

“We Weren’t Kidding”

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Prediction as Ideology in American Pulp Science Fiction, 1938-1949

By

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ABSTRACT

In 1971, Isaac Asimov observed in humanity, “a science-important society.” For this he credited the man who had been his editor in the 1940s during the period known as the “golden age” of American science fiction, John W. Campbell, Jr. Campbell was editor of *Astounding Science-Fiction*, the magazine that launched both Asimov’s career and the golden age, from 1938 until his death in 1971. Campbell and his authors set the foundation for the modern sci-fi, cementing genre distinction by the application of plausible technological speculation. Campbell assumed the “science-important society” that Asimov found thirty years later, attributing sci-fi ascendance during the golden age a particular compatibility with that cultural context.

On another level, sci-fi’s compatibility with “science-important” tendencies during the first half of the twentieth-century betrayed a deeper agreement with the social structures that fueled those tendencies and reflected an explication of modernity on capitalist terms. Tethered to an imperative of plausibly extrapolated technology within an American context, sci-fi authors retained the social underpinnings of that context. In this thesis, I perform a textual analysis of stories published in *Astounding* during the 1940s, following the sci-fi as it grew into a mainstream cultural product. In this, I

prioritize not the intentions of authors to advance explicit themes or speculations.

Rather, I allow the authors' direction of reader sympathy to suggest the way that favored characterizations advanced ideological bias. Sci-fi authors supported a route to success via individualistic, competitive, and private enterprise. They supported an American capitalistic conveyance of modernity.

## Preface

The notion of a “golden age” of American pulp science fiction stands as a functional demarcation for sci-fi scholars and cultural historians of the early twentieth-century. Its precise demarcations, however, remain fluid. Some authors, critics, and fans place its beginning as early as the 1926 publication of *Amazing Stories* and extend its decline into the “new wave” of experimental genre developments that peaked in 1971. More confine the period to a single decade in the 1940s. Regardless of chronology, one constant across variegated discussions of the golden age is an acknowledgement of the centrality of John W. Campbell, Jr., to the genre developments that defined the period. Campbell was writing sci-fi in 1926 when Hugo Gernsback started *Amazing Stories*, and he remained active as the editor of the popular and influential *Astounding Science-Fiction* (later *Analog*) until his death in 1971. Campbell’s influence was sprawling, but his impact declined after 1949 when sci-fi popularity began to engender a proliferation of movies, novels, and other cultural products outside of Campbell’s pulp kingdom. Concerned largely with pulp science fiction (sci-fi), this study does not look beyond 1949. I begin, not with Gernsback and *Amazing Stories*, but with Campbell’s ascension to the editorship of *Astounding* in 1938, where the support of publisher Street & Smith allowed him to implement the genre developments of preceding decades in a way that secured the legacy of the golden age and built the foundation of modern sci-fi.

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## Introduction

In his February 1959 essay, “Non-Escape Literature,” written just over a year after the U.S.S.R successfully launched Sputnik into orbit, pulp magazine editor John W. Campbell, Jr. took the opportunity to explain that he and the writers he had been publishing for more than two decades in the pages of *Astounding Science-Fiction* “weren’t kidding.” According to Campbell, science fiction (sci-fi) writers were among the most sincere writers of social theory in America.<sup>1</sup> They wrote about the evolutionary entanglement of technology with humanity and anticipated its future course. Looking back over the “golden age” of American sci-fi, Campbell challenged the perception of sci-fi as a literary escape into fantasy and “flubdubbery.” Sputnik was only the most recent example in a string of technological predictions that refuted the “non-science fictioneers” who in past decades had claimed, “nuclear weapons and space flight were amusing ideas to play with...nonsense, of course, but amusing nonsense.”<sup>2</sup> What did it mean to accept sci-fi as social commentary—to live with speculation turned real, when the predictions engendered thoughts of nuclear annihilation or stepping off *terra firma*

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Non-Escape Literature (February 1959),” in *John W. Campbell: Collected Editorials from Analog*, ed. Harry Harrison (227-231: Doubleday, 1966), 227-231.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

into the black abyss? Moreover, what assumptions were built into this world of pulp speculation, and by what means?

Campbell's answers reflected statements he had advanced for decades about the validity of sci-fi as a sober, future-directed commentary on humanity and society. Additionally, though less explicitly, Campbell's editorials often revealed a complexity beneath the levels on which he and his authors, in fact, "weren't kidding." Not only were their speculations governed by the sincere and studied extrapolation of existing technology, they were also bound by the ideological frameworks in which that technology had developed. In this thesis, I read the apparent truth of Campbell's assertions of predictive prowess regarding technological development against the ideological context of that development. Sci-fi authors assumed a continuity of momentum behind the material development of American industrial innovation. In its narrative expression, this carried the implication of a second assumption: that the ideology facilitating that momentum would also continue. Capitalism, sci-fi authors assumed within their future imaginings, would continue. More precisely, capitalism's underlying principles would continue to be relevant.

Ostensibly, Campbell was writing to explain a pattern of fluctuation in sci-fi pulp readership. Interest in sci-fi, following each Hiroshima and Sputnik, had spiked "for a few months" and then declined—a trend that "swept out of the field quite a few magazines that had hastily 'tried to get into the act.'"<sup>3</sup> According to Campbell, his magazine, *Astounding Science-Fiction* (*Astounding*)—dominant among golden age sci-

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 225.

fi pulps<sup>4</sup> and situated above the fickle fray by its having never pretended to peddle fantasy—had not suffered as much as others had. “We hadn’t been kidding ourselves,” Campbell wrote, “or anyone else.”<sup>5</sup> At *Astounding*, Campbell’s authors—including paragons of the genre like Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, Theodore Sturgeon, and A. E. van Vogt—wrote about space travel, nuclear power, and myriad other technological advancements long before they became reality, but not as fantasy, rather as speculative extrapolation of science fact. Golden age sci-fi authors predicted many world-changing technological developments, including those behind both the detonation of an atomic bomb over Hiroshima in 1945 and the dawning of the Space Age with Sputnik in 1957. It was not surprising that sci-fi writers in the 1930s and 1940s speculated about the future of science and technology. Such was the nature of the genre. It was quite a different and more disquieting circumstance, Campbell argued, for the readers of such fiction to bear witness as those speculations came true.

To explain the fluctuation in readership, Campbell referenced what he presumed to have been the shocking discovery of a “non-escape literature” where readers had expected to find its antithesis—the discovery of reality where they had thought to find fantasy. “Apparently, they thought that science fiction was an escape literature, and read it as such,” he wrote, “I think they thought we were kidding. That nuclear weapons and space flight were amusing ideas to play with...nonsense, of course, but amusing

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<sup>4</sup> Albert I. Berger, “The Magic That Works: John W. Campbell and the American Response to Technology,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 5, no. 4 (1972): 868 Berger reports that *Astounding* circulation averaged 150,000 per month over Campbell’s tenure, far stronger than its contemporary, competing sci-fi pulp magazines.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, Jr., “John W. Campbell,” 231.



nonsense.”<sup>6</sup> This conflation of sci-fi literature with fantasy literature, among fans that read both, according to Campbell, led to a homogeneity of perception and expectation regarding “comfortably impossible things [ideas advanced relatively by sci-fi and fantasy] like atomic bombs and vampires...rockets and werewolves.”<sup>7</sup> One of Campbell’s principal golden age imperatives was the valuation of sci-fi as distinct from fantasy. There was an audience for both, he knew. It just was not necessarily the same audience.

Many readers of pulp fiction in the 1940s wanted fantasy, and many wanted to “escape,” Campbell speculated. For these, he recommended the ubiquitous and “formless, nearly pointless stories found in mass-circulation magazines.” He wrote in 1959, “The essence of ‘mainstream literature’ is that There Are Eternal Truths And Nothing Really Changes.”<sup>8</sup> As Campbell saw it, escapist literature was any literature that failed to engage the true nature of humanity, which he held to be tied up with the imperative of technological change.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Campbell revealed his own interpretation of relevance beneath the aegis of two important sci-fi tenets: that sci-fi aspires to predict the future and that it assumes an imperative of technological change. Yet, by 1959, Campbell’s sci-fi, despite his claims of distinction, was itself moving into the realm of what he derided as “mainstream literature.”

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 229.

<sup>8</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., *John W. Campbell: Collected Editorials from Analog.*, ed. Harry Harrison (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 228.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 225-231.

The golden age of American sci-fi (1938-1949) saw a sharp growth in the popularity and preponderance of sci-fi *pulp* magazines, so called for the inexpensive stock of paper on which they were printed. For the first time since sci-fi emergence in the 1920s, writers began, during the 1940s, to display an increased sophistication and an artistry that would help to elevate their stories above the lowbrow transience of those pages. By most accounts, this ascension was almost wholly attributable to the influence of Campbell.<sup>10</sup> Campbell sought throughout the 1940s to produce a serious literary movement dedicated to a scientific engagement with the future. Campbell only bought stories that depicted what he perceived to be a plausible evolution of known science and its reasonable social impact. Underwritten by the financial strength of publishing giant Street & Smith, Campbell paid his authors better and more quickly than any of his competitors could. This won Campbell the right to first refusal of much of the sci-fi written at the time. Thus, *Astounding* retained a higher caliber of writing than other pulp

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Ashley, *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000); Albert I. Berger, *The Magic That Works: John W. Campbell and the American Response to Technology*, vol. 46, 65 vols., 1st ed., The Milford Series: Popular Writers of Today (San Bernardino, CA: The Borgo Press, 1993); Isaac Asimov, *In Memory yet Green: The Autobiography of Isaac Asimov, 1920-1954*, 1st ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1979); Sam Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom* (Westport Conn.: Hyperion Press, 1974); Frederik Pohl, *The Way the Future Was: A Memoir*, 1st ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978); Lester Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976: The History of a Subculture* (New York: Garland Pub, 1980); H. Bruce Franklin, "America as Science Fiction: 1939," *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 1 (March 1982): 38-50; Damon Knight, *In Search of Wonder: Essays on Modern Science Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Advent Publishers, 1967); Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (Basingstoke [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Marshall B. Tymn and Michael Ashley, eds., *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Weird Fiction Magazines*, Historical guides to the world's periodicals and newspapers (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985); Donald Wollheim, *The Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

sci-fi magazines, and Campbell was able to project his vision as the standard for success in the industry. It was not Campbell's vision alone. In fact, he was building on innovations that had colored sci-fi for more than a decade. In his book about the sci-fi pulp era, *The Time Machines* (2000), Mike Ashley interprets Campbell's contribution as one of capturing the different strands of sci-fi and braiding them into a coherent way forward.<sup>11</sup>

Campbell was also responding to the predilections of the sci-fi pulp market and to reader correspondence. He encouraged reader letters and printed as many as he could, attempting to represent the conversation that informed his editorial direction, taking care to portray his readership as among the most important forces driving the transformation of sci-fi during the golden age. Campbell infused his editorial writing with the implication that he, his readers, and his writers cooperatively were moving sci-fi in an important direction—away from the fantastic space operas and cosmic adventure stories of the 1920s and early 1930s, toward a rational exploration of the plausible evolution of known science and its social impact—toward the “non-escape literature” of his 1959 editorial.

On another level, Campbell's editorial betrayed a limitation on his perception of what was socially realistic versus what was socially fantastic. Explicating the same limitation that bound his authors during the golden age, he qualified “non-escapist” literature—that is, sci-fi literature—by its willingness to engage the “uncomfortable lump that wouldn't be nice in an escape literature.” He explained, “It's nicer to say that

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<sup>11</sup> Ashley, *The Time Machines*, 232.

evolution is based on the survival of the fittest; it's more honest to recognize that it is based on the elimination, the culling out, of the incompetent."<sup>12</sup> He described a "ruthless" universe—within a real estate metaphor—in which "the rent on the top-floor space we happen to prefer is simply to 'achieve more than anyone else in the building does—and that means more than you yourself did last year.'"<sup>13</sup> Failure to meet that rent, in Campbell's harsh "reality," condemns one to "join the rest of the culls." Golden age sci-fi protagonists, advanced by authors under Campbell, often embodied the individualistic, self-reliant, self-assured, competitive spirit that would facilitate success within such a "reality."

Many studies of sci-fi in general, and the golden age in particular, fall into two different camps. First, sci-fi authors, fans, publishers, etc. have produced a good deal of literature in the mode of anecdotal chronicle. These include autobiographies, commentary on genre developments, or personal accounts of events such as the first sci-fi Worldcon. These works tend to advance nostalgic analyses or judgments from a particular perspective and are beneficial in reconstructing the history "as it was lived" by principal and peripheral actors.<sup>14</sup> The second category consists of literary criticism and analyses of sci-fi and its social commentary. Many of these critics engage the fiction on the level of thematic explication, or the intentions of sci-fi authors, concentrating on how the authors attempted to advance contemporary social advocacy or criticism within

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<sup>12</sup> Campbell, Jr., "John W. Campbell," 229.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom*; Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*; Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*; David Kyle, "Caravan to the Stars," *Mimosa*, December 2002; Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*.

future allegories. These often include specific themes of class, gender, or race examined within the context of utopian or dystopian projections.<sup>15</sup>

This thesis pursues a different line of inquiry. It is an analysis of the relationship between sci-fi and its broader cultural context and of the ideology advanced by sci-fi as a cultural product. Within this framework, I perform a textual analysis of golden age sci-fi that examines the way in which narrative language, dialogue, characterization, and sympathetic authorial portrayal produce a powerful, often distinct, cultural statement of ideology. I have applied cultural theory in order to explain the linkages between technological prediction, cultural imagination, and the ideologies of capitalist democracy. In other words, I have sought to expose the ideological constraints of golden age sci-fi. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences have applied a similar methodology, exposing ethnocentric social paradigms or a gendered, linguistic historicity—respectively in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and Joan Scott’s *Gender and the Politics of History* (1988), among others.<sup>16</sup> My reference to the operative “cultural contracts” within sci-fi narratives suggests the self-evident cultural and social forms drawn out in the contextual application of Carole Pateman’s “sexual contract” and

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<sup>15</sup> *Where No Man Has Gone Before: Women and Science Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1991); Denise Goerisch, *Dystopian Bodies: Posthuman Representations of Gender in Science Fiction*, 2007; Patricia Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire* (Liverpool [England]: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Jodi Napiorkowski, *The Human Behind the Mask: The Construction of Otherness in Science Fiction*, 2007; Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, Rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

Charles Mills' "racial contract."<sup>17</sup> I have found a kind of "socio-economic contract" to have governed sci-fi cultural production during the golden age, resulting in the reproduction of the foundational assumptions beneath self-evident capitalistic modes.

In the following pages, I have engaged the golden age sci-fi from *Astounding*, reading its authors against the cultural contracts that sustained a latent American capitalist ideology through the crisis of a Great Depression, the uncertainty of a global struggle against fascism, and toward its resuscitation in a postwar prosperity that colored and facilitated the establishment of a Cold War ideological conflict between the capitalist West and the communist East. These contracts drew strength from an entrenched American mythos of exceptionalism, inevitable triumph, and rugged individualism. Sci-fi authors manifested this ideology in the creation of sympathetic, heroic protagonists, contextualizing their narrative arcs within an arena of messianic technological development. Such development, which authors portrayed as self-evidently correct or morally triumphant, often fueled the realization of historical success aided by the actions of sci-fi heroes. These heroes, in turn, found individual success by virtue of their support for these seemingly historically inevitable ideologies. Invariably, the stories endorsed a favored status for, and often authoritarian social control by, the scientist/hero or a like-minded meritocratic elite. Often, the conflict and the competition within sci-fi narratives succeeded in shuffling these protagonists into a natural or self-evident position of authority. Ultimately, sci-fi authors' sympathetic portrayal of both

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<sup>17</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988).

these characters and their circumstances, within golden age stories, served to conflate the meritocratic with the democratic.

My conclusions bear an ambiguous relationship to the existing scholarship. On one hand, some scholars of sci-fi have argued for an inherent subversive potential within the sci-fi genre—be this by virtue of a counter-hegemonic popular dissemination of erudite scientific thought or by the “desire called utopia” that drives futurist speculation and social change.<sup>18</sup> On the other, historian Albert Berger has argued that the writers of sci-fi at *Astounding* during the Golden Age advocated authoritarian principles of social control, especially by a meritocratic elite. This advocacy developed within the context of Campbell’s adherence to the primacy of American political and economic values.<sup>19</sup> Berger’s is *one* suggestion of the way in which golden age sci-fi,

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<sup>18</sup> Frederik Pohl, “The Politics of Prophecy,” in *Political Science Fiction*, ed. Donald M. Hassler and Clyde Wilcox (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 7-17; Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 211-233; Eric Drown, ““A Finer and Fairer Future”: Commodifying Wage Earners in American Pulp Science Fiction,” *Endeavour* 30, no. 3 (September 2006): 92-93. Pohl was an influential writer and editor as sci-fi entered the 1950s. In this essay he presents what is perhaps the strongest counter-point to Campbell’s ideology, placing it central to the distinction I will attempt to draw between the ability of sci-fi practitioners to *read* the future and their ability to *write* it. Pohl’s autobiographical writing will also inform later discussions of the role of sci-fi fandom. Jameson’s is the strongest argument for an inherent subversive potential in sci-fi, by his notion that the details of an imagined future are secondary to the mere fact of the *desire* to beyond and outside the state of things. Drown’s analysis of the magazines published in the 1920s by Hugo Gernsback presents an argument for the democratic, counter-hegemonic influence of sci-fi by virtue, not of its content, as much as by its distribution—its dissemination of scientific knowledge to unprecedented masses and the expansion of the scientific conversation to include the perspective of such.

<sup>19</sup> Albert I. Berger, “Theories of History and Social Order in Astounding Science Fiction, 1934-55,” *Science Fiction Studies* 15, no. 1 (March 1988): 12-33.

specifically at *Astounding*, diverged from a model of advocacy for social change. My own arguments agree with Berger's rejection of subversive sci-fi, to a point.

Rather than acting as a subversive force, or as a simplistic argument for authoritarianism, I believe sci-fi carried a more complex ideology of authoritarianism, nuanced by strong cultural, social, and economic trends that fed the momentum of an American capitalistic ethos. Sci-fi stories employed a rhetoric of democracy beneath the valorization of elite authority, legitimated by the self-evident ability of competitive economic and social models to identify and reward merit. I do not intend to suggest an intentional ideological agenda on the part of sci-fi progenitors, though one may have at times existed. Rather, the cultural complicity of sci-fi came by virtue of the desire of its authors to plausibly extrapolate from existing technology, and in so doing, incorporate the momentum of technocratic cultural trends into the forward looking stories they were creating.

Indeed, a significant measure of *explicit* patriotic excess ran through much American sci-fi during the 1940s war effort and the mobilization of the home front. However, the *implicit* connotations of American free-market capitalism with the self-evident mythos *beneath* this explicit patriotism sustained a far greater ideological influence over the sci-fi cultural product. I draw these connotations out from the American historical context of the late-1930s and the 1940s by reference to recent scholarship that argues for a resurgence, during this period, of social and intellectual support for



American exceptionalism.<sup>20</sup> Exceptionalism infused wartime cultural production, from Franklin Roosevelt's "infamy" speech to the consumption of popular culture and commercial goods, with the ethos of "victory culture," which Tom Engelhardt follows into its postwar infusion of both national anxiety and national prosperity.<sup>21</sup> As I move the discussion out of World War II and into the Cold War, I primarily use Paul Boyer's *By the Bomb's Early Light* to derive the cultural impact of postwar anxiety, while Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic* and Andrew Hurley's *Diners, Bowling Alleys, and Trailer Parks* help to culturally contextualize America's postwar prosperity.<sup>22</sup> My discussion of trends behind these consumer spaces and practices is largely based on William Leach's *Land of Desire*, Lawrence Glickman's *A Living Wage*, and Warren Susman's writings on the culture of abundance and the 1939 World's Fair.<sup>23</sup> These

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, "Exceptionalism," in *Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past*, ed. Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 21-40.

<sup>21</sup> Emily S. Rosenberg, *A Date Which Will Live: Pearl Harbor in American Memory*, American encounters/global interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1995); Larry May, "Making the American Consensus: The Narrative of Conversion and Subversion in World War II Films," in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 71-102. For a discussion of victory culture and the mythos of inevitable triumph in American popular culture, see Engelhardt and May. For its centrality to Roosevelt's infamy speech, see Rosenberg.

<sup>22</sup> Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Andrew Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks: Chasing the American Dream in the Postwar Consumer Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

<sup>23</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); William Leach, *Land of* (note continues)

authors provide the historical and cultural context for my analysis of the ideological content of the sci-fi produced at *Astounding* during the golden age.

Golden age sci-fi writers employed and honored the same cultural contracts that sustained a conscious and unconscious support for American free-market ideology through the economic turbulence of the 1930s and the 1940s, facilitating a cultural rejection of New Deal collectivism, European socialism, and Soviet communism on libertarian as well as capitalist principles. Specifically, sci-fi upheld a reverence of individual identity and responsibility within an arena of messianic scientific discovery and technological advancement. This occurred despite, and even within, frequent social speculations outside of an apparently capitalist model. Ultimately, though not always explicitly, sci-fi writers at *Astounding* supported social confluences of free markets with free societies, of economic liberty with economic security, and of individual agency in a capitalist system with political power in a democratic society. Bound, as they were, to existing technological trends by the imperative of plausible extrapolation, sci-fi writers would likely have had to execute an intentional break with these trends in order to have done otherwise.

The sci-fi at *Astounding* reflected this, as its writers attempted to reconfigure social models without altering their foundational assumptions of these models. Campbell and his writers grounded their speculations in existing science and social science. Therefore, they grounded their sci-fi in the present moment—and pointed it

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*Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Lawrence B. Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1999).

toward the future. In its most essential character, sci-fi was forward looking, but through a diffracting lens. It engaged the world as Campbell saw it, materially bound to its technocratic momentum. He wrote often of sci-fi as though it were actual science—science of a predictive nature. In a sense, he was right. In fact, he and his authors were very often right. They were adept at applying certain scientific and historical methods forward in time. They did not always nail the details, and Campbell would apologize in print for glaring miscalculations. However, more often than not, they hit fairly close to the mark—sometimes, Campbell reflected in his February 1959 editorial, to the dismay of a wide-eyed public in search of recreational literary escapism.

Much of sci-fi authors' predictive success was rooted in Campbell's specific interpretation of technological change—that it is both inevitable and inevitably progressive (despite certain dangers arising from its misuse by errant social forces). Isaac Asimov, who first published, in *Astounding*, the stories that would be collected as the *Foundation* and *I, Robot* novels, wrote in a 1978 essay that the importance of sci-fi lies not in the notion that it predicts *which* changes will happen, but rather that it predicts *that* changes will happen. Asimov identified “science fictional thinking” as vital in a society where “taking into account not only the world as it is, but the world as it will be” is essential for the survival of humanity.<sup>24</sup>

Sci-fi editor and writer, Frederik Pohl agreed with Asimov as to the centrality of “change” in sci-fi, but offered a more political context, arguing that any speculation beyond existing social models subverts those models by the mere suggestion of

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<sup>24</sup> Isaac Asimov, “Social Science Fiction,” in *Science Fiction: The Future*, ed. Dick Allen (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 263-290.

alternatives.<sup>25</sup> Writing in 1997, Pohl quoted Ray Bradbury to support his argument that all futurist sci-fi is political. When asked if *Fahrenheit 451* was a prediction, according to Pohl, Bradbury replied, “Hell, no. I’m not trying to *predict* the future. I’m just doing my best to *prevent* it.”<sup>26</sup> For Bradbury and Pohl, sci-fi seems to have represented an instrument by which the future could be *written*, or guided; for Asimov, by which it could be *read*, or predicted. Neither Bradbury nor Pohl ever wrote for Campbell; Asimov was one of his leading lights.<sup>27</sup> The distinction is one of an aspirational sci-fi, as opposed to a functional sci-fi—what sci-fi could be or sought to accomplish versus what it was or *did* accomplish.

In pursuit of a kind of *functional* sci-fi, the writers at *Astounding* explored alternative futures, but they did so as disciplined researchers. In May of 1941, Campbell published Robert Heinlein’s “Future History” chart, which mapped out the future society in which his stories “lived.”<sup>28</sup> In his editorial that month, Campbell characterized Heinlein’s process as applying the historical method forward in time.<sup>29</sup> Consistent with Asimov’s analysis of change in sci-fi, Heinlein was *reading* the future, as

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<sup>25</sup> Pohl, “The Politics of Prophecy,” 7-17.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> The distinction illustrates not simply Campbell’s interpretation of the sci-fi *raison d’être* but also that sci-fi evolution was not homogenous. Without question, Campbell was dominant, but he was not singular. A longer future study could examine more completely the different currents that flowed through sci-fi during and beyond the Golden Age. An analysis of other media outlets (film, radio, television, comics, etc.) could help to fill a more complete picture of the role of American sci-fi in the culture at large.

<sup>28</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Brass Tacks (Heinlein History),” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, May 1941.

<sup>29</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “History to Come,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, May 1941, 5-6.

historians read primary sources. However, Heinlein's sources were internal, informed extrapolations of the present moment. To perceive oneself as following such a method is to retain a certain responsibility to the present, including a responsibility to the momentum of cultural and social infrastructures. Unable to make a clean break from the present context for fear of drifting too far afield from the plausibility directive implicit in the creation of "future history," many authors at *Astounding* helped to strengthen the inertia of an established cultural context by sustaining it in their fiction. Uncovering the way in which this occurred provides the chronological and methodological structure for this project.

In this thesis, I argue that the sci-fi produced at *Astounding* during the golden age ideologically supported certain influential cultural trends beneath American reactions to social crises following from the Great Depression and World War II. These trends employed an American mythos of inevitable triumph, rugged individualism, and private enterprise to constrain the national response to depression and war within the social context of American free-market capitalism. Rather than offering a potentially subversive "desire called utopia," *Astounding* provided a way to predict a future that buttressed the status quo.

In Chapter 1, I engage the emergence of sci-fi at the dawn of its golden age in the late 1930s, attempting to understand this emergence through a comparison between *Astounding* authors' reading of the American cultural context and that of the World of Tomorrow exhibition at the 1939 World's Fair in New York City. By reading Campbell's editorials and the fiction published in *Astounding* between 1938 and 1941, including stories by Isaac Asimov, A.E. van Vogt, and Robert Heinlein, against a

historical and cultural analysis of the ideological statements of the fair, I argue for a consistency between the two cultural products. Both *Astounding* and the World of Tomorrow advanced an optimistic vision of the future of American material prosperity based on positive value judgments and self-evident imperatives that supported individuality, self-reliance, and a faith in the meritocratic authority of private enterprise.

In Chapter 2, I follow an emergent sci-fi as it began to penetrate more deeply into the mainstream of popular culture, tracing its course from the middle 1940s against the cultural impact of the continuing World War. In Asimov's "Foundation" series, and in the homo-superior speculations of van Vogt and Heinlein, I found a strong and recurrent sci-fi penchant for the representation of rule by an authoritarian meritocratic elite. Sci-fi authors promoted these war-time authoritarian models through an adoption of the primacy of American exceptionalism and inevitable triumph that followed from the war effort. The authority that sci-fi authors supported sprung from a perceived historical inevitability—recognizable as American free-market capitalism embodied in attributes of protagonists clearly destined for success within the historical inevitability they helped to preserve. The self-evident freedom of sci-fi social models, and the self-evident merit of the successful actors within those models, required protagonists to embody both the means to a desired destiny and the promise that destiny holds.

In Chapter 3, I engage two stories by Theodore Sturgeon and the conclusion of Asimov's "Foundation" to illustrate the changes in golden age sci-fi in a post-nuclear America. After Hiroshima, sci-fi authors adopted a more pessimistic vision of the role of nuclear technologies in their future speculations. Authors favored the same individualistic scientist heroes and technocratic elite they had throughout the golden

age, but their success was no longer guaranteed beneath the specter of nuclear annihilation. However, they still were portrayed as objects of reader sympathy. In fact, authors invited readers to sympathize more intimately with the self-evidently beneficent authoritarian entities, which began during this period to move from representation as an abstract imperative or inevitability (as in early “Foundation” stories) toward an explicit corporeal characterization (as in later “Foundation” stories). Furthermore, sci-fi authoritarian models adopted a stronger ideological agreement with the American Cold War global identity—democratic and capitalist, as opposed to the totalitarian and communist Soviet Union.

Throughout these developments, sci-fi retained its predictive mantle as advanced by Campbell since the time of his ascension to the editorship of *Astounding* in 1938. Campbell had valorized sci-fi prophecy because of its compatibility with the cultural context of his historical moment in 1939. In that period, sci-fi predictions invested in a broad agreement with the optimism of the World’s Fair regarding private enterprise and technological development. During the war, Campbell backed off a bit from his argument for reality within sci-fi prediction, in his attempt to ameliorate the controversy over a possible leak of nuclear secrets by an *Astounding* author. Following the detonation of an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, Campbell again reveled in the predictive prowess of sci-fi. With the war over and the nuclear secret out, his comments in a 1945 interview for the *New Yorker* came up just shy of preening, “We told you so!”<sup>30</sup> By 1949, as the Cold War settled into the American cultural consciousness, Campbell again re-

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<sup>30</sup> Rosann Smith, Clifford Orr, and Geoffrey T. Hellman, “1945 Cassandra (The Talk of the Town),” *The New Yorker*, August 25, 1945.

contextualized sci-fi prophesy, touting its role in the cycle by which technological development follows the will of the people. Whatever the rhetoric, in Campbell's final accounting, golden age sci-fi writers were prophets.



## Chapter One

July 1939: “Ad Astra”

On the fourth Friday of June 1939, the readers of the pulp science fiction magazine *Astounding Science-Fiction* unwittingly encountered a future historical icon in the issue that modern fans and scholars would credit with launching the golden age of American science fiction. For many, *Astounding* in general, and this issue specifically, became emblematic of the most important genre developments of the period, when science fiction embraced plausibility as a touchstone for its technological and social speculations. During the golden age, *Astounding* set in place many of the tenets of the later multi-media sci-fi phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The golden age saw *Astounding* embrace the role it would play in the American cultural context of the 1940s, courting mainstream popularity through its agreement with the cultural contracts beneath the American capitalist ethos. As the landmark 1939 issue hit the streets, it carried these golden age

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<sup>1</sup> Ashley, *The Time Machines*; Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*; Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*; Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*; Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*; Tymn and Ashley, *Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Weird Fiction Magazines*.

tendencies, both literary and ideological, within its pulp binding, and into the annals of sci-fi lore.

It was the July issue—its mailing date preceding by a week its cover-page designation—number five-of-six in the twenty-third volume of *Astounding*. Consistent with its normal format, the issue carried 162 pages of content, printed on 7 by 10 inch pulp stock—less than ten-percent of which had been sold as advertising space. The monthly publication collected four short stories, three novelettes, two articles, and a variety of editorial and reader commentary, all bound beneath one of the more famous cover paintings *Astounding* would reproduce in the 1930s—its notoriety acquired by virtue of both its striking artistry as well as its attachment to the landmark issue.<sup>2</sup>

Graves Gladney painted the cover plate as an illustration of the enclosed, first-ever story published by one of the most innovative and important authors of the golden age, A. E van Vogt. Gladney's cover prominently displayed a silhouette, against an orange sky, of van Vogt's title character the "Black Destroyer," a giant, darkened creature bearing fangs as long and as pointed as its prominent cat-like ears. The creature and the bluff upon which it holds vigil conspire to cast the cradle of a shadow in which a distant spacecraft rests—its crew milling about in humanoid vulnerability. Within the foreshortened gaze of the reader, the crew appears unaware of the menace posed by the dangling jaws of the watching beast. In the near distance, a crew member contemplates an ill-favored ascent toward the unseen creature's perch.<sup>3</sup> Hitchcockian

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<sup>2</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr. and Martin Harry Greenberg, eds., *Astounding Science Fiction, July 1939* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Graves Gladney, "Black Destroyer," *Astounding Science-Fiction*, July 1939, Cover.

in his mastery of suspense, Gladney conjured a moment of morbid anticipation that succeeds in drawing the reader to the edge of his or her seat before the magazine is ever opened. On one level, the cover inspires an instinctive, though vicarious, reaction to the iconic suggestion of predation. Whether *fight* or *flight*—one engages more propitiously from the edge of one’s seat.

On another level—one more reflective of a pervasive theme throughout golden age sci-fi—Gladney encapsulated the story of a humanity driven by its technologically facilitated imperative toward material and intellectual progress. In his use of silhouette, Gladney surrendered wholly sixty-percent of his cover to the black beast. In this darkness lives the unknown, the excited expectation that can weave itself into a narrative suspense—made ominous, in this case, by the obvious danger posed by the fangs of the watchful predator. A reader can scarcely help but to throw sympathy behind the imperiled starship, and especially its isolated crewman as he mounts the bluff and nears the “Black Destroyer.” Here, as above, is the primal anxiety; an innocent walks blindly into the jaws of certain death. However, he is not an innocent. He has arrived at his predicament via starship—a manner of conveyance that suggests an expected and accepted risk. His exploration of the bluff is merely an extension of that which drove him to board the ship—which drove his species to desire and to build the ship. Nor is his death certain. Though it portends danger, Gladney’s “unknown” promises solely that—the unknown, which the man and his crewmates have willingly engaged. More importantly, they have done so in apparent optimism, or they would not have done so at all.

As the editor of *Astounding*, John W. Campbell, Jr. had articulated that very same human willingness to engage the unknown. In his June 1939 essay “Future Tense,” Campbell recognized the emergence of sci-fi as a unique historical phenomenon. Campbell speculated that sci-fi—by his definition, a futurist genre—had appeared because “for the first time in all the history of Man’s climb, he looks *forward* to better things, and not backward to a forgotten ‘Golden Age’.”<sup>4</sup> In this turn of phrase, Campbell transposed the “golden age” mythos from a nostalgic remembrance into a buoyant anticipation. “They had fantasy—but science-fiction isn’t pure fantasy. They had prophecy—but it wasn’t entertainment; it was protection, necessary defense against the blank terror of the future.”<sup>5</sup> He contrasted the stories of a generalized past society with his own cultural moment: “Science-fiction comes when science takes some of the tension of terror out of the future tense.”<sup>6</sup> Sci-fi came, by Campbell’s interpretation, when humanity sought, rather than feared the unknown specter represented in Gladney’s interpretation of van Vogt’s “Black Destroyer.”<sup>7</sup>

In a sense, Campbell was interpreting sci-fi as the new and appropriate mythology for his contemporary society, by specific virtue of sci-fi’s compatibility with its own cultural context.<sup>8</sup> In this chapter I analyze the validity of that interpretation by

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<sup>4</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Future Tense,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, June 1939, 6

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gladney, “Black Destroyer,” Cover.

<sup>8</sup> His assertions appear to suggest the later work of twentieth-century mythologist Joseph Campbell, who identified the primary role of artists and writers in a society as assimilators of mythological meaning into a relevant cultural context. Joseph Campbell theorized that any modern mythology must find its relevance within the context of the (note continues)

reading the fiction in *Astounding* against the World of Tomorrow exhibition at the 1939 World's Fair, and the first major sci-fi fan convention, Worldcon 1—each occurring in New York City during the summer of 1939. At Worldcon 1, sci-fi defined its intent to move into the mainstream of popular culture, increasing its cultural presence, but also its susceptibility to the influence of mainstream trends. Across town, an American culture of material progress and commercial consumption dominated the concurrent World's Fair.

In comparing the ideological underpinnings of golden age sci-fi to those of the corporate face of the 1939 World of Tomorrow exhibition, I argue for the cultural coherence of the messages from each. This shared ideology supported belief in a broad and common access to the “American Dream”—defined with by the promise of prosperity that Warren Susman found in the “culture of abundance” he saw advanced by the fair.<sup>9</sup> The fair did not communicate or represent the totality of the American cultural context in 1939, in which economic anxiety persisted as the Great Depression continued to stifle prosperity and the specter of fascism abroad presented a disturbing specter for many Americans. However, its optimism did reveal an intention on the part

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society it informs, especially regarding the technology that facilitates and bounds human experience within that society. Speaking with Bill Moyers in 1986, he made the argument that ancient civilizations interpreted the mono-myth through an ethno-centric comprehension of identity within the context of their own socio-economic culture (hunter/gatherer, agricultural, civic, etc.). It follows, he theorized, that any modern mythology must find its relevance not only in a uniquely twentieth-century integration of humanity with its global society and ecosystem, but also within the context of the technology that informs and bounds its precise human experience. In a foreshadowing of Joseph Campbell's analysis of myth in society, John Campbell's interpretation of golden age sci-fi within its cultural moment appears profound beyond its pop-culture aegis.

<sup>9</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 211-229.

of government and business to secure popular consent for a road to recovery along generally free-market lines.

To contextualize my comparison of the cultural productions from golden age sci-fi and the 1939 fair, I first follow Campbell's advocacy for reader agency in sci-fi development into a discussion of the political maneuvers by which early sci-fi fandom established itself. During the conception and planning of Worldcon 1, the sci-fi community exercised an ideological exclusion of the politically engaged Futurian fan group. By its embrace of a so-called "de-politicized" sci-fi, with the support of Campbell and other industry professionals, the genre facilitated the means by which it reproduced rather than subverted dominant cultural and social models within its stories.

Engaging the fiction itself, I begin with two stories from the landmark July 1939 issue of *Astounding*: van Vogt's cover story, "Black Destroyer," and "Trends," the *Astounding* debut of a young Isaac Asimov. These stories reflected the optimism that Gladney's cover painting implied, placing a strong faith in the technological prowess of humanity. My exploration of the cultural and ideological content of the 1939 World's fair first identifies its promotion of the technocratic optimism apparent in the 1939 stories, but then moves into a discussion of the implicit paternalistic role assumed by the fair's corporate exhibitors within the promise of their optimistic future imaginings. Fair exhibitors sought to inspire a popular faith in their ability act as the architects of American prosperity.

Finally, Robert Heinlein's "The Roads Must Roll" (*Astounding*, March 1941) effectively illustrates the agreement between golden age sci-fi and that socio-cultural proposition of the World of Tomorrow. In "Roads," Heinlein registers his agreement with

the technocratic optimism of 1939 exhibitions sponsored by American capitalist corporate entities like General Motors, General Electric, Westinghouse, and others. Further, and more explicitly than Asimov or van Vogt had, Heinlein advanced the belief that optimism was most justified when the technocracy exercised the paternalism espoused by the corporate exhibitions and public relations of the fair. Whether generating from the fair or the fiction, this shared ideology endorsed the optimism of Campbell's "Future Tense" essay, especially as it would and should be carried into the future on the strength of American institutions of private enterprise and free-market capitalism.

In his "Future Tense" editorial, Campbell's claiming of a culturally important sci-fi at the close of the 1930s was not profound by virtue of a complete and correct reading of that historical moment, but rather as an acknowledgment of a latent trend that remained beneath the doubt and fear that permeated the political and economic turmoil of the preceding decade. Campbell's statement drew significance from its agreement with the optimistic abundance on display at the World of Tomorrow exhibition and from the means by which the New Deal sought to *rescue*, rather than *overturn* American free-market capitalism. Campbell wrote that sci-fi "must represent some totally new characteristic of our new civilization," arising "when men reached that stage of civilization that looked forward gladly."<sup>10</sup> Despite inevitable crises of confidence within developing societies, Campbell found a continuing psychological migration from fear to hope within the arc human social evolution.

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell, Jr., "Future Tense," 6.

In Campbell's perspective, a culture of industrial prosperity had retained its forward-looking optimism despite the socio-economic roller-coaster that pitched its citizenry through the boom and bust of the 1920s, the austerity of the Great Depression, and the variegated adjustments of the New Deal. He believed, along with corporate sponsors of the 1939 fair, in the resilience of an American industrial mythos, which held that scientific discovery, through its industrial application and its commercial distribution, would secure prosperity and the American way of life.<sup>11</sup> While the larger culture of the late 1930s carried some measure of this ideology, Campbell believed that sci-fi was uniquely qualified to do so by its embrace of the progressive industrial and technological imperative that ferried the ethos of the "American Dream" over the turbulence of the preceding half-century.

Campbell perceived, in golden age sci-fi, a special providence for a genre that had acquired its *own* resilience over the previous decade. He saw sci-fi as ready to leave its infancy behind and wade confidently into a cultural context that he read to have been all but custom-made to receive it. His efforts accelerated the mainstream success that sci-fi achieved during its golden age. However, while it is difficult to overstate the importance of Campbell to the structural transition and cultural emergence of the genre during the 1930s and the 1940s, the accomplishment was not his alone—as tempting as this simplified agency might appear. Sci-fi had come to Campbell by its own path. He helped to steer it in a specific direction, continuing the momentum of the preceding

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<sup>11</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*; Susman, *Culture as History*; Ed Tyng, *Making a World's Fair: Organization, Promotion, Financing, and Problems, with Particular Reference to the New York . of 1939-1940*, 1st ed. (New York: Vantage Press, 1958).



decades. As a veteran writer, a long-time advocate of the genre, and as a publishing industry professional, he protected that momentum as it drew sci-fi into the cultural mainstream.

While Campbell's vision was influential and incorporated the existing momentum of genre developments, reader agency also did exist. Readers sustained the evolution of the genre, co-opting and retaining the innovations of sci-fi pioneers like Campbell's Hugo Gernsback, David Lasser, and F. Orlin Tremaine for manipulation by Campbell.<sup>12</sup> These editors had much of the power, but sci-fi fans had their passion. Sci-fi writer and editor Frederik Pohl best illustrated the distinction between fandom and sci-fi professionals (editors, publishers, etc.) in his analysis of the organization of sci-fi fandom into Gernsback's *Science Fiction League* chapters in 1933. "From Gernsback's point of view, what he had to sell was a commodity," and one with a specific and limited audience. "What Hugo [Gernsback] hoped for from the Science Fiction League was a plain buck-hustle, a way of keeping readers loyal. What we fans hoped for from it was Paradise."<sup>13</sup> Pohl described the loneliness of sci-fi fandom in the early 1930s, and the

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<sup>12</sup>Gernsback was the creator of the first pulp magazine dedicated to what he called "scientifiction," *Amazing Stories* (beg. 1926), where he sought to simultaneously entertain and educate his reader. As Gernsback's editor at the 1930s pulp *Wonder Stories*, Lasser refined genre distinction by strictly requiring his writers to explore the "realistic" social impact of scientific advancement. Tremaine, Campbell's predecessor at *Astounding Stories* (Campbell would change the name to *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1938), explored the limits of this plausible extrapolation of known science in his far-flung "thought variants." Following from Gernsback, all of these men encouraged reader participation. Campbell protected these two main developmental arcs, building his magazine and his golden age on the foundational tenets of reader involvement and genre distinction.

<sup>13</sup> Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 19.

euphoria of encountering like-minded aficionados through the League.<sup>14</sup> Here was a loyalty to the sci-fi genre, not to any specific pulp, nor to any editor or publisher, especially not to Gernsback. For all his stated ideals, Gernsback was a businessman first, who did what was necessary to sustain his titles, even if it meant not paying writers well, or quickly.

By his low prioritization of writers, specifically regarding prompt compensation, Gernsback facilitated the schism by which sci-fi fandom acquired a life of its own. Sci-fi fans, at this time, retained a connection to the genre that was, frankly, pure. They loved sci-fi, and all that they required from it was sustained access to a regularly refreshed product. They were natural allies of the underpaid, disgruntled writers who were beginning to reach out to fandom in search of solidarity. Young writers Donald Wollheim and John Michel (both under twenty at the time) visited Pohl's Brooklyn chapter of the Science Fiction League (SFL) when Pohl was only fourteen. Pohl described the meeting and the "inside information" these writers provided as "revelatory" and "more exciting than anything that had happened to me before, at least since I discovered science fiction, maybe since I discovered sex."<sup>15</sup> Pohl and his fellows "resolved to be just like them."<sup>16</sup> Wollheim and Michel had little trouble convincing the chapter to disassociate from Gernsback and to strike out as an entity independent of the SFL. In this taking of sides, a young sci-fi fandom surrendered a measure of the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 18-38.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>16</sup> Pohl, "The Politics of Prophecy," 38.

innocence that underpinned its purity and acquired an active role in shaping the cultural product it held dear.<sup>17</sup>

In the middle 1930s, Pohl, Michel, Wollheim, and Robert Lowndes (a later editor of sci-fi pulps) formed “the Quadrumvirate,” a core group of gypsy fans moving from SFL chapter to SFL chapter, speaking at meetings and editing *fanzines* in an attempt to drag the entirety of New York City fandom away from its affiliation with Gernsback and *Wonder Stories*. While influential, the Quadrumvirate was not the sole force of dissent and reconfiguration within the NYC fan base. Sci-fi scholar and fan, Will Sykora was attempting to create an international community of fans around his *International Scientific Association* (originally the *International Cosmos Science Club*), where the Quadrumvirate landed in 1936 and where Pohl served as editor of what he believed to be the biggest fanzine of its time, *The International Observer*.<sup>18</sup> Sykora eventually teamed with Sam Moskowitz and James Taurasi to form the dominant force in fandom during the late 1930s, *New Fandom*.<sup>19</sup> Of a different mind, the Quadrumvirate formed the other important group of that period, the *Futurians*, distinguishable from *New Fandom* by the tendency of its members to lean politically to the left, Pohl, Michel, and others were also members of the Young Communist League (YCL).<sup>20</sup> By further distinction, a uniquely high proportion of *Futurians* succeeded in making the jump from sci-fi fan to sci-fi writer.

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<sup>17</sup> Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 33-38.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 50-59.

<sup>19</sup> Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom*, 69-92; Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 39-59, 70-101.

<sup>20</sup> Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 60-69; Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 210-213.

Isaac Asimov was a founding member of the *Futurians*, not by virtue of any previous association with the Quadrumvirate, but rather by his receipt of an invitation to its first meeting in September 1938. He had come to the attention of sci-fi fans through his prolific writing of letters to the editor, many of which Campbell had published in *Astounding*.<sup>21</sup> Asimov was an avid sci-fi fan, aspiring writer, and in the process of becoming Campbell's protégé. He had spent the majority of 1938 receiving rejection notices and advice on writing from Campbell. He remained unpublished as an author at the time of his introduction to the world of fandom.<sup>22</sup>

As with Pohl, an affinity for sci-fi pulp led to a measure of social isolation throughout Asimov's youth; and like Pohl, he was thrilled to discover that it could also serve as a vehicle for social intercourse. Asimov wrote, of his introduction to the *Futurians*, that he had thought he would be attending a meeting of an earlier incarnation of *New Fandom*, then called the *Queens Science Fiction Club*, somehow relocated to a Brooklyn address, making it significantly more convenient for Asimov to attend. The confusion proved fortuitous for the young Asimov, who recalled that, "had I known of the issues involved, I would, of my own accord, have joined with the *Futurian* group."<sup>23</sup> Asimov believed, with the *Futurians*, that sci-fi could exercise a strong voice in the struggle against fascism. More conservative, *New Fandom* preferred a depoliticized sci-fi. Not surprisingly, many sci-fi professionals agreed.

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<sup>21</sup> Isaac Asimov, "Brass Tacks (Letter to the Editor)," *Astounding Science-Fiction*, April 1939; Isaac Asimov, "Brass Tacks (Letter to the Editor)," *Astounding Science-Fiction*, July 1939; Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 196-233.

<sup>22</sup> Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 196-207.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

Asimov's encounter with the *Futurians* caused him to recognize a new complexity in his relationship with Campbell, which had been idyllic in the perception of the aspiring writer. Perceiving one of the forks at which sci-fi had arrived in the late 1930s, Asimov was committed to developing sci-fi realism in the direction of Campbell's vision. He described the genre split as follows:

*Amazing* was still slanted toward mad professors with beautiful daughters, toward malevolent monsters and hectic action, and it would even continue to have some commercial success with it...Campbell, however, was pushing for quieter, more thoughtful stories, in which the science was realistic, and in which scientist, inventors, and engineers talked and acted like recognizable human beings. That was the direction of progress, and it was the one in which I tended of my own accord to move.<sup>24</sup>

Asimov favored *Astounding* above all other sci-fi pulps and saw Campbell as the editor to please if one wanted to consider oneself a writer of sci-fi. Asimov wrote that he did not feel like a professional writer until Campbell bought one of his stories.<sup>25</sup> However, when Asimov burst into Campbell's office "overflowing with the glories of that meeting [with the *Futurians*] and told him all about it and about the *Futurian* philosophy" the esteemed editor became confrontational. In his diary, Asimov recorded the realization that Campbell was a "hidebound conservative." Implicit was his subsequent realization

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>25</sup> Isaac Asimov, "Concerning "Trends"," in *Astounding Science Fiction, July 1939*, ed. Martin Harry Greenberg (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 174.

that, in the dawning age of the new sci-fi, “the direction of progress,” as he had described it, did not carry as singular a momentum as he might have thought.<sup>26</sup>

More explicitly political than Asimov, Pohl had his own experience with Campbell’s conservatism. Although, he never sold a story of his own to Campbell during the golden age, as a submitting author, an agent representing other authors, and eventually a competing editor, Pohl had frequent occasion to meet with Campbell. At times, according to Pohl, the two “fought like wombats.” Pohl recounted his own tendency to passionately brandish the *Daily Worker* in a fevered sermon against the evils of capitalism, only to have Campbell calmly explain why he was wrong. “He was a hundred percent behind the capitalist system...he was a boss.”<sup>27</sup> However, like Asimov, Pohl recognized *Astounding* as the center of gravity for sci-fi writers and readers, and Campbell as its critical mass. “I learned from him as from Jesus on the Mount,” Pohl wrote, in praise of the man he called, “the best science-fiction magazine editor there ever was.”<sup>28</sup> Pohl recognized in Campbell, what Asimov had identified as “the direction of [sci-fi] progress” despite his disagreement with Campbell’s politics and, further, Campbell’s unwillingness to see sci-fi as a vehicle for political change.<sup>29</sup>

Campbell’s politics was closer to that of Will Sykora, Pohl’s and the *Futurians’* rival for the heart of sci-fi fandom. In the December 1937 *Astounding*, Tremaine printed a letter from Sykora in which he advocated for scientific realism in sci-fi. In echo of the Gernsback mantra, he expressed the hope that such would “turn more young men into

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<sup>26</sup> Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 212-213.

<sup>27</sup> Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 90.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 84-91.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

engineering or scientific careers.”<sup>30</sup> Like Asimov and Pohl, Sykora shared Campbell’s vision of a more realistic portrayal of science in sci-fi stories. However, unlike Asimov and Pohl, Sykora and his fellows at *New Fandom* also shared Campbell’s vision of a depoliticized sci-fi. Neither Campbell nor Sykora purported to employ sci-fi toward the dissemination of a conservative ideology; each merely favored a sci-fi absent any ideology<sup>31</sup> (however unlikely that may seem). Pohl has written of his belief in the impossibility of such a goal. According to Pohl, by its very definition sci-fi speculates beyond that which is presently known or existent. Therein, Pohl recognized implicit attempts to “work out the consequences of political change” through sci-fi production.<sup>32</sup>

Whether or not Campbell sought to champion one or another specific political ideology (beyond the ideology of “good” sci-fi), his choices succeeded in doing so. In 1939, Campbell invited Sykora to write another letter for publication in the January *Astounding*, informing his readers of the plan for the first “World Science Fiction Convention” to be held in New York City that summer. Sykora wrote of the convention schedule and amenities as “being rapidly whipped into shape by *New Fandom*,” which he described as “an association of all science-fiction readers who want to see science fiction advanced.” The convention, he stressed, was to be “open to the science-fiction fan, the science-fiction reader, and the general public.”<sup>33</sup> What Sykora failed to mention, and what Campbell implicitly endorsed through his publication of the letter and

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<sup>30</sup> William S. Sykora, “Science Discussions (Letter to the Editor),” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, December 1937, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom*, 48-88; Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 39-101.

<sup>32</sup> Pohl, “The Politics of Prophecy,” 5-16.

<sup>33</sup> Sykora, “Science Discussions (Letter to the Editor).”

his appearance at the event, was the systematic exclusion of *Futurians* from the high-profile convention, and by extension the marginalization of the *Futurian* advocacy for a politically engaged sci-fi.

This was a particularly unkind cut, according to Pohl and to fellow *Futurian* David Kyle, because it was the *Futurians* led by Donald Wollheim who had first originated the idea of a “Worldcon,” as well as its concurrence with the World’s Fair opening that same summer in New York. “We were not confident we could get anyone from Outside just to talk about science fiction,” Pohl wrote, “but if they were coming to New York, anyway [for the World’s Fair],” he and the others felt a concurrent convention would stand a good chance of a respectable attendance.<sup>34</sup> However, *New Fandom* succeeded in muscling the *Futurians* out of a controlling interest in the conference, and then out of the conference itself. Several *Futurians* experienced a literal muscling-out as they tried to enter Cavalcade Hall on the date of the conference, Saturday, July 2, 1939.<sup>35</sup> In retrospect, Pohl wrote of his belief that the exclusion had as much to do with the air of superiority projected by many *Futurians* as it had to do with their ideological tenor—as much a conflict in personality as politics.<sup>36</sup>

In Kyle’s telling, Sykora and Moskowitz offered to admit the *Futurians* on the condition that, “there was to be no propaganda from the *Futurians*, no speeches, no

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<sup>34</sup> Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 93-94. Ultimately, upwards of 200 fans attended the event, which seems a small number, compared to today’s sci-fi cons. However, this was considered a great success for a genre that often inspired double-digit crowds on a good day, and within which fans, as with Pohl and Asimov, regularly enjoyed sci-fi in isolation and described their initial realization as to the existence of other fans as pleasantly surprising.

<sup>35</sup> Kyle, “Caravan to the Stars,” 55-59; Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 93-96.

<sup>36</sup> Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 94.



disruptions of any kind, and a pledge of ‘orderly’ conduct.”<sup>37</sup> The nature of these, largely refused, conditions suggest the primacy of political issues in the concern of *New Fandom*. This is especially so when they are read against the behavior of *Futurian* members at a similar, but smaller event in 1937 where Wollheim, reading the words of Michel, called for the sci-fi community to:

“...place itself on record opposing all forces leading to barbarism, the advancement of pseudo-sciences, and militaristic ideologies, and shall further resolve that science-fiction should by nature stand for all forces working for a more unified world, a more Utopian existence, the application of science to human happiness, and a saner outlook on life”<sup>38</sup>

The *Futurians* maintained a presence, holding forth in neighborhood bars and eateries outside the jurisdiction of the convention proper. They experienced the convention through sympathetic go-betweens and fellow *Futurians* who avoided exclusion either by agreeing to the terms of *New Fandom* or by passing beneath its radar, as did Kyle.<sup>39</sup> Asimov’s was possibly a unique case, by Pohl’s speculation. Among *Futurians*, Asimov was one of the few to gain entrance to the convention. Such circumstance might have arisen as the result of a striking distinction Asimov acquired among *Futurians* that summer. That very month, it was widely known, Asimov accomplished something that

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<sup>37</sup> Kyle, “Caravan to the Stars,” 55-59.

<sup>38</sup> Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom*, 119.

<sup>39</sup> Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 93-96; Kyle, “Caravan to the Stars,” 55-59.

no other *Futurian* and very few fans yet had. He had appeared in the pages of the July 1939 *Astounding*, not as a letter-writing fan, but as a published and paid author.<sup>40</sup>

Asimov published regularly in *Astounding* during the golden age and continued throughout to be the sole *Futurian* thus favored by Campbell. By the circumstance of his having a foot in each camp, Asimov's remains the ideal perspective from which to view the events of that summer. The incident at Caravan Hall (the site of Worldcon 1), which came to be known in sci-fi circles as The Great Exclusion Act of 1939, did not set a precedent for future conventions; nor did it exceedingly mar what by all accounts—even those by excluded *Futurians*—was a fine inaugural in Worldcon 1. However, *something* significant had happened on that July afternoon.

As sci-fi took its first steps into the mainstream, so too, the mainstream began to permeate sci-fi. The movement for realism in sci-fi fell into lock step with a depoliticized model of sci-fi content, each marching behind Campbell through the pages of *Astounding*. The existence of *New Fandom* facilitated the split between Campbell's dominant sci-fi and the marginalized ideology of the *Futurians*. Because of his strong relationship with both Campbell and the *Futurians*, and because of his relatively strong literary talent, Asimov, more than any other writer, exemplified the conflict that ran through the evolutionary development of sci-fi as it entered the golden age.

While much of Asimov's failure to produce an explicitly political sci-fi during the golden age was due to his capitulation to a paycheck and a place on the main stage, both of which Campbell's *Astounding* embodied, such influence was not unsupported.

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<sup>40</sup> Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 219-233; Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 91-101; Kyle, "Caravan to the Stars," 55-59.

Asimov's own ideology played an equally significant role. Unlike Pohl's, Asimov's politics ran less along a Marxist line than they did beside a more broadly anti-fascist ideology. Asimov was not a member of the YCL, as were Pohl, Michel, and other *Futurians*. When Asimov wrote of the political engagement of the *Futurians*, he was careful to describe the group as wanting "to use science fiction as a way of fighting fascism," while he allowed, near lamentingly, that "it was almost impossible to do this in those days without making use of Marxist rhetoric."<sup>41</sup> His tolerance for that rhetoric within *Futurian* ranks, betrays less a political agreement, as it does an acceptance of the same pragmatism underpinning the Popular Front coalitions that defined global counter-fascism in the years before the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact of 1939.<sup>42</sup>

In his autobiography, Asimov was equally careful to contextualize his father's early sympathies for Soviet Russia outside of any support for a communist economic model. Rather, he explained, his father believed that the classless society the Soviets were building would see the end of anti-Semitism in Russia. In 1938, Judah Asimov told his son that the fatherland they had left fifteen years earlier, at the urging of his wife's émigré brother, would be the savior of Europe; the egalitarian, classless Soviet Union would ultimately constitute the force to stop Adolf Hitler. Young Isaac disagreed. He believed that the country he had called home since he was three-years-old would fill

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<sup>41</sup> Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 211.

<sup>42</sup> For a broader discussion of the Popular Front, see David Blaazer, *The Popular Front and the Progressive Tradition: Socialists, Liberals, and the Quest for Unity, 1884-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).

that role. The United States of America, he knew, would save the world.<sup>43</sup> In this belief, grew the kernel of Asimov's speculation on the routes and the remedies to a fascist power structure. As well, it began to define a sphere of compatibility between himself and Campbell.

The first stories Asimov managed to place with Campbell betrayed a strong mistrust of mass psychology in both the author and the editor, which likely derived in some measure from their observations on the rise of European fascists during the 1930s. In "Trends" (July 1939), Asimov explored a future America in which a religious evangelist, Otis Eldridge, has founded his quest for power upon an ability to unite popular opinion against space travel, described as "a blasphemous attempt to pierce the veil beyond which man is forbidden to go."<sup>44</sup> Ignoring public opinion, Asimov's hero/scientist John Harman refuses to delay a test of his rocket, the *Prometheus*. An explosion during the sabotaged launch of the *Prometheus* martyrs Eldridge and forces Harman underground to continue his now criminal, self-financed work. His eventual success in reaching the Moon turns the tide of public opinion, as he predicted it would, presumably inaugurating a glorious new age of science and reason.<sup>45</sup>

Overtly, the story is about the "pendulum swing" of social imperatives, hence the title "Trends," chosen by Campbell above Asimov's submission title "Ad Astra," meaning "to the stars."<sup>46</sup> At its core, it is a tale of the malleability of popular sentiment, within

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<sup>43</sup> Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 216.

<sup>44</sup> Isaac Asimov, "Trends," in *Astounding Science Fiction, July 1939*, ed. John W. Campbell, Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-46.

<sup>46</sup> Asimov, "Concerning "Trends",," 173-175.

which Asimov sustains a specific value judgment. Twice in “Trends,” Asimov portrayed mass opinion as swayed by the efforts of a strong individual—first by the words of Eldridge, later by the actions of Harman; first in reverence of traditional belief, later in reverence of future progress. The authorial and editorial judgment is clear throughout. Eldridge is a demagogue reliant upon the spooky evocation of superstitious folk mores to rule by fear. Harman is a scientist, a rationalist savior, offering hope and a way out of the darkness in which the technologically skittish present remains mired.

Harman succeeds in dragging humanity into the realization of its technological promise by his mere ability to resist the demagogue—by the shining strength of his individuality—real, present, and corporeal, as opposed to the ideological martyrdom of the firebrand. In the end, the “slave morality” of the masses appears sadly borne only beneath the ministrations of the “bad” man, in this case the power grubbing Luddite. The individual liberty and private enterprise practiced and defended by Harman (the “good” man) suggests a specific social system, recognizable as a free-market liberal democracy. In Harman, Asimov and Campbell endorsed the ability of that system to meritocratically shuffle the “good” man to the top of the heap.

The publication of “Trends” provides a window into the process by which Asimov and Campbell concretized the ideological signature of sci-fi during the golden age—as individuals, certainly, but also as representations of the genre’s political negotiations that bridged the fandom gap of 1939, however imbalanced they may have been. Campbell’s vision of a depoliticized sci-fi, married to the present moment (both technologically and socially), was predisposed to accept Asimov’s version of a similarly tethered, counter-fascist sci-fi, in which American capitalist ideologies patrolled the

ramparts. On this point, Asimov's original title is particularly illustrative. Campbell changed Asimov's title to "Trends," from "Ad Astra." Although Asimov lost his title, his prose retained the ideological implications of a humanity destined to look "to the stars." As a theme, the inevitability of forward technological progress, prejudged as correct and beneficial, ran through much of the golden age sci-fi printed in *Astounding*. Likewise, sci-fi stories of this period followed "Trends" in sustaining the tendency of strong, individualistic, (usually male) human beings to exercise a "natural" affinity for individualized liberty and private enterprise and to employ it in the protection of a progressive technological imperative.

Asimov would write that his appearance in the landmark July 1939 issue of *Astounding* was a minor historical occurrence, insisting that "Black Destroyer," the first published story by A. E. van Vogt, held the true significance of that particular number.<sup>47</sup> His concession was to the superior literary acumen of van Vogt, at the time a valid recognition. However, his historical modesty was misplaced. "Black Destroyer" was probably the best story in that issue, but its golden-age significance merely matched that of "Trends," or even followed from it. Where Asimov identified the special destiny of humanity within its technocratic imagination and proficiency, van Vogt followed that special destiny into its intergalactic expression, exploring the galaxy alongside the crew of the *Space Beagle*, presumably named in homage to the ship that ferried Charles Darwin to the Galapagos Islands.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

In “Black Destroyer,” the crew of van Vogt’s *Space Beagle* encounters a giant, black cat on a seemingly abandoned world. The crew takes it to be the “animal” that it appears to be and collects it as a biological specimen. However, as the reader learns through the narrative thoughts of the cat-like alien creature—self-identified as “Coerl”—it is not merely physically superior to humans; it also possesses extra-sensory and borderline telekinetic abilities, as well as a superlative, cunning intelligence. It allows itself to be taken aboard the *Space Beagle* on the hope that it will be transported to the home planet of the human beings, which it desperately wants to devour.

The Coerl is immortal and need not eat, but it is obsessed to the point of addiction over something it senses within the bones of the humans, something it calls “id.” It delays its satisfaction vis-à-vis the “id” to guarantee the bounty it imagines to be waiting on Earth. Unable to control its need for the “id,” Coerl attacks several crew members, revealing itself as the “Black Destroyer.” Finding itself overwhelmed by the crew, Coerl is nonetheless able to avoid capture long enough to fashion an escape pod. Ultimately, the crewmen foil the escape by virtue of their familiarity and skill their own technology.<sup>48</sup>

It is neither insignificant, nor anomalous in sci-fi, that the crew of the *Space Beagle* is able to defeat a “superior” foe by virtue of its engineering and scientific prowess. However, van Vogt paints his most clear picture of a unique species and its special progressive destiny within his notion of “id,” the singular human essence after which the Coerl lusts. By the 1930s, the notion of a Freudian subconscious was

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<sup>48</sup> A. E. Van Vogt, “Black Destroyer,” in *Astounding Science Fiction, July 1939*, ed. John W. Campbell, Jr. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981), 9-31.

common in the American cultural vernacular, though often by virtue of an oversimplified interpretation. A mass reading of the Freudian “id” and its operational “pleasure principle” as the hidden, driving force behind human subconscious desire presented an accessible concept, over-simplified as it was, to many Americans by 1939.<sup>49</sup>

In his June 1939 editorial, Campbell saw the historical significance of the emergence of a literary genre that foregrounded the technological manifestation of van Vogt’s use of “id” and Asimov’s “ad astra” tendency. In sci-fi, men of individualistic liberty and industrial expertise carried a morally wrought imperative of technological advancement into the shining future their efforts would guarantee. In New York City, during the summer of 1939, American industry offered a similar assertion. While fandom architects of the first sci-fi WorldCom sought concurrence with the World of Tomorrow exhibition in the hope of boosting attendance, the cultural statement from within the World’s Fair commingled with and supported sci-fi on a much deeper level.

In his “Future Tense” editorial of June 1939, Campbell recognized a society that looked forward optimistically. The designers of the 1939 World’s Fair in New York City were of a like mind, building it around the futuristic “World of Tomorrow” theme. Beginning with the 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, the World’s Fair had traditionally provided an arena for the display and admiration of *state-of-the-art* industry. These were self-congratulatory forums, or retrospective versions of such, as with the

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<sup>49</sup> For a more complete discussion of the early impact of Freudian theory in American culture see Nathan Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Hendrik Ruitenbeek, *Freud and America*. (New York: Macmillan, 1966).



1933 “Century of Progress” exhibition in Chicago. The futuristic theme was a novel concept in 1939.<sup>50</sup> It was also a forward-looking commercial concept.

According to cultural historian Warren Susman, the 1939 World of Tomorrow exhibition was the first World’s Fair to promote “the availability of consumer products and services” as its central purpose. The most successful exhibits at the fair were those sponsored by “producers of consumer goods.”<sup>51</sup> In 1939, the expositional focus shifted from a more traditional concentration on *industrial production* to a foregrounding of the *commercial product* at the end of that production line, and especially onto the consumption of that product—onto the *consumers themselves*, the American people. According to the official published report on the creation of the “everyman’s fair,” described by fair president Gerald A. Whalen as “built for and dedicated to the people,”<sup>52</sup> the exhibition sought to show the average American consumer “what he [or she] could attain for his community and himself” in a near future society.<sup>53</sup>

Fair exhibitors and organizers couched this promise of future abundance and prosperity in the language and ideology of the past, employing powerful reflections on a patriotic American narrative. A corresponding theme of the fair celebrated the sesquicentennial of the inauguration of President George Washington, which took place in New York City on April 30, 1789 (150 years to the day before the opening of the fair). Within this theme, the organizing committee sought to stress the “preservation of the

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<sup>50</sup> Tyng, *Making a World's Fair* , 11-15, 23, 25-26.

<sup>51</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 215.

<sup>52</sup> Grover A. Whalen, “Introduction,” in *Making a World's Fair: Organization, Promotion, Financing, and Problems, with Particular Reference to the New York . of 1939-1940*, 1st ed. (New York: Vantage Press, 1958), 6.

<sup>53</sup> Tyng, *Making a World's Fair* , 26.

sacred fire of liberty...[and the]...destiny of the republican form of government.”<sup>54</sup> Fair archivist Ed Tyng described the goal as one of proving the “experiment” in government launched on that spring day 150 years prior. “The task then of those planning the New York fair,” he wrote, “was to show to what the course plotted by the first President had led, and to what it might be expected to lead.”<sup>55</sup> Explicitly, the consumer products of the future imagined within exhibits by RCA, Ford, General Motors, AT&T, Firestone, General Electric, and others became linked to the national mythos and its cultural hegemony—sustaining what Friederich Engels called “the bourgeois illusion of the eternity and finality of capitalist production.”<sup>56</sup>

The message of the fair bore a striking resemblance to the growing strength of an “Americanized” extrapolation of the technological future in sci-fi pulp literature. The parallel assertions of the fair, the promise of continued liberty and the promise of an ascending cycle of production and consumption, together conflated the primacy of consumption, abundance, and free markets into the cultural tenets of individual liberty and messianic technological progress. Susman identified the maturing of what he would call the “culture of abundance”<sup>57</sup> in the comfort and control imagined in the *World of Tomorrow*. “The fair became a rather generalized advertisement,” he summarized, “for something the 1930s had begun to call the American Way of Life...a veritable

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Friedrich Engels, “Letters on Historical Materialism: To Franz Mehring (London, July 14, 1893),” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1978), 767.

<sup>57</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, xix-xxx.

Disneyland.”<sup>58</sup> Sci-fi historian H. Bruce Franklin also recognized the fantastic in the World’s Fair, taking the notion of its applicability to sci-fi genre developments a step further, identifying the fair itself as “the principal form of sci-fi in 1939.”<sup>59</sup>

Franklin elevated his assessment of the “fictions” disseminated at the fair, perceiving them to meet or exceed those appearing in *Astounding* during the same year. He justified his claims of genre legitimacy regarding the culturally ambient sci-fi of the fair based on the “Wow! Gosh!” factor he observed within the Utopian visions at the 1939 exposition. He found this explicitly lacking from the stories in *Astounding*. In fact, he found the sci-fi in *Astounding* during 1939 to be often critical of technological progress, while much of the fair’s Utopian rhetoric contradicted the unmentioned social consequences wrought by the existing ministrations of the future corporate messiahs. Franklin also read *Astounding* to be largely unconcerned with the development of Utopian models or even with the state of society on planet Earth. One of the exceptions he allowed was Asimov’s “Trends,” in which, he peripherally noted, the road to Utopia is technologically paved through the singular efforts of Asimov’s capitalist/scientist/hero.<sup>60</sup>

To engage more broadly the sci-fi of the period, to expand beyond the single year to which Franklin holds his analysis, is to recognize the importance of “Trends,” not as the exception to the rule by which Franklin drew his distinction between the fair and the pulps, but rather as the embodiment of a deeper accord. Franklin’s distinction derives from the metric of the “Wow!” factor, as well as that of an explicit tub-thumping

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 228.

<sup>59</sup> Franklin, “America as Science Fiction,” 38.

<sup>60</sup> Franklin, “America as Science Fiction.”

advocacy for the technological marvels in the World of Tomorrow. By such a measure, Franklin's fair clearly launched the more committed campaign for an American free-market capitalism as the present and future patron savior of the common citizen. Susman affirms as much, recognizing the power of the "Wow!" through which visitors to the fair largely "accepted consumer capitalism without critical reflection."<sup>61</sup> However, the cultural production from *Astounding*—neither in 1939, nor later—operated as simply as Franklin's reading, or even as the intentions of its authors, might suggest. The cultural language that informed its characterization and narrative, as we have seen in "Trends" and "Black Destroyer," implicitly strengthened the assumptions that had underwritten success within the American capitalist model. In this way, the World of Tomorrow exhibition and *Astounding*, each by its own route, arrived at a particular ideological consistency: they both supported private enterprise as the "American way of life," and as the best to Susman's "veritable Disneyland," his "culture of abundance."

This "natural" tendency of cultural expressions to reflect and reproduce dominant economic and social systems helped to create and sustain the means by which the World of Tomorrow exhibition and *Astounding* advanced similar cultural statements in support of a capitalist inevitability. An industrial economy bred an industrial society and an industrial culture. In turn, these served to strengthen and sustain the resource relationships of that economy—individual rather than communal, entitled rather than

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<sup>61</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 228.

accountable, competitive rather than cooperative, and in reverence of economic growth and monetized profit.<sup>62</sup>

The fair illustrated the way in which commercial institutions of production and distribution manufactured the desire necessary to absorb present and future production by creating and deploying a commercial aesthetic in support of what William Leach called the “cult of the new.”<sup>63</sup> Marketing and sales professionals employed industrial techniques—industrial by virtue of their efficiency—to produce future oriented desire. In a sense, this was the intentional production of an optimistic cultural dependency on technological development in service of an economic agenda. Strongly manifested in the 1939 fair, that ethos had exerted, throughout the preceding decade, a social and political influence sufficient to carry capitalism through a popular crisis in confidence following from the Great Depression. Individualized consumer agency and the “cult of the new” imposed a moral imperative upon the ideologies of technological progress and individual liberty that informed the World of Tomorrow exhibition.

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<sup>62</sup> For a more complete discussion of the development of individual identity and agency within a system of industrial capitalism and commercial consumption see Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*; Leach, *Land of Desire*; Glickman, *A Living Wage*.

<sup>63</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire* Leach traced the growth of a modern culture of commercial consumption from its roots in the nineteenth-century industrial disruption of traditional, agrarian patterns of sustenance resulting in the creation of a wage-related shift toward pecuniary and market valuations of products and labor. Within this monetized development of worth and agency within the productive and consumptive power of citizens, advocates of commercial and industrial growth encouraged an embrace of individual desire and of individual consumption to satisfy such. Consumer entitlement to satisfy individual desire was drawn by the “cult of the new” into a perpetual state that suggested the future orientation of the fair by 1939.

H.G Wells, writing in a special section on the World of Tomorrow in the *New York Times*, engaged what he saw as the inevitability of progress, set above the minutia of history, identifying that inevitability as “the general drift of the material circumstances of mankind.” Wells saw this drift as unaltered in its general progress by such historical trivialities as war, depression, liberty, slavery, injustice, and the myriad other concerns of human society. “Nothing is in sight that will stanch the flow of invention and very little to stay innovation,” he observed, allowing that such may proceed, “a little faster or a little slower,” but always forward.<sup>64</sup> Amid the slings and arrows—as Wells upheld, the fair embodied, and sci-fi explicated—humankind would move forward pointing its gaze diligently ad astra.

Writing alongside Wells in the *New York Times* fair preview, GM vice-president Charles F. Kettering argued that America was destined to disperse itself across the continent (conveniently requiring an increased manufacture of *his* product), but implied that progress would automatically and benevolently wash itself into every corner of that population. Kettering defined the role he and his company sought for the consumer, recalling a tree in the front yard of the Ohio farmhouse in which he was born. “Without moving an inch,” Kettering’s tree bore witness to all of the technological marvels that defined the preceding half-century. As the tree stood firm, planes, trains, and automobiles rushed past; families exposed and enjoyed photographs and home movies beneath its shade; radio broadcasts from across the globe suffused its branches with

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<sup>64</sup> H. G. Wells, “World of Tomorrow,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 1939, sec. 8: New York World's Fair: Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Washington's Inauguration, 4.

the music and the news of the day. “The whole world, in a sense has come there,” observed Kettering; “Change has actually thrust itself upon us.”<sup>65</sup> He proceeded to speculate on a Utopian future of solar-powered cars and of airplanes that will see through fog—though, all beneath the aegis of a benevolent and paternalistic technological *fait accompli*, in which the mass of humanity need not lift a finger.<sup>66</sup> As in the sci-fi Campbell was printing at *Astounding*, men of action would direct and preserve the inevitable march of progress on behalf of that humanity. Change, sci-fi increasingly agreed with Kettering, will “thrust itself upon us.”

In March of 1941, Robert Heinlein offered one of *Astounding's* clearest characterizations of Kettering's paternalistic guardian of technological destiny in his portrayal of Lawrence Gaines, Chief Engineer for the *Diego-Reno Roadtown* in “The Roads Must Roll.” Through his “roadtowns,” Heinlein engaged the question of urban obsolescence, as predicted by Kettering, within the most technologically informed installment of his “Future-History” timeline to date. Heinlein not only referenced and built upon power generation technology introduced earlier in the timeline (“Let There Be Light” *Super-Science Stories* May 1940);<sup>67</sup> he also established its limitation given the current development of the roadtown—itsself destined for obsolescence and sustained cultural reference throughout later episodes. Roadtowns were multiple sprawling

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<sup>65</sup> Charles F. Kettering, “Wheels, Keels and Wings,” *The New York Times*, March 5, 1939, sec. 8: New York World's Fair: Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of Washington's Inauguration, 16,48.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> “Let There Be Light” is one of the few “Future-History” installments to appear outside the pages of *Astounding*. Interestingly, due to its uniquely anti-corporate theme, and its “racy” dialogue, Pohl eventually published the piece in *Super-Science Stories*.

communities, containing the majority of the American population, built along enormous conveyor systems connecting distended urban centers across thousands of miles. Despite their eventual failure and subsequent relegation to a kind of tragicomic kitsch within future societies, Heinlein presented the roadtowns as a necessary developmental stage.<sup>68</sup> Gaines, in turn, became its greatest advocate and rescuer in the face of the myopic social forces that threatened it from within.

In “Roads,” Gaines must abandon a tour he is conducting of his roadtown in order to lead a paramilitary response against the labor dispute that threatens to shut down his road. Within the individualistic paradigm of golden age sci-fi, it is not unusual for an executive atop a bureaucratic structure to handle anything and everything by himself, as Gaines does in this case. He proceeds beneath the roads with an armed accompaniment, but he micro-manages the entire operation and ultimately chooses to confront the villain alone. The labor action is led by Gaines’s deputy chief, Shorty Van Kleek, who feels “more at home in the Guild Hall...than...in the engineers’ clubhouse” having ascended to his executive position from “down inside,” among the technicians and workers who labor beneath the roads under the mantra, “The Roads Must Roll.”<sup>69</sup> Heinlein portrayed Van Kleek’s actions as demagoguery and even as terrorism—the

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<sup>68</sup> Robert Heinlein, “Logic of Empire,” in *The Past Through Tomorrow: 'Future History' Stories* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 304-340; Robert Heinlein, “If This Goes On—,” in *The Past Through Tomorrow: 'Future History' Stories* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 361-470; Robert Heinlein, “Methuselah's Children,” in *The Past Through Tomorrow: 'Future History' Stories* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 526-667; Robert Heinlein, “Coventry,” in *The Past Through Tomorrow: 'Future History' Stories* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 471-508.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Heinlein, “The Roads Must Roll,” in *The Past Through Tomorrow: 'Future History' Stories* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1967), 31.



partial stoppage orchestrated by the strikers having resulted in the horrific death of an innocent woman.<sup>70</sup>

Heinlein revealed Van Kleek to be a man of weak character, one taking advantage of the immense power held by those who keep the roads rolling. Van Kleek appears especially distinct in his opportunism as Heinlein placed him in contrast to the one sensible voice from among the guild members, identified only as Brother Harvey. Harvey points out that an *ability* to make demands does not equate to a *right* to do so; “Our jobs are important, sure, but where would we be without the farmers—or the steel workers—or a dozen other trades and professions?” He demands, “What’s all the shootin’ for? We’ve got the highest hourly rate of pay of any mechanical guild.”<sup>71</sup> Van Kleek and those he has convinced of their extraordinary importance and worth take no heed, proceeding with their plan to threaten the road. When Gaines eventually catches up with Van Kleek, he is able to maneuver the latter into an individual confrontation that favors his confidence and strong character. Despite the apparent advantage of Van Kleek’s gun and his holding the road hostage, Gaines is able to dominate Van Kleek, psychologically as well as physically, leaving the would-be demagogue “sprawled on the floor, tears streaming out of his closed eyes, blubbering like a frustrated child.”<sup>72</sup> Heinlein exposed Van Kleek as a child cursed with an over-extended sense of entitlement, working against his own self-interest and encouraging his peers and subordinates to the same.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 58.

Van Kleek's characterization invites and excuses Gaines's paternalism, which the latter expertly deploys to diffuse the threat from the irascible, imprudent, and dangerous Van Kleek, rescuing the vulnerable masses from both his villainy and his toxic influence. By his championship of such a clean and efficient exercise of a paternalistic industrial management, Heinlein undercut the spirit of the Wagner Act of 1935 and other New Deal labor reform measures designed to guarantee certain human rights in the arena of labor dispute. Van Kleek, and the "functionalist" movement he champions,<sup>73</sup> represents the tragic product of that ill-advised devolution of economic and political power. This responsibility rests more securely with the likes of Gaines, who heroically and paternalistically saves the road and the society that depends upon its operation.

More importantly, and in a greater benefit to society, Gaines is able to learn from the incident. Throughout his chase to confront Van Kleek, Gaines is preoccupied with analyzing the susceptibility of the roadtown to the sabotage of malicious parties. He formulates a series of protective measures that, when implemented, will protect the roadtown and its citizenry, not simply, from internal meddling, but also from dangers

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 47-48 In explanation of Van Kleek's assertion that the "functionalist revolution" had begun, Heinlein described "functionalism" as follows: "*Concerning Function: A Treatise on the Natural Order in Society*, the bible of the functionalist movement, was first published in 1930. It claimed to be a scientifically accurate theory of social relations. The author, Paul Decker, disclaimed the 'outworn and futile' ideas of democracy and human equality, and substituted a system in which human beings were evaluated 'functionally'—that is to say, by the role each filled in the economic sequence. The underlying thesis was that it was right and proper for a man to exercise over his fellows whatever power was inherent in his function, and that any other form of social organization was silly, visionary, and contrary to the 'natural order.'"

associated with certain mechanical failures and other damaging and costly inefficiencies.<sup>74</sup> Gaines not only saves his roadtown proper, but sustains the evolutionary arc of the technology that will carry Heinlein's "Future History" timeline across several centuries to come. And he does so all by himself. The citizens of the American roadtowns need only to have depended upon the roads, to have made use of the roads, and to have required their continuance. Beyond that, all that is asked of them is that they patiently await the wash of technological development. As with the tree near Kettering's childhood farmhouse, the future and its attendant prosperity would thrust itself upon them.

Neither pulp sci-fi, nor the American culture of commercial consumption promoted at the 1939 fair, explicitly advocated for a society of unquestioningly receptive zombies. In fact, both professed to present an inclusive, constructive role for individuals in service of a technologically progressive social narrative. In *Astounding*, Campbell regularly renewed his call for young men to seek training in engineering and in the sciences. Both the fiction and the advertising copy echoed his call. Entreatments of "Be a Radio Expert," and "Get Ahead—Make More Money...Be a Diesel Engineer," greeted *Astounding* readers, from ads for the National Radio Institute, Hemphill Diesel Schools, and others like the International Correspondence Schools.<sup>75</sup> Sci-fi heroes provided the model. The voice of the commercial culture, as expressed in *Astounding's* advertisements, revealed the route.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 48-57.

<sup>75</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., ed., "Astounding Science Fiction: 1936-1952," in *William J. Heron Collection of Speculative Fiction, Newman Library Special Collections, Virginia Tech* Examples appear frequently throughout the golden age run of *Astounding*.

In similar fashion, the World of Tomorrow could simultaneously live up to its explicated sub-plot of cooperative, progressive effort *and* validate Susman's reading of it as an advertisement for the "American way of life." Both sci-fi and the World's Fair encouraged individual entitlement and action, but within a self-evidently correct and morally predestined economic and social structure. Susman best illustrated the agreement between cultural statements made by the fair and by *Astounding* in his discussion of the essay contest sponsored by fair organizers in its second year to identify the "typical American boy." The winning entry, quoted by Susman from its September 1940 reprint in the *New York Times*, embodied the spirit of Campbell's entreatments in *Astounding* and, by Susman's reading, that of the fair as well. "He is always busy at some handicraft or hobby," the winning essay averred, "and always thinking up something new to do or make. That is why America still has a future."<sup>76</sup> America had a future because its youth had the good sense to covet and to come *ad astra*.

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<sup>76</sup> Susman, *Culture as History*, 220.

## Chapter Two

### March 1944: “Those Who Help Themselves”

The written description of an atomic bomb and the mechanism designed to trigger its chain-reaction was over-simplified and crude:

Two cast-iron hemispheres, clamped over the orange segments of cadmium alloy. And the fuse...a tiny can of cadmium alloy containing a speck of radium in a beryllium holder and a small explosive powerful enough to shatter the cadmium walls. Then...the powdered uranium oxide runs together in the central cavity. The radium shoots neutrons into this mass—and the U-235 takes over from there.<sup>1</sup>

It lacked the subtle functionality of the “gun-type” and “implosion-type” trigger assemblies built into the nuclear devices detonated respectively over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945 to secure American victory in World War II.

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<sup>1</sup> Cleve Cartmill, “Deadline,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, March 1944, 174.

Despite its impractical workability and layman’s banality, this description was sufficient to raise eyebrows within the U.S. War Department’s Counter Intelligence Corps for two reasons. First, the underlying method of holding and combining two isolated, non-critical quantities of fissile uranium in order to delay and control the attainment of critical mass necessary to produce a nuclear reaction was absolutely sound. It was consistent with the theory informing contemporary, top-secret government research at Manhattan Project labs across the country that remains behind the science of nuclear weapons today. Second, and more importantly, it was published for popular consumption. The description appeared as an element of the narrative “MacGuffin” in a lackluster adventure story written by Cleve Cartmill and published by John W. Campbell, Jr., in the March 1944 issue of *Astounding Science-Fiction* (*Astounding*)—nearly 18 months before the United States revealed its nuclear capability to the world. In a sense, the sci-fi penchant for predictive technological extrapolation was beginning to exercise its cultural credentials in a way that made the protectors of a tenuous wartime technological advantage very nervous.<sup>2</sup>

As American sci-fi continued its emergence into the mainstream of popular culture during the 1940s, its authors continued to favor cultural support for free and individual action within American economic and social models. The rhetoric of this cultural support had shifted to accommodate wartime material necessity, in which

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<sup>2</sup> Ashley, *The Time Machines*, 166-167; Berger, *The Magic That Works*, 60-69; Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*, 108-109; Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 206-207; Robert Silverberg, “Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: One,” *Asimov's Science Fiction*, [http://www.asimovs.com/\\_issue\\_0310/ref.shtml](http://www.asimovs.com/_issue_0310/ref.shtml); Robert Silverberg, “Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: Two,” *Asimov's Science Fiction*, [http://www.asimovs.com/\\_issue\\_0311/ref2.shtml](http://www.asimovs.com/_issue_0311/ref2.shtml).

business and government sought to cultivate expectations of abundance and prosperity in a postwar America by embedding the future directed optimism of the 1939 fair into the patriotic homefront ethos. Even as the war continued, Americans were confronted with advertisements for postwar prosperity that reminded them of “What this war is all about,” and “what we’re fighting for,” attaching consumer abundance and general prosperity to rhetorical notions of democracy and liberty that derived from an entrenched mythos of American exceptionalism.<sup>3</sup> Sci-fi followed this shift, incorporating themes of exceptionalism and inevitable triumph alongside its continuing support for rugged individualism, self-reliance, and willful private enterprise. Sci-fi authors continued to advance plausibility within their technological speculations and to take those speculations seriously as a forum for relevant future-directed scientific discussion. In this, they maintained a connection to the material realities of known science and existing technology. Within that continuing trend, however, they increasingly incorporated allegorical representations of the ideological buoys of postwar prosperity, weaving these into models of authoritarianism and the meritocratic ascension of capitalistic actors within historical inevitabilities.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the ideology of sci-fi in the middle-1940s, contextualizing it within the wartime cultural contracts that both encouraged sci-fi’s popular emergence and shaped its product. I begin with a continued discussion of the Cleve Cartmill affair, which placed *Astounding* at the center of controversy surrounding issues of national security. I use the investigation into a possible leak of

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 69-75.

military secrets to suggest recognition by the government and mainstream media of the expanding cultural presence of *Astounding* and sci-fi.

Next, I follow the discussion of American exceptionalism and “victory culture” into Isaac Asimov’s narrative treatment of these ideas, and his exploration of historical inevitability within his popular “Foundation” series. The serialization of “Foundation” appeared in *Astounding* throughout the 1940s and stands as emblematic of sci-fi’s ideology in that decade. Finally, I enhance my analysis of sci-fi authoritarianism within a particular historical destiny by engaging two stories by Robert Heinlein and A.E. van Vogt. In “Methuselah’s Children” and “Slan” respectively, Heinlein and van Vogt explored these themes through the inevitable success of their super-human protagonists.

Identifying where and how existing scholarship has been limited in its interpretation of the ideological message from golden age sci-fi, I argue that these stories advanced a narrative of inevitable triumph beneath a specifically American cultural ethos—in ultimate support of an American capitalist ideology. Through textual analysis, I will draw out the means by which authors attached sympathetic protagonists to individualistic, self-reliant, and competitive action, effectively defining this as the route to success within a self-evident destiny. Reading the stories against recent scholarship on consumer and political agency within the American capitalist system, I intend to show that golden age sci-fi served to rhetorically democratize access to an elite model of authority, autonomy, and agency.

Like much of the content Campbell printed in *Astounding* during the 1940s, Cartmill’s short-story, “Deadline,” was the product of collaboration between editor and



author. According to statements made by Campbell to government investigators—statements eventually corroborated by Cartmill—the physics behind the bomb in “Deadline” were wholly Campbell’s formulation. Both men had studied physics at an advanced level, but Campbell remained obsessively current, as his editorials and personal correspondence illustrate. In fact, Cartmill appears to have lifted entire passages of scientific description word-for-word from Campbell’s letters, including the section quoted above, a schedule of probable damage from the detonation of a nuclear weapon, and an estimation as to the amount of fissile uranium in the possession of United States Military.<sup>4</sup> This latter statistic, Cartmill narratively attributed to a fictional nation-state embroiled in a planet-wide military conflict and on the cusp of entering its own atomic age.<sup>5</sup>

To the degree that Campbell and Cartmill intended to reference emerging military technologies within America’s contemporary geo-political conflict, they did so merely as an element of good science fiction, though the story was scarcely that.<sup>6</sup> Cartmill revealed much of the science and politics in question within the dialogue of his protagonist, Ybor Sebrot, and through his attempts to solicit the help, or circumvent the suspicion, of the various characters that threaten his mission to destroy the atomic

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<sup>4</sup> Berger, *The Magic That Works*, 60-69; Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 205-207; Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*, 108-109; Ashley, *The Time Machines*, 166-167; Silverberg, “Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: One”; Silverberg, “Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: Two.”

<sup>5</sup> Cartmill, “Deadline,” 164.

<sup>6</sup> Silverberg, “Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: One”; Silverberg, “Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: Two”; John W. Campbell, Jr., “The Analytical Laboratory,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, June 1944, 94 In fact, *Astounding* readers ranked it last among stories in the March issue, and Cartmill himself told his mailman who had been pressed into service by the Counter Intelligence Corps that the story “stinks.”

device. An agent of the Seilla (Allies spelled backwards), Ybor has landed his glider in territory controlled by the enemy Sixa (including the kingdoms of Ynamre and Ylati) with orders to neutralize a new and dangerous Sixa weapon. Intelligence reports indicate that the bomb, if used, could turn the tide of the war hard against the Seilla or, if uncontrolled, could exterminate all life on the planet.<sup>7</sup> It was Campbell's suggestion that the narrative follow the mission of a secret agent within an obvious World War II allegory.<sup>8</sup> Cartmill employed both, so thinly veiling the latter behind his reversed spellings that a reader scarcely recognizes the setting as extra-terrestrial or the characters as non-human until, at the climax, Ybor wins the day by disarming his opponent using a here-to-fore unmentioned prehensile tail.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the direct reference to an actual, continuing war, and despite a fairly accurate speculation toward the means of weaponizing of a sub-atomic chain-reaction, Campbell managed to advance and eventually support the claim that "Deadline" contained nothing beyond that which an engaged reader of published technical journals might extrapolate. Regardless, he and Cartmill endured government surveillance and interrogation, while several others from among *Astounding's* authors fell under peripheral suspicion, including Robert Heinlein, L. Sprague de Camp, Will Jenkins (who wrote sci-fi under the name Murray Leinster), and Isaac Asimov. These were among Campbell's most successful and prolific writers.

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<sup>7</sup> Cartmill, "Deadline," 154-179.

<sup>8</sup> Silverberg, "Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: One."

<sup>9</sup> Cartmill, "Deadline," 175.

From the perspective of government agents, they together formed a network of suspect coincidence, beginning with a luncheon meeting involving Campbell, Jenkins, and Edgar Norton, an engineer working at Bell Labs. Bell Labs had conducted atomic research for the government, though Norton had not been associated with that research. Jenkins, who had previously attracted government censors to his own writing, was also helping his daughter (a researcher for Raytheon) in her attempt to acquire atomic copper, samples of which he passed to Asimov for analysis. Asimov was conducting and assisting wartime research at the Philadelphia Navy Yard along with de Camp and Heinlein, a known friend to Cartmill. Ultimately, after investigating the connections and interviewing the actors, intelligence agents accepted Campbell's statement as to the public availability of the nuclear "secrets" informing "Deadline," but pressed for a moratorium on stories about atomic weapons consistent with the voluntary, wartime guidelines generating from the U.S. Office of Censorship.<sup>10</sup>

Created on December 19, 1941, under the First War Powers Act of 1941, the Office of Censorship (OC) issued in June of 1943 a confidential request to broadcasting, newspaper, and periodical editors that they refrain from the mention of atomic fission, uranium, radium, and other components of military experiments.<sup>11</sup> This request

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<sup>10</sup> Ashley, *The Time Machines*, 166-167; Berger, *The Magic That Works*, 60-69; Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*, 108-109; Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 206-207; Silverberg, "Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: One"; Silverberg, "Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: Two."

<sup>11</sup> Washburn, Patrick S., 1988. The Office of Censorship's Attempt to Control Press Coverage of the Atomic Bomb during World War II. Paper presented at the annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Portland, OR, July 2, 2-7, <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED295201> (accessed February 10, 2010).

Campbell later claimed to have received and ignored. In an interview given to the *New Yorker* in late August 1945, Campbell explained, “atomic bombs had been our stock in trade for years and that it would look terribly suspicious if we suddenly dropped them—from the magazine, I mean.”<sup>12</sup> Campbell maintained that his editorial freedom suffered little under the “Deadline” investigation and the broader wartime censorship guidelines (which constituted an entirely voluntary, though widely followed policy). He held that government agents agreed with his conclusions as to what was or was not “suspicious,” and that further, “They probably figured nobody would believe us anyhow.”<sup>13</sup> However, as Robert Silverberg pointed out in his report on the “Cleve Cartmill Affair,” fissile U-235 does not appear again in *Astounding* again until after the war.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, Orr, and Hellman, “1945 Cassandra (The Talk of the Town),” 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Silverberg, “Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: Two.” Silverberg’s observation is upheld by an analysis of *Astounding*’s content over the 18 months following the March 1944 issue, and is especially illustrated in Campbell’s September 1944 editorial, aptly entitled “Remarkably Absent.” In that September essay, Campbell recounted the many super-weapons that sci-fi had predicted, and which the war had made a reality by the necessity of the fight, including the bazooka and “rocket-bomb projectiles.” He also admitted sci-fi miscalculations, over- and under-estimations, as in the case of chemical weapons and TNT respectively. He singled out the bulldozer as “one of the great strategic weapons of the war” for its efficiency in the construction of airstrips on small Pacific islands under the administration of a small crew of workmen. (Interestingly, he did not mention Theodore Sturgeon’s “Killdozer,” which would appear in the November issue of *Astounding* later that year, and which he must have already had in his possession. In it a small crew of workmen has been sent to construct an airstrip on a Pacific island, where they are trapped and hunted by a murderously possessed bulldozer.) Ultimately, the weapons Campbell interprets as “remarkably absent” from the list of sci-fi-speculations-come-true are radio-controlled weapons. More telling, given the fresh trouble with “Deadline,” is the “remarkable absence” of any mention of atomic weapons or nuclear physics from Campbell’s essay. In Campbell’s own words, these had been the “sci-fi stock in trade” for nearly a decade.

Campbell appears to have been caught between a disinclination, on one hand, to limit his authors' ability to engage topics natural to sci-fi and, on the other, his desire to champion a special relevance for sci-fi, inclusive of both its engagement with the cutting-edge of technology and science and of its predictive aptitude. Jack Lockhart, who handled the "Cartmill Affair" for the OC had written a year earlier that his office rarely troubled itself over works of fiction, but allowed for exceptions when, "the fiction incorporates factual information dealing with restricted subjects."<sup>15</sup> Following the Cartmill affair, Lockhart issued *Astounding* a formal reminder of the 1943 OC guidelines, forcing Campbell to retreat from the very assertion he had been advancing since 1938: that sci-fi constituted a sincere and applicable technologically speculative dialogue. Even as the investigation into the "Cartmill affair" seemed to support Campbell's continued assertions of sci-fi relevance and prescience, he defended his disregard for censorship policy partly by allowing "Deadline"—and by extension, sci-fi—to be classified as "childish" and "utterly fantastic," and partly by convincing authorities that sci-fi was not predicting the future, but merely paying close attention to the present.<sup>16</sup> It was not until after the U. S. Military let its atomic cat out of the bag on August 6, 1945, that Campbell felt comfortable readopting his distinctive arrogance in support of sci-fi,

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<sup>15</sup> Washburn, *The Office of Censorship's Attempt to Control Press Coverage of the Atomic Bomb during World War II*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Berger, *The Magic That Works*, 62; Silverberg, "Reflections: The Cleve Cartmill Affair: Two." Edgar Norton told investigators that he had read "Deadline" and repeated what he told Campbell regarding its poor caliber as sci-fi, as science, and as literature, and that he felt sure that anything stumbled upon "that was actually the subject of current military research...must have been purely coincidence."

reflecting in a *New Yorker* interview, mere weeks after Hiroshima, “I guess now people can see we knew what we were talking about.”<sup>17</sup>

The investigation into “Deadline” strengthened Campbell’s underlying assertions that sci-fi authors produced a cultural product of growing influence and import. It was sufficiently present, sufficiently accessible, and sufficiently regarded as popular culture to warrant suppression. By 1945, Campbell’s genre was emerging from the cultural periphery. During the early 1940s, sci-fi drew the current of mainstream culture into its specific literary gully, where dominant cultural trends eddied around the community of writers and readers at *Astounding*, lifting their speculations on technology and society into the ebb and flow of a broad American cultural purview. Its legitimacy required a less aggressive advocacy than what Campbell had provided in the late 1930s when he first took hold of the reigns at *Astounding*.

Campbell’s writing in this period tended to indulge his compulsion to pull discussions of “real” science into his pages.<sup>18</sup> He left the puffing-up of the genre, which so permeated his late 1930s commentary, to the talent of his maturing stable of authors. As the United States entered and embraced the war in Europe and the Pacific, many of the writers that Campbell had “discovered” early in his tenure, were turning out the stories that would cement their reputations as some of the leading architects of modern sci-fi. Popular and influential stories appearing in *Astounding* between 1940 and 1945 included Robert Heinlein’s “Methuselah’s Children,” “Logic of Empire,” and “If This Goes

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, Orr, and Hellman, “1945 Cassandra (The Talk of the Town),” 15.

<sup>18</sup> The entirety of the 1944 *Astounding* supports this assertion as each month features a different speculative or descriptive engagement of the cutting-edge of science and technology on Campbell’s “Editor’s Page.”

On—,” A. E. van Vogt’s “Slan” and the “Null-A” series, and Theodore Sturgeon’s “Microcosmic God,” “Killdozer!” and “Medusa.” At the same time, Isaac Asimov wrote his “Positronic Robot” and “Foundation” stories—two of the most enduringly popular sci-fi series in the history of the genre—originally for publication in *Astounding* during the 1940s. These authors and stories took up the mantle of Campbell’s advocacy, repeatedly proving that sci-fi was what he had argued it could be, a relevant cultural voice.<sup>19</sup>

Despite his disregard for censors, Campbell was a patriot, unquestioningly supporting the ideological and military effort of America at War.<sup>20</sup> In its content, his magazine reflected as much, following prevailing cultural trends during the 1940s, by which many producers of American culture unified behind the military effort. According to Larry May, in the motion picture industry this unity required a retreat from narratives of class conflict that demonized wealth and monopoly throughout the 1930s, as well as an embrace of a social momentum pointed toward ethnic plurality and commercial consumption.<sup>21</sup>

Where they could, as in “Deadline,” *Astounding* authors projected a direct patriotism through easily identifiable or extrapolated belligerents. More often, they

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<sup>19</sup> Campbell, Jr., “Future Tense,” 6.

<sup>20</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Post-War Duty,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, June 1942, 6, 113; John W. Campbell, Jr., “John W. Campbell to A.E. van Vogt, March 3, 1943,” in *The John W. Campbell Letters*, ed. Perry A., Sr. Chapdelaine, Tony Chapdelaine, and George Hay, vol. 1 (Franklin, TN: AC Projects, Inc., 1985), 49-55. Campbell’s letters and editorials often reflected an enduring and patriotic interest in the War, as well as an implicit acceptance of American social and technological superiority. The above cited are two examples.

<sup>21</sup> May, “The War in American Culture,” 71-96.

allowed the ideological hegemony to bleed through the fantastic. Themes of the transcendence of human limitations, as through genetic mutation or evolution, permeated sci-fi during this period. Protagonists like van Vogt's title characters in "Slan" (*Astounding* September-December 1940) or Heinlein's "Howard Families" in "Methuselah's Children" (*Astounding* July-September 1941) often possessed longevity, physical agility, intellectual prowess, extra-sensory perception, or any combination thereof. In their advancement of respective societies toward varying utopian realizations these super-humans employed a strong individualistic character to stand as both the means and the end within an often predestined historical narrative that somehow both required and guaranteed their success along with its own. Within the arena of historical inevitability, no stories engaged the notion as directly as Asimov's original "Foundation" trilogy, which Campbell first published as eight stories in *Astounding* throughout the 1940s. Having cemented Asimov's reputation as one of the leading writers of modern sci-fi, before he was 28 years old, the "Foundation" stories would go on to become one of the most popular series in the history of the genre.<sup>22</sup>

The first story, "Foundation" (*Astounding* May 1942), opens on the remote planet of Terminus on the outer rim of a great, but declining (entirely human) "Galactic Empire," where a foundation of scientists has been sequestered and charged with the task of creating the "Encyclopedia Galactica." The encyclopedia is to be a compendium

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<sup>22</sup> WorldCat.org lists 145 editions and printings in at least 17 different languages since the release of the first novel compilations in 1950. Asimov wrote in 1967, "No week passes without some piece of fan-mail referring to the *Foundation* novels." One year earlier, at the 24<sup>th</sup> World Science Fiction Convention, the Foundation Series had been awarded a "Hugo" as the "All-Time Best [sci-fi] Series."



of all the knowledge in the galaxy; with the ostensible purpose of preserving and protecting civilization from the inevitable creep of barbarism as the Galactic Empire declines. A crisis arises as the community of scholars finds itself cut off from the central, paternal authority of the Empire when the four neighboring imperial prefectures begin declaring independence and threatening the security and autonomy of the encyclopedist foundation. As the mayor of Terminus City Salvor Hardin contends with the official authority of the encyclopedist Board of Trustees for control over their response to the annexation threat posed by the strongest of the four new kingdoms, Anacreon, the origins of the Foundation presence on Terminus are revealed.<sup>23</sup>

On the fiftieth anniversary of the encyclopedia project, and on the eve of the Anacreonian occupation, Hardin and the Board receive an anticipated anniversary message from the “psychohistorian” founder of the encyclopedist foundation, Hari Seldon. He confirms all that Hardin had suspected about the declining Galactic Empire, its rebellious periphery, and the predicament of Terminus. Seldon was a psychologist who had mastered the now forgotten sub-discipline of “psychohistory,” which allowed for the prediction of mass societal developments—future-historical trends, independent of individual action—by the application of complex mathematical calculations. As it happened, Seldon created the encyclopedia foundation, not for its professed purpose of researching and writing an encyclopedia, but rather to establish a bastion of advanced technology and civil society in the outer rim of the galaxy. Seldon had determined that the fall of the Galactic Empire was inevitable and chose to take the necessary steps to

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<sup>23</sup> Isaac Asimov, *Foundation* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 49-78.

shorten the subsequent, galaxy-wide reign of barbarism from the thirty-thousand years predicted by psychohistory down to a mere one-thousand years. In the Foundation, he had planted the seed of the Second Galactic Empire.<sup>24</sup>

Hardin had not seen through the ruse of the encyclopedia. In fact, in earlier discussions of the impending anniversary, he had resisted the Board's decision to hang its fate upon the opening of the time-vault and the possible answers within Seldon's message. He remarked, "We are to do nothing...except to wait in quiet serenity and utter faith for the *deus ex machina* to pop out of the vault?"<sup>25</sup> Ironically, Hardin's interpretation of the circumstance, both on Terminus and throughout the Empire—his mistrust of both Imperial assurances and Anacreonian diplomacy and his need to act, resulting in a *coup d'état* supplanting academic authority with civic authority—has been loosely predicted by psychohistory. Despite himself, Hardin finds that he has followed Seldon's advice before he has even heard it. In so doing, he has presumably stumbled upon the solution to the crisis on Terminus.<sup>26</sup> Asimov hangs the resolution on a cliff, allowing only that Hardin comes to agree with Seldon that the solution to the Foundation's dilemma is "of course, obvious."<sup>27</sup>

In the next installment, "Bridle and Saddle" (*Astounding* June 1942), Asimov revealed that the solution, as executed by the newly ascended Hardin, was to present the nuclear power of Terminus as a bone of contention among the four kingdoms in the periphery, all of which had regressed to burning fossil fuels over a half-century of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 79-96.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 92-96.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 96.

neglect under the weakening Emperor. Hardin safeguards Foundation autonomy by convincing each of the hostile kingdoms that Terminus is too valuable a prize to be allowed to fall into the hands of any of the other three. In order to sustain this balance of power, Hardin trades nuclear capability, but not engineering, to all four worlds. The barbarous inhabitants of each perceive the Foundation technology as a mystical entity around which they construct a religion. Hardin encourages and facilitates this development as the path of least resistance toward his agenda, which requires the permeation of, and social dependency upon, Foundation technology and the controlled structures that provide it.<sup>28</sup>

Eventually, Hardin overcomes both an internal political challenge and a renewed external threat from a now nuclear Anacreon through the hegemony of the religion he has cultivated in the kingdoms. He is further exonerated when Hari Seldon appears for a second time, thirty years after the first message, to reveal that psychohistory has predicted just this course of events. Hardin had recognized the “Seldon crisis” as it unfolded and allowed himself to be guided by historical forces, postponing action until his options sufficiently narrowed.<sup>29</sup> Again, Hardin has helped himself and secured the fate of the Foundation by submitting himself and Terminus to the draw of inevitability, despite the protestations of impatient demagogues at home and the aggression of short-sighted despots abroad.

The dominating expansion of the Foundation theocracy continues for several decades until it begins to run close enough to the more civilized worlds on the edge of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 99-132.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 99-169.

the shrinking, but still strong Galactic Empire, where the rulers are often skeptical of the motives held by Foundation missionaries. In “The Big and the Little” (*Astounding* August 1944) and “The Wedge” (*Astounding* October 1944), Asimov replaced religious hegemony with economic hegemony as the means by which the Foundation fulfills Seldon’s prophecy of the Second Galactic Empire. A network of merchant princes and traders has evolved as the means of distributing the technology behind the Foundation’s religious encroachment.<sup>30</sup> One of these, Hober Mallow, concerned more with his bottom line than with the Seldon plan or the Foundation, perceives the growing hostility toward an attendant technological priesthood to signal the need for a change in distributive tactics. In the closed market of the Korell system, Mallow removes the stigma of a controlling priesthood from the consumption of Foundation products, relying solely on his ability to slowly cultivate an economic dependence upon the superior technology facilitated by its often manufactured obsolescence. He parlays his success into mayoral ascension where, like Hardin, he resists political threat from within and military threat from without by seizing the opportunity provided by the psychohistorical inevitability of the Foundation survival and expansion.<sup>31</sup>

In Hober Mallow, Asimov introduced an important nuance into the role of individual agency within psychohistorical predestination. He illustrates the way in which self-interested behavior can preserve historical inevitability and even employ it in service of its own agenda. Salvor Hardin, initially driven to action on the behalf of his community, had ultimately surrendered a measure of his agency to psychohistory,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 173-227.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 205-296.

standing out of the way of history by postponing his involvement “until only one course of action was possible.”<sup>32</sup> Conversely, Mallow felt no responsibility to the Seldon plan. He merely knew of it and chose to pursue his own interests along the course suggested by its predictions. Where Hardin had sought to aid both his immediate social context and the historical destiny of the Foundation, Mallow acted for individual profit, using the momentum of that destiny to guarantee his own enrichment, and in the process, he strengthened the historical inevitability of Foundation success.

Asimov’s shift in perspective on the constructive nature of individual agency within a predestined historical narrative is reflective of his social context. Just as Asimov newly foregrounded an individual agenda as the means to fulfill Foundation destiny, post-war consumer agency had turned a similar trick. Asimov’s shift foreshadowed the shift in the purchasing ideology governing American consumers after World War II that Lizabeth Cohen has illustrated. It stood in agreement with cultural coercions designed to cultivate the trend Cohen observed during the period of industrial reconversion from military production to the production of durable consumer goods.

Cohen found that sustaining economic prosperity required a change in the consumptive pattern of Americans, favoring consumer entitlement over consumer responsibility. Consumers had weathered the Great Depression and the War effort largely limiting or controlling their consumption based on the broader societal imperatives behind New Deal and military projects. Even during the war, Cohen argued, the mass consumer culture was preparing citizens to begin purchasing based

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 119.

on individual self-interest, in pursuit of a promise of postwar abundance, thereby producing the consumption necessary to guarantee that abundance.<sup>33</sup> Each consumptive pattern, cooperative or individual, within each specific industrial program, wartime conservation or postwar reconversion, served the specific needs of capitalist markets at the time. Ultimately, each brand of consumption, in its own way, sustained the hegemonic ideology of American free-market commercial consumption. Similarly, Hardin and Mallow each advance the historical destiny of the Foundation—Hardin by his advocacy of present and future community benefit, Mallow by his self-interested entitlement—each receiving his just reward of success within the psychohistorical destiny his actions supported.

Asimov's actors do not simply follow in form the rhetorical shift governing Cohen's "citizen consumers." As cultural icons for mass consumption they also reproduce the attributes of successful actors within American consumer capitalism. These are individualism, entitlement, and an evaluation of progress within the ideology of technological development and the "cult of the new."<sup>34</sup> Cohen's prewar and postwar consumers obeyed different commercial imperatives in support of the same commercial system, but they were drawn by the same promise of individual success within that system. Asimov's characters also trace disparate paths toward similarly successful conclusions along the arc of Seldon's psychohistorical prediction. As each of Asimov's

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<sup>33</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 62-75.

<sup>34</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 4. Leach held the "cult of the new" central to his discussion of the democratization of desire and the creation of a new, mass-commercial aesthetic near the turn of the century. The coercive ideology informs Cohen's discussion of the postwar mechanisms for the dissemination of the promise of abundance.

Mayors finds his way through psychohistory, each draws his portion of reader sympathy and narrative success out of an apparent strength of character founded upon the confident, self-reliant deployment of enterprising, paternalistic action. This is at times heroic action always supported at its root by the hegemony of technological prowess. Just as Cohen's consumers followed a path to both individual and system-wide success by their individual agency, in cooperation *or* in competition, so too are Hardin and Mallow bound toward success by their individualistic actions. Even the passive Hardin, who repeatedly denounces violence as "the last refuge of the incompetent," chooses to personally confront the irascible, war-mongering Anacreonian Prince Regent Wienis, punctuating the success of the religious coup by innocuously absorbing a blast from Wienis's weapon into his nuclear-powered personal shield (technology unknown on Anacreon). In frustration, the regent turns his weapon upon himself with quite a bit greater success.<sup>35</sup>

Asimov enriched his exploration of individual agency within a predestined historical narrative in his writing of the fifth "Foundation" story, which places Imperial General Bel Riose in active defiance of Hari Seldon's "Dead Hand" (*Astounding* April 1945). As the most powerful and acclaimed general in what is left of the First Galactic Empire (still vibrant at its center), Riose lusts for battle and believes to have found his opponent within the whispered tales of "magicians" who reside "where the stars are scattered thinly, and the cold of space seeps in."<sup>36</sup> These "magicians" are the technologically superior Foundation traders, brushing up against the Empire in the

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<sup>35</sup> Asimov, *Foundation*, 144-164.

<sup>36</sup> Isaac Asimov, *Foundation and Empire* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 12.

frontier that stands between the two galactic powers. Riose learns of Seldon's predictions and of psychohistory from Ducem Barr, a patrician of the frontier system of Siwenna, who has researched the myth of Hari Seldon and the Foundation for greater than forty years. Forcing Barr to accompany him, Rios vows to control his own destiny and to defeat both the Foundation and the "dead hand" of Hari Seldon.<sup>37</sup>

Barr is unremittingly skeptical of Riose's chances against what he calls "psychohistorical necessity." Riose insists that he is not "a silly robot following a predetermined course into destruction." Barr grants his freewill, but strips it of any historical agency in the face of psychohistory: "Do whatever you wish in your fullest exercise of freewill. You will still lose." Confidently, Riose holds his strong resolve. "I'll take that challenge," he crows. "It's a dead hand against a living will."<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, Riose fails. Ironically, his very determination and the success it seems to garner have guaranteed his failure. As he stands poised to strike the fatal blow to the Foundation armada, his own emperor begins to fear that further military success will transform the general into a dangerous political rival. The Emperor withdraws his support, choosing the security of conservative action over revitalizing growth. As Seldon has predicted, the Empire cannot escape the inertia of its own decline, while the momentum of the Foundation carries it ever forward.<sup>39</sup>

Looking back upon the failure of Riose—in Part I of the first serialized "Foundation" story, "The Mule" (*Astounding* November-December 1945)—Captain Han

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 7-31.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 75-99.



Pritcher argues for the necessity of strong leadership in the face of psychohistorical crisis with a complacent Mayor Indbur. Indbur recalls that, in Riose, “we faced the cleverest opponent, the heaviest armor, the strongest force of all. Yet we won by the inevitability of history.” Pritcher acknowledges the legitimacy of the Seldon prophecy, but refines Indbur’s analysis. He points out, “the history...became inevitable only after we had fought desperately for over a year,” illustrating how, “Seldon’s plan helps those who help themselves.”<sup>40</sup> However, as Riose discovered, Pritcher’s axiom applies only those who are on the right side of psychohistory.

Mayor Indbur, forever on the receiving end of “Seldonist” explication, next finds his hesitation toward active agency coming against the frustrated opposition of another man of action, Ebling Mis. Mis is a Foundation psychologist attempting to reconstruct the science of psychohistory. While researching in the Time Vault, Mis discovered that the image of Hari Seldon, as it had appeared twice to Salvor Hardin, had also delivered two other unheard, now lost messages. The lost messages, he was able to deduce, each corresponded with a moment of crisis for the Foundation and its psychohistorical destiny. He informs Indbur that, according to his calculations, a Seldon avatar will appear to deliver a fifth message in just under four months time. Mis extrapolates that the climax of another crisis must also be four months away.<sup>41</sup> Unable to shake Indbur from his belief that all is and will remain well, nor to sufficiently explain the gravity of his

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 151-159.

findings, Mis verbally pummels the mayor, reminding him, “the Foundation will come through because it must, but if I walk out of here now—you won’t.”<sup>42</sup>

Asimov had Mis threaten Indbur with the lesson of Hardin and Mallow—a lesson that, much to the delight of Barr, Riose had learned the hard way. There are a right and a wrong side of history, this lesson teaches, and individual agency serves largely to place individuals into fortunate alignment with, or into ill-favored opposition to, inevitable historical trends. On a grand scale, the inevitability itself provides security for the Foundation, its citizenry, and presumably, all of humanity spread throughout the galaxy—this by virtue of the civilization it engenders and the barbarism it mitigates. Individually, however, Foundation citizens prosper by their accepting and “aiding” the inevitability—though, as in the defeat of Riose, not without some measure of clever planning, diligent effort, and mortal sacrifice. At least, in the service of psychohistory, one knows, appreciates, and *expects to acquire* (if only by the proxy of subsequent generations) that for which one plans and works, and fights and dies. Within that knowledge rests a comforting brand of fatalism that follows from the perceived guarantees of progression and social “success” inherent in an accepted historical destiny. This serves as comfort to the series’ characters, by some degree, but more so to its readers.

In that comforting fatalism, within the security of that psychohistorical predestination, sci-fi critic Charles Elkins solved what he believed to be the mystery behind the popularity and longevity of the Foundation series. He reads into Asimov’s

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 155.

epic, “a concept of history...similar to one of the main ingredients of Marxism—historical materialism.”<sup>43</sup> Elkins found the “overriding historical laws” and “predestination” of “vulgar Marxism” where he could find no apparent literary merit. Indeed, he wrote of the Foundation series, “The characters are undifferentiated and one-dimensional. Stylistically, the novels are disasters,” and “Asimov’s ear for dialogue is simply atrocious.”<sup>44</sup> Elkins also wrote that, beyond their literary disrepute, the stories also fail as “social science fiction.” Contrary to the Marxist view that technological change will engender changes in society and consciousness, Elkins argued that, despite the scientific advances that contextualize the Foundation stories, “Man remains essentially the same.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, familiar human concerns within a predestined narrative (drawn from a cyclical recurrence of familiar historical events) lie at the root of Elkin’s explanation of Foundation popularity.

He drew his speculation of Marxist influence upon the Foundation series from assumptions about the amount and the form of Marxism to which Asimov might have been exposed in the 1940s, and from the writing of Donald Wollheim, who had founded the sci-fi fan group “Futurians” along with Frederik Pohl, Asimov, and others.<sup>46</sup>

Wollheim wrote, “psychohistory is the science that Marxism never became...thought it was and never could be.”<sup>47</sup> He continued, “Asimov took the basic premise of Marx and

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Elkins, “Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" Novels: Historical Materialism Distorted into Cyclical Psycho-History,” *Science Fiction Studies* 3, no. 1 (March 1976): 28, doi:Article.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 29-31.

<sup>47</sup> Wollheim, *The Universe Makers: Science Fiction Today*, 40-41.

Engels, said to himself that there was a point there—that the movements of the human mass must be subject to the laws of motion and interaction,” and created a fictional mathematical science around that notion.<sup>48</sup> Elkins agreed, but averred that both Asimov and Wollheim were wrong on Marxism.<sup>49</sup>

Elkins argued that Marxism, as Wollheim understood it, and in the form that Asimov must have encountered it while writing the “Foundation” stories, was the common, but “crude conception of historical inevitability” that filtered through Stalinist writings and into the purview of many American radicals and Communist Party members, like Wollheim, during the 1930s, 1940s, and into the 1950s. He argued that, lacking the insight within the unavailable or untranslated writings of Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, and the Frankfurt School Marxists, Wollheim and other American radicals failed to grasp the humanity, complexity, and nuance of the theory.<sup>50</sup> While Wollheim was wrong in his claim that Marxism was “intended” as a predictive science, or as any “exact” science at all, Elkins wrote, he *was* correct in finding his own crude interpretation of Marx at the center of Asimov’s Foundation universe.<sup>51</sup> In this,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>49</sup> Elkins, “Isaac Asimov's "Foundation" Novels,” 32-33. Elkins wrote, “Asimov’s failure to grasp the complexities of historical materialism and the humanistic emphasis of Marxism constitutes the major intellectual and artistic deficiency. This needs to be emphasized because...Wollheim...argues that the validity of the ‘underlying concept’ and the strengths of the novels lie in their deviation from Marxism. In so doing, he continues to propagate a thoroughly distorted view of Marxism and produces a misleading evaluation of Asimov’s achievements.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 30.

according to Elkins, Asimov failed a third time: first as literature, second as social science fiction, and here as an allegory of Marxist theory.<sup>52</sup>

Elkins missed the mark partly because he based his assumptions about Asimov's intentions to employ Marxism upon two of Asimov's circumstantial associations: with his Russian ancestry and with the largely radical Futurian group. However, Asimov never indicated any political sympathy for the U.S.S.R., nor for the Communist Party membership of friends like Pohl or Wollheim. In fact, he once wrote of his time in the Futurians, "Looking back on it now, my connection was always tenuous for I didn't fit the mold."<sup>53</sup> In direct response to Elkins, Asimov wrote in 1971:

I have never read anything written by Marx. I have never read anything written about Marxian economics or philosophy. Consequently, I don't really know anything about Marx and I therefore fail to see how anything I write can represent a Marxian view of history, either clear or distorted.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, one *can* fail to "really know anything about Marx" and still succeed in communicating a Marxist ideology,<sup>55</sup> but Elkins argued for intent, not for success.

Elkins *was* correct in his recognition that Asimov employed a crude model of historical predestination behind his psychohistory, and likely in his speculation

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>53</sup> Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*, 319.

<sup>54</sup> Isaac Asimov, "Asimov's Guide to Asimov," in *Isaac Asimov*, ed. Joseph D. Olander and Martin Harry Greenberg, 1st ed. (New York: Taplinger Pub. Co, 1977), 203.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 204-206.

No longer specifically addressing the Elkins essay, Asimov himself admits later in this same essay, "A writer is not the best judge of his own work and so whenever I deny any deep meaning to my writing, I always add the fact that others may know more about it than I do...because there's more to my writing than my conscious intentions."

that such a model, in some measure, fueled the popularity of *Foundation*. His argument fails, however, because he does not allow for the possibility that Marxist theory enjoys an exclusive connection to neither the notion of historical destiny, nor the practice of crude interpretation.

Asimov's stories *did* carry a crudely wrought model of historical inevitability, but this was not the Marxist historical materialism that Elkins read. As an American cultural product, "*Foundation*" carried an ideology that was, in form and function, more distinctly American. It embraced the special destiny that had long blanketed the American ethos. According to Daniel T. Rodgers, many American historians observing "the 'suicide' of the Old World" in the European decline of the 1940s began to take the notion of American exceptionalism as a societal and historical "given." Exceptionalist historians writing during and after the war reflected the growing strength of a cultural ideology that haunted the American self-image since before the first days of the republic. From John Winthrop's colonial imagining of a "city on a hill," through Alexis de Tocqueville's identification of a special place and special purpose within the providence of the new republic, and on into the attributions of "perennial rebirth" at the heart of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier mythology, the exceptionalist mantle arrived well-heeled at early century.<sup>56</sup> Specifically, the "continentalism" and manifest destiny that swallowed Turner's frontier had concretized early-century cultural exceptionalism as a popularized

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<sup>56</sup> Rodgers, "Imagined histories ," 21-36.

“victory culture” within the simplistic depictions of Western conquest that permeated the pulp magazines and early motion pictures of that period.<sup>57</sup>

As Japanese aerial bombardment surprised American military bases throughout the Pacific in December 1941, drawing the United States into World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt relied on the American historical inevitability that bled from exceptionalism and victory culture to unify industrial, commercial, and cultural support behind the war effort. He assured a stunned nation in his famous “infamy” speech of December 8, “the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory...with confidence...with the unbounding determination of our people—we will gain the inevitable triumph.”<sup>58</sup> America responded. Fueled by the cultural conveyance of exceptional, pre-destined victory—from popular entertainment through the re-envisioning of the historical narrative—the “inevitable triumph” of America and the American way of life defined the home front.<sup>59</sup>

Conflations of national mythos and public policy helped to cast “the American way of life” as both the means to achieve that “inevitable triumph” and the fruits to be won. This informed a full range of cultural products, from a lofty presidential rhetoric down through the trenches of commercial consumption. Roosevelt had brought American democracy and free-market commercial capitalism through the doubt and destabilization engendered by the Great Depression, deploying New Deal adjustments

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<sup>57</sup> Rodgers, “Imagined histories ,” 21-29; Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 1-6.

<sup>58</sup> “Day of Infamy” Speech by Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 8, 1941; SEN 77A-H1, Records of the United States Senate; Record Group 46; National Archives. Accessed online at, “Our Documents - Joint Address to Congress Leading to a Declaration of War Against Japan (1941),” <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=73#>

<sup>59</sup> Rosenberg, *A date which will live* .

within the cultural ideology that prioritized and protected private property over the nationalization of industry and finance.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, he sought to sustain the free-market as both the engine of the war effort and the prize of victory. Throughout the mainstream cultural production of the 1940s, the notion that the American way of life both *would* and *should* triumph carried the day.

Asimov's "Foundation" stories advanced *this* crudely wrought historical inevitability, not the vulgar Marxism that Elkins and Wollheim found. As an emergent mainstream cultural product during the 1940s, golden age sci-fi in general acquired an increased susceptibility to the influence of these dominant trends. Asimov's "Foundation" stories developed within this context, which held the inevitable success of an American free-market economy based on individual liberty and consumer entitlement as self-evident truth. That a rising American cultural genre communicated dominant American ideologies to an American audience is not a surprising assertion. However, the argument that the "Foundation" series did so does not rely wholly upon this admittedly superficial assumption. Its legitimacy derives more strongly from the textual analysis that reveals the author's valuation and sympathetic portrayal of specific characterizations and narrative motivations. These betray in successful "Foundation" protagonists, as in much golden age sci-fi, a tendency toward individuality,

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<sup>60</sup> Leach, *Land of Desire*, 381-382; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 366; Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (Oxford, Eng.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 317-318; Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933-1939* (New York: Picador, 2007).



independence, competitive and progressive development, and support for a self-evidently messianic technological evolution. These were the very tenets of an American embrace of modernity within a capitalistic inevitability.

Much of the sci-fi Campbell printed in *Astounding* during the golden age carried these same cultural messages as it both followed and reinforced powerful social contracts. As the leading publication employing many of the leading writers, the production from *Astounding* largely governed the mainstreaming of the sci-fi genre. Writers like Pohl and Wollheim, who sought a more socially proactive role for speculative fiction, helped to breed complexity in both the cultural product and its attendant public perception. However, Campbell's way was hegemonic. His editorials and letters display a strong patriotism and free-market advocacy, which is confirmed in the auto-biographical and critical writings of his contemporaries.<sup>61</sup> His best writers brought legitimacy to the genre through the strength of their fiction, each communicating the ideology of "inevitable American triumph" on a growing and increasingly relevant stage—partly by the strength of Campbell's editorial influence, partly by the magnetism of the American cultural context—and each in his distinct fashion.

Where Asimov advocated an individualistic and competitive ideal through his character development and allowed the background of psychohistory to carry the notion of inevitable triumph, others like Robert Heinlein and A.E. van Vogt relied on protagonists to stand as both the embodiment of the ideology and the inevitable reward

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<sup>61</sup> Asimov, *In Memory yet Green*; Asimov, "Concerning "Trends""; Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*; Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*; Campbell, Jr., "John W. Campbell to A.E. van Vogt, March 3, 1943"; Campbell, Jr., "Post-War Duty."

for its practice. These authors explored the kind of homo-superior speculations that would inform Campbell's later support for *Astounding* author L. Ron Hubbard's psychological actualization philosophy as introduced in "Dianetics: The Evolution of Science" (*Astounding* May 1950). In *Astounding* during the 1940s, speculative extrapolations of human evolutionary potential varied widely, but always carried the ethos of their time and place of origin. As one might expect, Robert Heinlein stands as a prime example.

In *Methuselah's Children* (*Astounding* July-September 1941) Heinlein built the epic-length progressive arc of Asimov's psychohistory into the longevity of his Howard Families. The Howard Families are the progeny of privately funded, mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century secret attempts to prolong the human lifespan through selective breeding. In the 22<sup>nd</sup>-century, the families find their society threatened in the aftermath of an ill-favored decision to reveal the secret of their unique genetics to what they had believed to be an enlightened humanity. The families flee Earth under the leadership of the 213-year-old Lazarus Long, who marshals the enhanced cognitive ability of some from their number to achieve faster-than-light travel enabling the success of their escape. In stellar exile, they encounter two different collectivist utopian/dystopian societies, each inclined to provide a secure future for the families through partial or total integration. Loathe to sacrifice any measure of human individuality, Long and a majority of the others return to Earth, where they hope the faster-than-light engine and other technological advancements will be enough to buy their freedom from their erstwhile persecutors.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Heinlein, "Methuselah's Children," 526-667.

Long is a perfect narrative avatar for the ideologies of free-market, private enterprise, and individual production/consumption. Apparently immortal, Long possesses both the physical resilience of a twenty-year-old and the wisdom of his more than two centuries of life. Invariably, he acts outside any collective plan, even one he himself has created or endorsed. He always improvises to secure the ultimate successes of the families. He continually regrets the flight of the families, knowing it “would have been a more human, a more mature and manly thing, to have stayed and fought.”<sup>63</sup> He rejects the paradise they eventually found, bemoaning, “It can’t always...be time for tea.”<sup>64</sup> Long is pleasantly surprised when a majority of the exiles agrees with him.<sup>65</sup> Upon their return, the families learn that Earth-bound humanity has cracked the longevity code and no longer holds the Howards to be a freakish threat. In fact, they are welcomed as heroes for the gift of their advanced technology, just as Long had predicted.<sup>66</sup> He feels vindicated and optimistic within his beliefs regarding human nature:

There ought not to be anything in the whole universe that man can’t poke his nose into—that’s the way we’re built and I assume that there’s some reason for it...whatever the answers are, here’s one monkey that’s going to keep on climbing, and looking around him to see what he can see, as long as the tree holds out.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 646.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 644.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 651.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 656-667.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 666-667.

Long reads an inevitable progress into his and humanity's longevity. Inherent in humanity, he finds the inevitable triumph that comes, as he says, from "enough time to do a little hard thinking"<sup>68</sup>—and a good bit of hard acting, as suggested by his, and the family's need to trade paradise for self-determination. Here proactive agency, in compliance with a special progressive destiny, is the "more human" course of action. Back in paradise, Long had observed that "basking in the sun all day" was somehow wrong, somehow against human nature; "he knew it, even if he could not define how he knew it."<sup>69</sup> In Heinlein's world, the inevitability of the triumph remains entwined with a technological prowess or progress.

In the 1940s, van Vogt reengaged his exploration of a technologically entwined human potential and destiny in much the same way that Heinlein did in "Methuselah's Children." Van Vogt's most successful attempt came in "Slan" (*Astounding* September-December 1940). In the distant future of the planet Earth, humanity has developed a second evolutionary tract of intelligent, telepathic, steel-nerved, dexterous *slans*, who are named for Samuel Lann, their discoverer (thought by many to be their creator). Slans are physically identifiable only by the golden tendrils protruding from their heads. These tendrils are the psychic organs of the slans. Conventional humanity fears the superiority of the mutants, which most believe to be the result of genetic experiments conducted by Lann. The humans, who vastly outnumber slans, have hunted and executed the slans into near extinction by the time the story begins (several centuries after Lann's death). Unknown to humans, many slans in the past had sought to erase

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 666.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 645-646.

the distinction of the tendrils as a means of protection from the genocide. Their progeny, with significantly limited psychic abilities, now live undetected among the humans, plotting the annihilation of both the humans and the remaining “true” slans, with whom they do not recognize a genetic relationship because they are unaware of the secret experiments responsible for their existence. Equally unaware, is the hero of van Vogt’s story, true slan Jommy Cross.<sup>70</sup>

Serialized in four parts, “Slan” opens dramatically with a 9-year-old Cross clutching the hand of his mother, lying dead in the street, murdered by slan-hunters. Well prepared for this moment by his parents (now both murdered), Jommy is able to escape her killers, disappearing into hiding until he is old enough to seek out and complete his father’s hidden work.<sup>71</sup> Jommy’s father was a scientist who perfected a kind of atomic energy that can be generated within the space of a few molecules and to output immense power. Using his father’s notes, Jommy is able to use the technology to generate not only heat, but also motion, pressure, vibration, and direct electricity. He employs this power to create and refine weapons, tools, and vehicles, most usefully developing a very strong and very light “10-point steel.” His are inventions of necessity, protecting his movements and work from humans and tendrillless slans, whose existence and hostility he had unwittingly discovered.<sup>72</sup>

Able to use his psychic abilities to control humans, with the help of his atomically rebalanced crystals, Jommy concentrates on preventing the tendrillless slans from

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<sup>70</sup> A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*, An Orb ed. (New York: Orb, 1998).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-21.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-179.

launching an attack on the Earth from their secret Martian base. As his actions and capabilities come to the attention of the tendrillless slans, his own fate entangles with that of humanity. Ultimately, he can see only one course of action. He must confront the human leader responsible for the ruthless, continuing murder of slans, Kier Gray. Jommy is captured sneaking into Gray's palace and finds himself face to face with the ruthless leader.<sup>73</sup> Immediately, he realizes that Kier Gray, the leader of all humans on Earth, is a tendrillless, but "true" slan. Gray explains that he is the leader of a small shadow government of slans and tendrillless slans attempting to maintain the balance of power between slans and humans.

The secrecy and the deadly ruse of the continuing slan-hunt were necessary stratagems to protect the shadow slans until the tendrillless slans (destined to reacquire their tendrils within two generations) have grown inclined to accept their true slan origin, and the humans (known by the slans to be growing increasingly infertile) have all died out. Slans, Jommy realizes, are the evolution of humanity, the better, faster, stronger, and smarter future of the species.<sup>74</sup> "What could be more natural," Gray explained, "than that we should insinuate our way into control of the human government?"<sup>75</sup> Consistent with golden age sci-fi meritocratic postulations of authority, slans have assumed their proper role—cast by evolutionary biology, legitimated by a social sorting out.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 154-236.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 237-255.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 245.

In “Slan,” “Methuselah’s Children,” and others from Campbell’s golden age publication, Albert I. Berger found a three-pointed dialogue between authorial and editorial inclinations toward the plausible extrapolation of science and technology, the creation of entertaining fiction, and a belief in American “political and economic values,” the synthesis of which engendered a strong advocacy of elite authoritarian rule. Berger argued for the proof of that advocacy within the meritocratic social organization that van Vogt, Asimov, and Heinlein apparently support, which he attributes to Campbell’s own fiction written as Don A. Stuart.<sup>76</sup> Just as Berger had observed in Stuart’s earlier fiction, Campbell’s faith in meritocracy bled through his editorial commentary throughout the 1940s.

In 1941, Campbell invoked “Slan” in his essay, “We’re Not All Human” (*Astounding*, September 1941), bringing the evolutionary science behind van Vogt’s story into a contemporary discussion of genetic mutations that he perceived to be commonplace.<sup>77</sup> Most mutations, he explained, are “unfavorable,” and most are singular (and minor).<sup>78</sup> However, he argued for the “inevitable confluence” of many “favorable” mutations within a single individual; “He would, in a very genuine sense, be a superman,” and destined, by virtue of his extraordinary abilities, to ascend the upper echelons of society.<sup>79</sup> He concluded, “All men may be born with equal opportunities—in America, at least—but they definitely aren’t all born equal. They aren’t even all born

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<sup>76</sup> Berger, “Theories of History and Social Order in *Astounding Science Fiction*, 1934-55.”

<sup>77</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “We’re Not All Human,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, September 1941, 121-127.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-125.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

true human beings.”<sup>80</sup> That final statement carries Campbell’s faith in the rhetoric (re: “equal opportunities”) and the apparent result (vis-à-vis the implicit meritocracy) of the American free-market system. This appears to further reflect support for authoritarian models he published by Asimov, van Vogt, Heinlein, and others, as Berger observed.

On one level, my analyses of the golden age work by these authors confirms Berger’s arguments for a pervasive mistrust of mass society, and a strong faith in the leadership of a superior elite class loyal to American economic and political ideologies. However, when read against the recent historiography on the early and middle twentieth-century in the United States, the stories suggest a more nuanced conclusion. Berger argued for two ironic contradictions within much of the best sci-fi written during the golden age: first, the self-evident social progress to be wrought by the advancement of science and technology versus the apparent impossibility to achieve any kind of future utopia, and second, the self-evident superiority of American political and economic ideals versus the “implicit reject[ion] of those very ideals, specifically the notions of individuality, equality, and self determination.”<sup>81</sup>

It is with this second assertion that Berger missed. He fails to assess the cultural message as it was carried. Instead, he interpreted what he perceived to have been intended. Even if sci-fi authors wholly intended to advocate a counter-democratic authoritarian rule by a meritocratic elite (of which I am not entirely convinced), sci-fi readers remained more likely to identify with the stories’ protagonists who were

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Berger, “Theories of History and Social Order in Astounding Science Fiction, 1934-55,” 29.



invariably of that elite brimming with the individuality, self determination, and paternal egalitarianism that Berger found ideologically rejected by the narrative. The legitimacy of this assumption is born out by the popular sci-fi fandom mantra during much of the middle century, “fans are slans.”<sup>82</sup> In this, readers publicly expressed their assumed superiority. They explicitly identified with a protagonistic, progressive elite (van Vogt’s slans) as opposed to the easily led, destined for extinction, Luddite, mass of humanity, which that elite must and will transcend.

Just as reader sympathy and identification with elite protagonists helped to mitigate and forgive sci-fi authoritarianism, so had similar perceptions buoyed American free-market systems. Leading historians, writing in the 1990s, advanced the primacy of individual perception regarding access, inclusion, and agency within an “American dream” mythos. To these, admittedly, Berger had no access when he made his argument in 1988. Lawrence Glickman, William Leach, Grace Hale, and Lizabeth Cohen are all effective in illustrating the way consumption increasingly defined political power and social identity for Americans of all classes as the industrial economy relied more and more upon the *manufacture of desire* as a means to control the consumptive

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<sup>82</sup> Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction*, 205; “Fancylopedia - FANS ARE SLANS,” <http://fancylopedia.editme.com/FANSARES>; “Fancylopedia - SLAN,” <http://fancylopedia.editme.com/SLAN>; Kevin J. Anderson, “Introduction (to *Slan* by A.E. van Vogt),” in *Slan*, 2nd ed. (New York: Orb, 2007), 6. Anderson wrote, “The serialization of *Slan* was an immediate sensation among readers of the magazine [*Astounding*]. Science fiction fans perhaps felt a special kinship with slans, who [the fans] had interests that set them apart from ‘mundane’ humans, and yet were ‘persecuted’ (teased, rather than being hunted down and killed).”

processes within that economy.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, Cohen and Andrew Hurley show how manufacturers successfully moved social relations and political agency almost entirely into the consumer sphere during and after the Second World War.<sup>84</sup>

The sustaining of these identifications required that consumers formulated their consumptive—and therefore political and social—identities as consistent with the tenets of an exceptionalist, inevitably triumphant, American mythology. In consumption, Americans must and did find the personal autonomy, authority, and abundance to which an early century culture of abundance had assured they were entitled. On this, the greater *authority* of the American free-market consumer culture depended. Just as most American citizens, as consumers, found a rhetorical and theoretical connection to a level of abundance and agency only marginally available to many of them, sci-fi readers would also have perceived an access to the authority and agency inherent in the elite status modeled by sympathetic protagonists in golden age stories.

The authoritarian inclinations Berger read in the *Astounding* authors during the golden age were certainly present—and Heinlein, for one, would go on to explore authoritarianism to a greater depth in his later fiction. Additionally, notions of predestined historical narratives pervade the stories of these authors, as Elkins identified in the “Foundation” series. However, within the cultural context of the

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<sup>83</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999); Glickman, *A Living Wage*; Leach, *Land of Desire*.

<sup>84</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 75-100, 166-191, 257-344; Hurley, *Diners, Bowling Alleys and Trailer Parks*, 15.

American 1940s, the consistently capitalistic attributes of sympathetic characters created by Asimov, Heinlein, van Vogt, and Campbell color these themes in an important way that both Elkins and Berger ignored. Within a fictional narrative backgrounded by the historical inevitability of social progress and triumph, where a sympathetic, meritocratic elite wield authoritarian social control by virtue of an ascription to, and an embodiment of, the under-girding ideologies of the American capitalist culture, two conclusions are obvious. The historical inevitability is the inevitability of *the triumph of the American capitalism*, and the dominant authority is *the authority of American capitalism*. As a mainstream cultural product—newly emergent as such in the 1940s—the American sci-fi in *Astounding* wholly and consistently carried these predominant ideologies of its cultural context. As to the social imperative drawn out by the sci-fi reader (read consumers or actors within the American capitalist system)—in the words of Asimov’s Han Pritcher, “Seldon’s plan helps those who help themselves.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Asimov, *Foundation and Empire*, 126.

### Chapter Three

#### November 1949: "What Enough People Want"

"I just finished reading my copy of the November issue and I felt compelled to write in and congratulate you. I have no doubts that this issue will rate tops for the year 1949,"<sup>1</sup> wrote *Astounding Science-Fiction* reader Richard A. Hoen in a letter to editor John W. Campbell, Jr. In the fashion of Campbell's prevailing reader correspondence, Hoen continued his letter with a story-by-story evaluation of the issue.<sup>2</sup> Encouraged by Campbell's entreatments, readers of *Astounding Science-Fiction* (*Astounding*) during the golden age loyally advanced formal assessments of the popular pulp magazine. These appeared in the "Brass Tacks" reader's forum that served as an opened window into the discourse beneath the sci-fi community that *Astounding* purported to represent. Campbell drew his general impression of reception from letters to the editor, as well as the specific data that he published in "The Analytical Laboratory," a monthly tabular ranking of the fiction appearing in *Astounding*. While, in form, Hoen's letter was

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<sup>1</sup> Richard A. Hoen, "Brass Tacks (Letter to the Editor)," *Astounding Science-Fiction*, November 1948, 111.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 111-112.

unexceptional, his commentary *was* unique. It set itself apart by virtue of the disjunction between the stated publication date of the issue under its review, “November 1949,” and the actual publication date of the letter itself, November 1948. Ticked by the inherent suggestion of historical precognition, Campbell printed the letter along with his flippant response, “Hm-m-m—he must be off on another time track. ’Fraid it’s not THIS November ’49.”<sup>3</sup>

A year later Campbell offered a more complete response by painstakingly bringing Hoen’s vision to life. Campbell chose to take the letter seriously in order to make the point he explicated in “Science-Fiction Prophecy,” his editorial introducing the so-called “predicted issue” of November 1949.<sup>4</sup> Taking as given the ability of sci-fi to predict the future by extrapolating known science, Campbell proposed an alternative method of prophesy: “what enough people want badly enough, they will, sooner or later, force into actuality.”<sup>5</sup>

Campbell enlisted his best writers, asking for stories and essays built around the titles and ideas Hoen envisioned. He was unable, however, or unwilling to bring the totality of Hoen’s vision to life.<sup>6</sup> Campbell failed to resurrect semi-retired golden age sci-

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<sup>3</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Brass Tacks (Response to Richard A. Hoen),” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, November 1948, 111.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Ashley, *The Complete Index to Astounding/Analog*, 1st ed. (Oak Forest, Ill: R. Weinberg Publications, 1981), 44; Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*, 113-114; Paul Williams, “Story Notes,” in *The Perfect Host: Volume V: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, vol. 5, 12 vols., The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon (Berkeley Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1998), 362-386.

<sup>5</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Science Fiction Prophecy,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, November 1949, 4.

<sup>6</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Contents: November 1949, Vol. XLIV, No. 3,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, November 1949, 2; Hoen, “Brass Tacks (Letter to the Editor),” 111-112.

fi pioneers E.E. Smith and Don A. Stuart (his own alias) as Hoen had speculated. He chose instead to print “Part One” of the final installment in Asimov’s “Foundation” series, “...And Now You Don’t.” Next to Campbell’s editorial, Asimov’s story was the only 1949 inclusion not “pre-reviewed” by Hoen in 1948.<sup>7</sup> Whether Campbell intended or not, Asimov’s inclusion retained a respect for Hoen’s vision as well as for the change that had taken place in sci-fi during the decade that separated 1949 from the heyday of Smith and Stuart. Asimov was helping to create the fiction that was expanding science fiction’s audience in the post-World War II era.

As the nuclear age dawned, sci-fi extended its presence into the mainstream of American culture in unprecedented fashion. While Hugo Gernsback had introduced the term “science-fiction” in the 1920s, it was not until 1949 that it began to surface in the pages of magazines like *Harper’s*, the *Atlantic*, the *Saturday Review*, and the *New Yorker*.<sup>8</sup> Sci-fi stories also began to transcend the pulp ghetto and step into the glossier

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<sup>7</sup> Campbell, Jr., “Contents: November 1949, Vol. XLIV, No. 3,” 2; Hoen, “Brass Tacks (Letter to the Editor),” 111-112. Hoen “reviewed,” in November 1948, several stories, including “Gulf” by Anson McDonald (a.k.a. Robert Heinlein), “What Dead Men Tell” by Theodore Sturgeon, “Over the Top” by Lester del Rey, “Final Command” by A.E. van Vogt, “Finished” by L. Sprague de Camp, and an untitled essay by R.S. Richardson, all of which appeared in the November 1949 issue. He also foresaw the return to writing fiction in *Astounding* by Dr. Edward E. Smith and Don A. Stuart, two pioneers of sci-fi during the golden age. These latter, Campbell was unable or unwilling to deliver.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Orr, and Hellman, “1945 Cassandra (The Talk of the Town);” Will Lissner, “Men from Mars Give Soviet Jumps,” *New York Times*, May 14, 1948; Richard H. Parke, “Street & Smith Giving Up ‘Pulps,’” *New York Times*, April 9, 1949; “Topics of The Times,” *New York Times*, September 17, 1949; “The Press: Adventures in Time & Space,” *Time*, October 31, 1949, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,801009,00.html>; Villiers Gerson, Joseph Trautwein, and Edward R. Collins, “Take a Rocket to the Moon...,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1950; John W. Campbell, Jr., “The Science of Science Fiction,” *Atlantic*, May 1948.

pages of *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*.<sup>9</sup> Much of this new wave of attention came as a result of the atomic bomb, which had foregrounded sci-fi's prophetic nature. In 1949, having become accustomed to the *fact* of the bomb, many Americans began to take sci-fi more seriously.

My purpose in this chapter is to read the narrative changes in sci-fi during the years shortly following Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By Campbell's 1959 recollection, this period saw an awakening to sci-fi as "non-escape literature." For these new eyes on sci-fi in the late 1940s, *Astounding* rolled out a cynical prediction. As evidenced in the concluding installments of Asimov's "Foundation" series (during 1948 and 1949), as well as in the post-nuclear stories by Theodore Sturgeon, and in Campbell's editorials, sci-fi grew pessimistic about the role of the bomb in the future of humanity.

Within this pessimism, sci-fi retained its support for both the authority of a meritocratic elite and the authority of the iconic scientist hero, both leading humanity along a self-evidentially correct historical destiny. However, sci-fi authors found they could no longer guarantee success in the pursuit of that destiny. They also began to portray that authority as an explicitly corporeal elite rather than an abstract historical inevitability or moral imperative. Into the inevitabilities and imperatives that guided and defined this personified authority—especially in Asimov's "Foundation" conclusion and Sturgeons "What Dead Men Tell" (*Astounding* November 1949)—sci-fi authors injected the rhetorical imprint of an American global Cold War identity that was both capitalist

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<sup>9</sup> Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, 257; Albert I. Berger, "The Triumph of Prophecy: Science Fiction and Nuclear Power in the Post-Hiroshima Period," *Science Fiction Studies* 3, no. 2 (July 1976): 143-146.

and democratic as opposed to the communist and totalitarian Soviets. The ideology of *democracy* grew implicitly, but powerfully, entwined with the benevolent ministrations of these newly fleshed-out, technocratic puppet-masters. Sci-fi authors also continued to support competitive, individualistic cultural contracts that favored the dominant social models of American free-market capitalism. This support had simply moved into rhetorical agreement with the developing ideological imperatives of postwar reconversion economics and the new geo-political military and ideological demands that emerged during the early Cold War.

To draw out these developments, I first turn to Campbell's editorials. Rather than abandoning his insistence on the predictive power of sci-fi, as he might have in the wake of the Cartmill affair of 1944, Campbell refined and enriched his perception of sci-fi prediction. He continued to believe that sci-fi authors could research the future by the scientific and historical methods applied forward in time, but he also began to foreground the ability of sci-fi to provoke technological change. He incorporated the influence of the "will of the people" into these arguments, for the first time drawing out an explicit democratic component from this predictive cycle.<sup>10</sup>

The other theme informing Campbell's editorials in the late-1940s was the vulnerability of the sci-fi model of a nuclear powered utopia. The traditional sci-fi portrayal of nuclear power as the means to achieve much of the "good" authors had written into their future imaginings became untenable during the early Cold War. Much of this new pessimism had its roots in the regret of sci-fi writers that nuclear technology

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<sup>10</sup> Campbell, Jr., "Science Fiction Prophecy."



development had fallen under military, rather than scientific, authority. This theme emerged most powerfully in Theodore Sturgeon's 1946 story, "Memorial." Sturgeon presented a dystopian vision of postwar American society, in which a scientist hero, while attempting to save the world, destroys humanity. Yet, Sturgeon places blame elsewhere by strongly endorsing individual prowess over collective bumbling.

I then return to the 1949 "predicted issue" and Asimov's "Foundation" conclusion. In his final installment, Asimov intimately personifies the Seldon Plan in the form of Second Foundation psychohistorians and their manipulations of the destiny of the Foundation. Asimov presents his elite as democratic in spirit, while authoritarian in practice. He grants this social dispensation by endowing his puppet-masters with an unassailable egalitarian benevolence. Finally I examine, "What Dead Men Tell," Sturgeon's contribution to the "predicted issue," which echoes Asimov, but more explicitly develops the theme of democracy within the autocracy by granting an "everyman" admission to the ranks of the controlling elite.

Campbell's editorials continued to guide the evolution of *Astounding* in the postwar period. His "predicted issue" editorial introduced an important development within his explication of sci-fi prediction, suggesting that sci-fi during the golden age reflected a kind of democratic popular impulse. "The economics behind [the manifestation of popular will]," Campbell explained, "is the simple fact that if each of fifty million families is willing to pay two hundred dollars for a television set, there's a ten million dollar market waiting."<sup>11</sup> In other words, when sci-fi authors speculated about

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 4

future technologies, they were both reflecting material desires and helping to refine those desires. Sci-fi authors wrote about television as early as the late 1930s, in Campbell's view, because emerging technologies intersected with desires in a way that suggested a probable market as well as an effective hook on which to hang a sci-fi narrative. Their speculations then shaped the material expectations of consumers in a way that pushed scientists, engineers, and capitalists to bring the television set to the American public. In a democratic reflection of material desire, by Campbell's reading, sci-fi predicted what American science would produce.

In the field of "rocket science," for example, Campbell presumed that the actual engineering was often based on ideas suggested in sci-fi:

This type of suggestion becomes prophecy because sound engineering ideas have been presented; the engineers assigned to actual rocketship development, having read the ideas, naturally tend to consider them, try them, and use them.<sup>12</sup>

He continued, "a desirable, practicably attainable idea, suggested in prophecy, has a chance of forcing itself into reality by its very existence."<sup>13</sup> The wartime employment of the German V-2 rocket had touched off a global rush to incorporate "rocket science" into nascent missile and aerospace programs within the military projects of the United States, the Soviet Union, and others.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Campbell boasted that the actual

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "NOVA: Sputnik Declassified," *PBS Online*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sputnik/>; "John F. Kennedy Space Center - A Brief History of Rocketry," <http://www-pao.ksc.nasa.gov/history/rocket-history.htm>.

development had roots in the speculative fiction of *Astounding* and other golden age sci-fi publications. Sci-fi had predicted a plausible development of ballistic technology, and science pressed into service by the war had made the predictions a material reality.

Campbell's insistence on the conceptual force of sci-fi predictions operated on two levels. First, sci-fi was prophetic by virtue of its role as facilitator in the dialogue that brings about material, technological change. Sci-fi cleared the way, he implied, for latent and pending technological development by conducting speculative research into the social form and function of such development. Second, these advances took place within existing commercial forms: respectively, popular durable consumer electronics and military armaments, which both expanded dramatically during the Cold War. In a sense, Campbell and his authors were not *predicting*, so much as tapping into larger cultural changes.

During the late 1940s, according to Tom Engelhardt, the consumer abundance that Americans acquired among the spoils of World War II became conflated with the "military Keynesianism"<sup>15</sup> that defined the American defense strategies in the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> Westinghouse, General Electric, and General Motors, the same companies that had created a postwar "consumer's republic,"<sup>17</sup> also built the instruments of military and national security necessary to defend democracy in the new Cold War.<sup>18</sup> Beneath this productive coincidence, Engelhardt pointed out, grew the ideology that garnered cultural

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<sup>15</sup> Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-86.

<sup>17</sup> Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 69-75, 112-129.

<sup>18</sup> These same companies also were among the leading forces advancing this same optimistic promise of abundance at the 1939 World's Fair (see Chapter 1).

support for a universality of abundance, requiring “the ever larger car *and* missile, electric range *and* tank, television console *and* submarine.”<sup>19</sup> The nuclear threat eventually developed into a politics of fear, containment, and a strict ideological bifurcation that reinforced the American free-market ethos. It recast many complacent assumptions Americans held about their *place* in a global society, but played as significant a role in the reinforcement of the prevailing cultural contracts that got them there.

Sci-fi writers, likewise, during the late-1940s, generated a worldview knocked off kilter by the use of nuclear weapons, but continued to advance and support the same technocratic capitalism that permeated the golden age. Sci-fi authors writing after Hiroshima adopted a darker, more pessimistic tone for their post-nuclear speculations.<sup>20</sup> After 1945, the specter of Armageddon crept into the fiction and commentary of *Astounding* in a way that, despite a sometimes coolly scientific detachment, served to paint a disquieting image of the atomic future. Immediately following the first nuclear strikes, Campbell was adamant in his November 1945 assertion that on August 6, 1945, “the civilization we have been born into, lived in, and been indoctrinated with, died.”<sup>21</sup> In subsequent columns, he developed the notion of the indefensibility of any nation facing

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<sup>19</sup> Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture*, 78, (italics added).

<sup>20</sup> For discussions of sci-fi pessimism during the Cold War see: Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*; Berger, “The Triumph of Prophecy.”

<sup>21</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “Atomic Age,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, November 1945, 5.

nuclear assault and the vulnerability of the United States as “Target Number One”<sup>22</sup> in any nuclear war.

Campbell apparently agreed with the Federation of American Scientists’ “One World or None” advocacy for an international control of nuclear science and weapons technology.<sup>23</sup> He perceived the vulnerability of a super-power like the United States in the leveling of the global playing field, which he argued must naturally follow the dissemination of nuclear war-making capability. In 1946 he wrote, “The secret of the atomic bomb is not an American secret...it’s Nature’s secret—and Nature is a blabbermouth.”<sup>24</sup> He envisioned a balance of power in which the individual culpability of political leaders rather than nation states would govern global relations,<sup>25</sup> engendering “an era of international good manners and tolerance,” as opposed to the counter probability of “vast and sudden death.”<sup>26</sup>

Less than a year after Hiroshima, *Astounding* author Theodore Sturgeon explored the complexities of scientific heroism in the nuclear age. In “Memorial” (*Astounding* April 1946), Theodore Sturgeon exhibited a strong sympathy for the independent, individualistic action of his rogue nuclear physicist, Dr. Grenfell. Grenfell had contributed to the Manhattan Project only to find his continuing work stifled and

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<sup>22</sup> John W. Campbell, Jr., “—but are we?,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, January 1946; John W. Campbell, Jr., “Secrecy and Death,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, June 1946; John W. Campbell, Jr., “Denatured Atoms,” *Astounding Science-Fiction*, July 1946.

<sup>23</sup> For a more complete discussion of “One World or None” and the Federation of American Scientists, see Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, 33-81.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell, Jr., “—but are we?,” 6.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, Jr., “Denatured Atoms,” 6.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell, Jr., “Atomic Age,” 98.

criminalized in an over-regulated, government controlled post-Hiroshima America.<sup>27</sup> Sturgeon appears to have created Grenfell in the mold of the rogue “rocket-scientist” John Harman from Isaac Asimov’s 1939 story “Trends” (see Chapter 1). Working underground, self-subsidized, in his private laboratory, Grenfell has created an efficient, maintenance-free aluminum-isotope space heater that could solve one of the most power-hungry human needs. He does not publicize his discovery for fear of imprisonment because his nuclear experiments have been conducted in defiance of strict government prohibitions put in place to protect the United States’ nuclear secrets from foreign spies.<sup>28</sup> Through his next, more ambitious project, which Sturgeon’s story holds central, Grenfell plans to force a lifting of restrictions on atomic research by diffusing the tension surrounding the global nuclear threat. He hopes to sufficiently frighten the world off its drift toward war with his “war memorial to end war, and all other memorials...an example of the dreadful antitheses of peace.”<sup>29</sup> He calls it “the Pit,” a complete atomic disruption, triggering an explosion “more than a thousand times as powerful as the Hiroshima bomb.” The aftermath would act as a memorial, “radiating death for ten thousand years.” Grenfell feels the Pit will serve as an eternal reminder to humanity of the folly of atomic warfare.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately, Grenfell’s confidant, a magazine writer by the name of Jack Roway, betrays the scientist. Roway’s fear of the impending war leads him to contact

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<sup>27</sup> Theodore Sturgeon, “Memorial,” in *Killdozer!: Volume III: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, vol. 3, 12 vols., The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1996), 283-296.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-287.

government agents. He hopes that the military can weaponize Grenfell's powerful atomic disruption and guarantee first strike victory for the United States in the approaching nuclear war. Unable to convince Grenfell that, as a weapon rather than as a memorial, his discovery will better accomplish the peace he envisions, Roway relinquishes the task to government agents. Under the pretense of collecting the necessary components for surrender of his work, Grenfell tricks the agents into triggering a critical mass reaction, killing the agents, Roway, and himself in the explosion that creates his memorial "Pit."<sup>31</sup> The individualist, in reverence of messianic technological progress, and through heroic, assertive action has accomplished his goal. However, has he saved the day?

Unlike Asimov's John Harman, who had rescued humanity from its techno-phobic spiral into a primitive social devolution through the successful execution of his rocket ride to the moon,<sup>32</sup> Grenfell has inadvertently doomed everyone on the planet. Necessarily completed in secrecy, Grenfell's handiwork was unforeseen by American military and security officials. When the bomb detonates, these men react automatically to Grenfell's explosion as though it were an attack. American retaliation leads to the "First Atomic War," and then to a the second, and finally to the "Mutant's War," which eradicates "the tattered and largely sterile remnants of humanity." Eventually the "[genetically] unfit" mutants die off as well, leaving only "the Pit." In the ironic realization

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 289-295.

<sup>32</sup> Isaac Asimov, "Trends," in *The Early Asimov or, Eleven Years of Trying*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1972), 59-78.

of Grenfell's vision, "organized war [has become] a forgotten thing."<sup>33</sup> Because of Grenfell's memorial, "The scream and crash of bombs and the soporific beat of marching feet were never heard, and at long last the earth was at peace."<sup>34</sup>

Sturgeon failed to vindicate Grenfell by rewarding his action, as Asimov had Harman, though not in any censure of his character so much as recognition of the perilous state of a post-nuclear humanity. Sturgeon's support for private research is apparent in Grenfell's initial success with the space heater.<sup>35</sup> Sturgeon is also sympathetic to the private researcher, Grenfell—determined, hard-working, dedicated only to his science and the social benefit it may engender. In Grenfell's vision, science is synonymous with the progressive march of civilization, despite the fickle wind of mass opinion or state doctrine. "During the war," he tells Roway, "the government flogged me into the Manhattan Project, expecting, and getting, miracles. I have never stopped working along the same lines, [but the government] pulled legality from under me."<sup>36</sup> Grenfell never doubts the correctness of his course of action, regardless of legality. He

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<sup>33</sup> Sturgeon, "Killdozer!," 295.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>35</sup> Berger, "The Triumph of Prophecy," 144-145; Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, 51-52; "Atomic Energy Commission," <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1813.html> This notion of private research, as opposed to the government or military controlled research had been debated in congress before the passage of the Atomic Energy Act of 1946. The May-Johnson Bill, drafted in 1945 by the War Department would have sequestered nuclear research entirely beneath military control, as Sturgeon portrays in "Memorial." The McMahon Act (Atomic Energy Act of 1946), respecting a tradition of private enterprise, organized research as a regulated, civilian enterprise—though still under strict military direction.

<sup>36</sup> Sturgeon, "Killdozer!," 285.



does not even want credit for the peace he hopes to bring to the world; he merely wants the world to have its peace.<sup>37</sup>

Alone in his principles as well as in his work, Grenfell tolerates the company of his writer friend even though, as a man of action, he perceives that the more introspective Roway leads a “lazy and superficial” existence, in which “the grasshopper has it all over the ant.”<sup>38</sup> Early in the story, Grenfell challenges Roway, incredulously scolding, “With a mind like yours, I can’t understand why you don’t use it to build something instead of wasting it in these casual interpretations of yours.”<sup>39</sup> Later, during the climactic scene, Grenfell exposes Roway’s self-interested cowardice, comparing him, in telling fashion, to sci-fi writers. Grenfell depicts these writers as peddling the potential terrors of nuclear destruction, “in a delicious drawing room sort of way,” never expecting to encounter the manifestations of their speculations, “right smack in the middle of their own sacrosanct lifetimes.”<sup>40</sup> Roway can only plead, “It’s so soon...It’s so soon,” begging Grenfell to turn his work over to the War Department.<sup>41</sup> In response to Grenfell’s accusation that Roway merely hopes to “stall the inevitable—at least in your lifetime,”<sup>42</sup> the trembling writer betrays his fearful, self-protective motive: “There’s nowhere I...we...can go to be safe.”<sup>43</sup> His fear and his weak character have driven him

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 289.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 293.

into the perceived security of the bureaucratic collective—the antithesis of Grenfell’s shining, self-reliant individualism.

Sturgeon’s Grenfell is the heroic sci-fi face of technocratic free-market capitalism. He points the way forward, like Asimov’s Harman. He clears the way like Robert Heinlein’s Chief Engineer Gaines in “The Roads Must Roll” (see Chapter 1). Grenfell’s climactic confrontation with Roway echoes the conflict between Gaines and the labor agitator Shorty Van Kleek. The fact that Grenfell is not ostensibly victorious, as Gaines was, is not of paramount importance. The psychological victory by virtue of the strength of Grenfell’s individual character and will is clear enough—regardless of its coming within the limited resolution afforded a narrative of total human extinction.

Ultimately, Grenfell is a tragic hero, but a hero nonetheless. He has failed. He has further engendered, with his failure, the eradication of any possibility of future success for humanity. However, Sturgeon’s is not a story about the failure of Grenfell. It is a story about the madness of continued militarization in a nuclear world. Grenfell’s failure is imposed upon him by this folly. Along with everyone else, he is a victim. Moreover, if there was any hope at all, Grenfell was it. Sturgeon seems to lament between the lines, “If only the government had listened to the enlightened scientists, rather than the generals.” Self-interested, rather than self-reliant like Grenfell, Roway arrives at the opposite opinion. He places his faith in collective action, rather than the individual action preferred by Sturgeon.

At first, Roway seems also to stand for traditional American values. He attempts to persuade Grenfell that both the prohibition against independent atomic research and

the suggestion that he surrender his work to the government each stand on democratic principles. “We the people,” he lectures, “have...determined that no atomic research be done except in government laboratories.” He goes on to bemoan the perceived inadequacy of the funding that sustains these military labs, compared to those of “our overseas friends.”<sup>44</sup> Dreading the possible inferiority of the American nuclear arsenal, Roway surrenders his earlier nuance by the desperation of his climactic actions. Grenfell’s actions and assertions suffer no such betrayal. As is the case with many golden age sci-fi protagonists of Grenfell’s ilk, any lack of democratic form borne by his individualist action is redeemed as democratic *in spirit* by virtue of his charitable benevolence.

This assumption of democratic intent within a less-than-democratic paradigm reflected Campbell’s later, 1949 musings that, “what enough people want badly enough, they will, sooner or later, force into actuality.”<sup>45</sup> The inherent suggestion is that any social manifestation represents a kind of negotiated consensus, merely by virtue of its existence. The tendency of *Astounding* authors to bear this out through their championship of a rule by a meritocratic social elite lies at the heart of work by Albert Berger and others (see Chapter 2). I have argued that these same sci-fi authors retained American, ostensibly democratic, free-market capitalism as the vehicle for meting out that merit. In the same way, Sturgeon’s conflation of democracy with individual liberty embodied the further conflation of democratic spirit with meritocratic form.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>45</sup> Campbell, Jr., “Science Fiction Prophecy,” 4.

Sturgeon's "Memorial" stands as a strong example of the way in which the immediate aftermath of the bomb altered sci-fi representation of nuclear power, while leaving intact a cultural endorsement of American capitalism. As the Cold War began to affect American cultural imprints in the later 1940s, sci-fi reflected both the generalized anxiety and the ideological binary that contextualized a global balance of nuclear capability. Sci-fi favored the American side of that oppositional balance, incorporating explicit attempts to inject a democratic tenor into its authoritarian form, thereby situating that authority and its inevitability within a recognizable American ideology. As the 1940s drew on, the inevitability of success for this ideology fell increasingly from the bosom of an abstract auspicious destiny into the hands of a controlling elite organization of actual historical actors.

In the concluding installments of "Foundation" (1948-1949), Asimov revealed a controlling elite committed to the exercise of the "democratic spirit" that Sturgeon had written into Grenfell (and Asimov into Harman, to a lesser degree). Also in 1949—in the same "predicted issue" that carried Campbell's "Science-Fiction Prophecy" and Asimov's last "Foundation" story—Sturgeon began to insert that democratic spirit directly and corporeally into the membership of his authoritarian elite. Appearing together in the November 1949 issue, stories by Asimov and Sturgeon illustrated the incremental steps that drew sci-fi models of meritocratic authoritarianism away from any suggestion of the kind of totalitarian control associated with the Soviet Union in Cold War ideological representations and toward the democratic ideal increasingly embedded in the American capitalist counter example.

Asimov concluded his original “Foundation” series with “...And Now You Don’t” (*Astounding* November 1949). He reveals the centrality of a “Second Foundation” to Hari Seldon’s plan in which a Second Galactic Empire is intended to supplant the millennia of barbarism predicted to naturally follow the fall of the First Galactic Empire.<sup>46</sup> Nearly two years earlier, in “Now You See It...” (*Astounding*, January 1948), Asimov had acknowledged the influence of “Second Foundationers,” who intervened to halt the destructive actions of a galactic conquistador known as “the Mule.” A humanoid mutant, born with a frail and twisted body, awkward facial appearance, and the ability to manipulate the emotions of human beings, the Mule was an individual force unpredictable by the mass observations and calculations of psychohistory. Having defeated the Mule, ostensibly freeing the “First Foundation” to resume its development toward empire, the Second Foundation had rescued the Seldon Plan.<sup>47</sup> In the new story, Asimov qualified that victory, showing that it had come at the cost of placing the Foundation into a new danger posed by the revelation of the Second Foundation.<sup>48</sup>

All the Foundation had known of the Second Foundation were suppositions surrounding ambiguous references made by Hari Seldon in his intentionally vague, centuries-old instructions. Foundationers spread rumors of its existence, but its purpose was unknown. With the defeat of the Mule, citizens of the Foundation began to suspect that the Second Foundation had secured that defeat and that it was controlling

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<sup>46</sup> Isaac Asimov, “Part II: Search by the Foundation,” in *Second Foundation* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 97-279.

<sup>47</sup> Isaac Asimov, “Part I: Search by the Mule,” in *Second Foundation* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 5-96.

<sup>48</sup> Asimov, “Part II: Search by the Foundation,” 99-129.

the development of the Seldon Plan and therefore the fate of the Foundation.<sup>49</sup> The ignorance of the Foundation had been necessary to the success of the Plan. Seldon designed the original Foundation colony of encyclopedists to specifically exclude any psychologists or psychohistorians. He did not want the pursuit of predictive science within the Foundation to alter its psychohistorically inevitable development toward the Second Galactic Empire. In order for his own psychohistorical calculations to hold, humanity must be allowed to act and react as it naturally would.<sup>50</sup> The knowledge that a Second Foundation of psychologists and psychohistorians exists solely to guard and refine as necessary the Foundation's realization of the Seldon Plan could derail that plan, causing men and women, as historical actors, to depend on their inevitable destiny, rather than their own actions.<sup>51</sup>

The Second Foundationers, the academic progeny of Hari Seldon himself, have acquired through study and practice, "Mule-like" powers of mental manipulation. They employ these powers to manifest the calculated adjustments necessitated by such derailments of the Seldon Plan as the Foundation defeat at the hands of the Mule or the possible discovery of the Second Foundation.<sup>52</sup> In order to restore the confidence of the Foundation after the withdrawal of the Mule, the psychologists orchestrate a Foundation victory over an aggressive remnant of the Mule's fallen empire. To mitigate the concerns of Foundation citizens who bemoan the lack of control inherent in what the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 130-144.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 127, 145-148.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 116-129, 145-148.

<sup>52</sup> Asimov, "Part I: Search by the Mule," 77-96; Asimov, "Part II: Search by the Foundation," 118-119, 125-129.

Second Foundation represents, the psychologists then fake their own death. Sacrificing fifty of their number, the psychologists hijack the search and destroy mission engaged by a powerful shadow contingent on the Foundation home planet of Terminus, leading it to a decoy Second Foundation on that same planet. By the conclusion, Asimov has left his reader to assume that the Seldon Plan has been restored, along with the ability of Second Foundation guardians to protect the future of that plan.<sup>53</sup>

While the last of the “Foundation” stories retained the quest narrative that had defined the action through much of the series, this is backgrounded in the finale by a kind of authoritarian dénouement, placing a pin in Asimov’s advocacy of the social importance of leadership by meritocratic elite. “Foundation” had supported throughout its run the individual, assertive, self-reliant action of protagonists who partnered their own agendas with the psychohistorical inevitability of the Seldon Plan. In the successful resolution of their final adjustments, the Second Foundation secured the progress of the Foundation and the ignorance of its citizens. Apparently out from under the thumb of the Second Foundation psychologists, Foundationers reacquired a confidence in their own agency, while retaining the notion that Seldon’s original psychohistorical calculations still favored their destiny.

The final authoritarian statement toward the end of the “Foundation” series is much stronger than it had been in the earlier stories where the “dead hand of Hari Seldon” merely stood for a historical predestination. This discomfited some characters, but was markedly less autocratic than the minority control by the Second Foundation.

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<sup>53</sup> Asimov, “Part II: Search by the Foundation.”

In discussion with the “First Speaker” of the Second Foundation, an apprentice psychologist reveals to the reader Seldon’s, and Asimov’s, perception of the role of the psychohistorians, “the First Foundation supplies the physical framework of a single political unit, and the Second foundation supplies the mental framework of a ready-made ruling class.”<sup>54</sup> The manifestation of the Second Galactic Empire, still several centuries in the future, will signal the readiness of the Foundation to incorporate the discipline of psychohistory, allowing finally for the reunion of the two Foundations. However, the Second Foundation apparently does not seek political or economic power through its guardianship over the Foundation. It has sacrificed its own citizens to secure the Foundation’s development. Individual psychologists do not even receive personal credit for individual refinements of the plan.<sup>55</sup> All that matters is the Seldon Plan itself, which cannot be realized within the lifetime of any of the Second Foundationers. For Asimov, it seems, such benevolence excuses the undemocratic paternalism, as it often had for sci-fi protagonists throughout the golden age.

In that same “predicted issue,” the November 1949 *Astounding*, Theodore Sturgeon made his own statement in support of the benevolent dictatorship of a meritocratic elite in “What Dead Men Tell.” Well known as the vehicle for one of the philosophical dictums encompassed within “Sturgeon’s Law,” the story ostensibly advances the notion that “what is complicated isn’t important.”<sup>56</sup> Identified by Lucy

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 125.

<sup>56</sup> Williams, “Story Notes,” 382-383.



Menger, as “an arrow aimed at the heart of intellectualism,”<sup>57</sup> the statement actually defines the method of intellectual deduction employed by Sturgeon’s protagonist, known only as Hulon. “All I want to do is to think everything out according to that idea of mine [what is complicated isn’t important],” explains Hulon, “I mean everything: art and engineering and business and politics. I think I could work it all out if I had time.”<sup>58</sup>

Hulon is an uneducated man, making his living as a movie theater projectionist. Applying his method of uncomplicated deduction to a specific problem of interest, he submits an article for publication in a popular magazine. The common sense intellect displayed in his treatise is sufficiently impressive to draw the attention of a society of immortals capable of providing Hulon with the time he desires “to work everything out.”<sup>59</sup>

Driven by his longing for longevity and an attraction to anything suggestive of its possibility, Hulon twice follows film actors *known to be dead* as they exit the movie theater. He confronts Conrad Veidt and then Leslie Howard in the hope that he has stumbled upon the manifestation of life after life. Veidt and Howard each deny their suspected identity. However, the second encounter leads Hulon to a third, in which the similarly deceased Jean Harlow finally confirms his wild speculation. The woman, who is not really Jean Harlow, reveals that she and the other two walking dead have taken an appearance designed to draw out Hulon, who spends his days screening films. She is, in fact, a representative of the immortals who have decided to offer Hulon a chance

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<sup>57</sup> Lucy Menger, *Theodore Sturgeon* (New York: F. Ungar Pub. Co., 1981), 40.

<sup>58</sup> Theodore Sturgeon, “What Dead Men Tell,” in *The Perfect Host: Volume V: The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, vol. 5, *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1998), 335.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 333-339.

at admission based on the deductive strength displayed in his published article.

Admission would merely require Hulon to pass a test, but one in which failure would mean his death. In one moment he agrees to the terms; in the next, he finds himself within the challenge faced by two questions: “What is at the end of the corridor?” and “What death will I meet there?”<sup>60</sup>

The title of the story, “What Dead Men Tell,” references both the use of dead film avatars in the recruitment of Hulon and the centrality of a corpse to the solution of the puzzle in which he finds himself trapped. The puzzle is designed to “test about everything there is to test in a man,” Hulon surmises, “to see if he can analyze things he observes—even things that are against all his previous experience.”<sup>61</sup> The moderating doctor confirms as much, adding, “That’s right...including how badly he can be scared and still think straight.”<sup>62</sup> His answers to the puzzle, and his reasoning behind them, are subject to approval by the unseen membership of the society, which overwhelmingly votes to welcome Hulon aboard. He is to be made immortal and then trained in the use of the superior technology of this elite society. Hulon’s test involved a vast array of this superior technology, which the society presumably employs in the execution of its benevolent mission.<sup>63</sup>

Sturgeon leaves his reader to assume that the *raison d’être* of the secret society is consistent with Hulon’s earlier supposition, offered in answer to a question posed by the Jean Harlow avatar as to what use a hypothetical elixir of immortality might be put.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 329-339.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 350-352.

After stating the *apparently obvious* need for the sequestration of such an elixir behind the guard of a controlling elite, lest “the wrong people would live long” or “the treatment would overpopulate the Earth,” Hulon describes the ideal recipients of such a boon:

They would be very careful people. They would have to be able to consider the greatest good for humanity above any race or religious or national lines. They would have to be able to think ahead—years, centuries ahead. They would have to be able to hold their hands, keep from interfering, even when interfering might save thousands of lives.

They would have to put pressure here and nudge a little there in quiet ways, so that they would never be found out, and so that humanity would always think it was learning from its own mistakes and nothing else.<sup>64</sup>

Had Hulon somehow read the final installment of the “Foundation” series, appearing merely pages ahead of his own quotation in the “predicted issue” of *Astounding*? He is essentially describing the Second Foundation, stripped of its mathematical and mentally coercive prowess. Had Sturgeon read Asimov’s notes, or had them read to him by Campbell? Or, was the cultural message of golden age sci-fi, at least at *Astounding*, really that homogenous?

It was homogenous, by virtue of both cross-pollination and cultural context. It is likely that Campbell discussed “Foundation” with Sturgeon, and Sturgeon’s work with Asimov. His letters show a penchant for such communication, and his writers have

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 336-337.

spoken of his editorial influence as a near co-authorship.<sup>65</sup> Sturgeon and Asimov certainly read each other's published work, along with the work of other sci-fi writers. Both penned occasional letters to the editor, as did many sci-fi authors. Whatever the explanation, the tenor and the consistency of the two stories are obvious. Both projected an ideal of rule by benevolent, withdrawn elite.

In "What Dead Men Tell," Sturgeon employed much of the arsenal that had held golden age sci-fi in agreement with the ethos of American capitalism for more than a decade. Like Asimov, he forgave the non-democratic, authoritarian elite because it had ascended on merit for the purpose of the benevolent direction of the masses. Like Heinlein, in "Methuselah's Children," he hung the fate of progress on the hook of longevity, which echoed the breadth of Asimov's Seldon Plan. Like van Vogt, he put his faith in the ability of a free society to shuffle the natural authority to the top. These all support the arguments that Berger made for an authoritarian sci-fi within the pages of *Astounding* (see Chapter 2). As a product of the American cultural context of the 1940s, sci-fi authors supported an inherent authority of the American exceptional destiny. In Hulon's self-confident, single-minded individualism, Sturgeon registered his agreement with Asimov, Heinlein, van Vogt, and others as to the ideal model for success within the authority of American destiny. In "What Dead Men Tell," Sturgeon

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<sup>65</sup> Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976*, 149; Isaac Asimov, *Asimov on Science Fiction*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1981), 201-207; John W. Campbell, Jr., *The John W. Campbell Letters*, ed. Perry A., Sr. Chapdelaine, Tony Chapdelaine, and George Hay, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Franklin, TN: AC Projects, Inc., 1985); John W. Campbell, Jr., Isaac Asimov, and A.E. van Vogt, *The John W. Campbell Letters with Isaac Asimov and A. E. van Vogt*, ed. Perry A., Sr. Chapdelaine, Tony Chapdelaine, and George Hay, vol. 2, 2 vols. (Franklin TN: AC Projects, Inc., 1993).

encouraged such a reading, while foregrounding the undistinguished education and the pedestrian social standing of Hulon.

Hulon is every bit the self-reliant individualist of Grenfell or Harman. He is at home within the American value system that buoys his success. His strength of character and able mind aside, however, Hulon is not operating from an advantaged position, as are the independently wealthy Grenfell and Harman. Hulon ascends *purely* on merit. He is a working-class hero, rescued from mediocrity by a powerful social apparatus that does not see class and that recognizes and appreciates the value of his dream. In answer to her question about his education, Hulon tells Jean Harlow that it was, “Not much. High School. I read some.”<sup>66</sup> He explains that he submitted his work to the magazine because, “I thought I had an important idea. It’s part of a...call it a philosophy, if that doesn’t sound too high-falutin’.”<sup>67</sup> Later in their conversation, he misses her reference to *Walden* because he has never read it. When he tells her so, she explains what she meant.<sup>68</sup> Sturgeon makes the point that, despite his lack of formal education, Hulon can apply his philosophy to understand almost anything by breaking it down to its basic components. Through this same method, he is able to discern the precise architecture of his puzzle despite its lack of connection to his perception of what is and is not possible, as well as his lack of familiarity with even the rudimentary scientific principles involved.<sup>69</sup> Ultimately, Sturgeon judges Hulon, as a

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<sup>66</sup> Sturgeon, “What Dead Men Tell,” 333.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 349-351.

representative of the American everymen, to be fit to join the ranks of a super-elite guardianship over the human species.

Hulon's pedestrian status is especially important to the retention of sympathy for the elite society in "What Dead Men Tell" because, like Asimov's Second Foundation, and unlike the earlier "Foundation" stories, the controlling force behind a self-evident social development is specific and corporeal. These are *people* pulling the strings, not some psychohistorical inevitability. Where Asimov relied on an abstract benevolent direction behind the ministrations of the Second Foundation in order to attach an egalitarian spirit to a non-democratic form, Sturgeon injected the democratic perspective directly into the hierarchy of power, granting admission to the everyman, Hulon.

Richard Hoen inspired Campbell's explication of democratic attachments to sci-fi prophecy by his pre-configuration of *Astounding's* "predicted issue," suggesting the foundation of Campbell's arguments for the power beneath "what enough people want" in determining historical events. Campbell employed Cold War cultural contracts that helped place the United States as the ideological foil of Soviet communism, just as his writers were doing in the pages of *Astounding*. These statements came as implicit attachments to more overt sci-fi developments during the early Cold War, partially absolving an intensified and personified authoritarianism. These meritocratic and technocratic authorities now sought to save humanity from itself, rather than to deliver an inevitable Utopia. And they did so beneath the weight of an increased susceptibility to failure and descent into nuclear annihilation. Sci-fi future imaginings were more pessimistic in America following Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but sci-fi authors reified their

protagonists' sympathetic advancement of individualistic, self-reliant, competitive models. Even when these were tragic heroes, like Sturgeon's Grenfell, they were still heroes. In this way, many of the cultural contracts that colored an American response to the social and material circumstances of a global Cold War also bled through the sci-fi product.

## Conclusion

### “A Science Fictional World”

In 1971, Isaac Asimov recalled the significance of the golden age of sci-fi and of the man who had helped to define it. He observed, “We are now living in a science fictional world, and one which Campbell’s science fiction did significantly succeed in creating.” Asimov spoke of sci-fi stories that envisioned, “a world of computers, of trips to outer space, of missiles, of a science important society.”<sup>1</sup> These he attributed to the speculations advanced during the 1940s by himself and other sci-fi authors, working under Campbell’s guidance to produce a future-directed engagement with the development of science and technology in a process that bordered on prediction. In stating that Campbell and the authors at *Astounding* “did significantly succeed in creating” the world he described, Asimov echoed Campbell’s 1949 argument that sci-fi played a constructive role in the cycle of technological development employed by engineers, designers, and manufacturers to bring America their best material approximation of “what enough people want.”<sup>2</sup>

Speaking in January 2010, Kim Stanley Robinson offered a kind of agreement with Asimov and Campbell. Robinson told an audience at Duke University, “We are

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<sup>1</sup> *Isaac Asimov on The Golden Age of Science Fiction*, 2007, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pySVYz4GfzE&feature=youtube\\_gdata](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pySVYz4GfzE&feature=youtube_gdata).

<sup>2</sup> Campbell, Jr., “Science Fiction Prophecy,” 4.



living in a science fiction novel that we all collaborate on.” In response to a questioner’s assertion that her “not exciting” life is nothing like science fiction, Robinson turned to the golden age trick of Campbell and *Astounding*, pulling the sci-fi presuppositions of the audience member out of the realm of the fantastic and into the here and the now. He explained, “We live in a world that is so intensely structured by science and technology...a world created by science and technology,” a world created as the “science fiction novel that we all collaborate on.”<sup>3</sup>

Referencing Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* (1970), paraphrasing the meaning of the title as, “too much change in too short a period of time,” Robinson observed that, in *our* “science fiction novel” world, “future shock” is an archaic notion. Arguing that there is nothing that could be revealed today within the arena of technological advancement that could shock his audience, he contended that they all have been “conditioned by science fiction” to carry an “anticipation of the strange” within a strong “sense of futurism.”<sup>4</sup> By Robinson’s evaluation, public recoil from dramatic technological advancement, as Campbell observed following Hiroshima and Sputnik,<sup>5</sup> appears to be a social phenomenon that Americans left behind in the golden age. On the other hand, Robinson’s remarks seem to suggest the ultimate realization of another of Campbell’s editorial assertions from that period.

In 1939, Campbell argued for the legitimacy of his sci-fi genre within an American cultural context that, “for the first time...looks forward to better things.” Campbell wrote,

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<sup>3</sup> Kim Stanley Robinson: “We Are Living in a Science Fiction Novel We All Collaborate On”, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYXZQvUIqPg&feature=youtube\\_gdata](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYXZQvUIqPg&feature=youtube_gdata).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, Jr., “John W. Campbell.”

“Science–fiction comes when science takes some of the tension of terror out of the future tense.”<sup>6</sup> If Campbell was explaining sci-fi emergence by casting it as the relevant kind of mythology for contemporary life, the statements made respectively in 1971 by Asimov and in 2010 Robinson seem to suggest an even deeper entrenchment of that relevance. If we are to accept claims of living in a “science fiction world” or in a “science fiction novel,” especially one created by its inhabitants, we must also accept that Campbell was correct in his identification of sci-fi as a relevant social mythology.

In 1959, Campbell sought to place a final pin in a notion sci-fi legitimacy, which he had advocated for twenty years, attempting to ultimately emancipate sci-fi from the yoke of fantasy and “flubdubbery.” Campbell rejected any interpretation of sci-fi that divorced it from the material reality of technological development and the social structures that facilitated and required it. Campbell’s serial assertion of the real-world relevance and applicability of sci-fi provided proof that sci-fi literature was predictive. The “non-escapist” quality of sci-fi literature ultimately allowed for the development of its accurate speculations on future technology. Sci-fi authors retained plausibility by their respect for the inertia of both technological and social trends. Governed by this imperative, as a genre distinction of sci-fi, golden age authors had little choice but to predict the future, both in the short term of science and technology innovation, and in the long view of the “science important” society that Asimov and Robinson found at later century.

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<sup>6</sup> Campbell, Jr., “Future Tense,” 6.

Looking back as far as the turn of the century, Campbell saw sci-fi arising in response to the material optimism wrought by the social embrace of progressive science and technology that followed and facilitated industrial production. In this, he recognized sci-fi as an outgrowth of social and economic forces. In 1949, his refinement of the predictive role of sci-fi betrayed his perception of a more dialogical relationship between sci-fi and its cultural context. In his “predicted issue” editorial, Campbell placed sci-fi speculation within the cycle of technological development. He argued that when sci-fi authors speculated about future technologies, they both were reflecting material desires and helping to refine those desires within the productive capacity of technological evolution. Whether as the passive outgrowth or the active progenitor of a cultural context and its productive process, sci-fi remained tied to both that context and that process. Golden age sci-fi held a complexity within its status as “non-escape literature.” It retained both an agreement with its cultural context and an ability to predict the development of that context as it evolved into the “science important” society we inhabit today.

Specifically, sci-fi authors represented the evolution of this “science important” society within narrative explorations of predestination and historical inevitability. Whether these took the form of the psychohistorical destiny of Asimov’s “Foundation” or the portrayal of protagonists ideally suited to success within some morally imperative, self-evidently correct social model, sci-fi allegorical explorations were ultimately of an American evolution toward the future that Asimov and Robinson would eventually inhabit.

Robinson, I believe, is correct in his assumption that there is little or no revelation within in the arena of technological development that could “shock” Americans today. In fact, it is more likely for these Americans to be “shocked” by any pause, or even slowing, in the rate at which technological progress continues to dazzle. The “cult of the new” that William Leach found in ascension at the turn of the century has never been more culturally entrenched. Today’s culture of consumption largely defines the role of individual Americans in society, as it stands as both product and creative motor of a culturally pervasive American capitalism. The evolutionary arc of this model is as much responsible for the development of the “science important” society as sci-fi had been.

Throughout the golden age, it was this evolutionary arc to which sci-fi was tethered. This cultural context was not singular, nor was it fixed beneath some hegemony of capitalist development. Sci-fi narratives of the golden age were not explicitly capitalist in theme. However, authorial deployment of narrative language, dialogue, characterization, and sympathetic portrayal can display an altogether separate, and often more powerful, cultural ideology. Sci-fi authors directed reader sympathy and identification toward specific characterizations and narrative development.

At times, golden age sci-fi stories *did* explicitly carry a patriotic or ethno-centric, nationalistic American bias. More consistently, but less explicitly, the stories carried powerful ideological support for an American cultural ethos built around the inevitable triumph of social systems that favored private enterprise, self-reliant individualism, competitive action, and messianic technological progress. Golden age sci-fi stories are

not about material acquisition or profit margins. However, by careful textual analysis, I have found an ideological agreement with a competitive, individualistic, and technocratic social structuring, which stood in close agreement with the undergirding ideologies of American free-market capitalism. This complicity came by the necessary incorporation of existing social momentum in satisfaction of authors' desire for plausibility within speculation. And this complicity came through the influence of Campbell's conservatism. Under this dual influence, golden age sci-fi contributed to the cultural conveyance of American capitalism across a period of crisis and into a "science important future" on free-market terms.

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