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Where No Man Has Gone Before: Star Trek and the Death of Cultural Relativism in America

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STAR TREK: FIRST CONTACT
Various cinemas

Taylor Harrison et al

ENTERPRISE ZONES
Critical positions on Star Trek
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"The line must be drawn *here*", says Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart), master of the USS *Enterprise-E*, finest ship in Star Fleet. He is responding to the ultimate threat posed to the galaxy's United Federation of Planets by the Borg. These cybernetic creatures conquer and assimilate whole worlds, cultures and species of every kind in their path, absorbing them into a single entity. The Borg collectivity commingles humankind's worst nightmares of the totality of the social insects, on the one hand, and the Compleat Machine – metal and gears and mechanical parts – on the other. The Borg's slogan, announced from a thousand movie posters across the land, is "Resistance is futile".

This is rattling good stuff. *First Contact* is a terrific space adventure – vastly superior, for example, to last summer's wooden *Independence Day*. The final 1960s-cast *Star Trek* movies were very dull by comparison, not because the heroes were so obviously geriatric, but because they were all oppressed by a boredom curable only by death, which arose from having saved all of humanity and life as we know it once too often. Captain Picard and his gallant crew, on the other hand, are just starting their epic journey of product placement for *Star Trek's* owner, the Paramount Corporation. Unless one is fanatically opposed to science fiction, *Star Trek*, or escapism, then *First Contact* is a good bet, and resistance really is futile.

But the quality of a space epic, as with all melodrama, depends on its villain. What makes *First Contact* satisfying for more than just Star Trekkies is the Borg Queen, played with delicious camp and a wickedly seductive smile by Alice Krige. We have apparently come a long way in our appreciation of beauty since the aluminium-foil-clad space maidens whom Captain Kirk clasped in his arms in the 1960s, and of whom I had dreams as a boy of ten; today's culture of body piercing and fashionable leather fetishism is as much at the heart of the Borg as their cybernetic melding of the organic and the mechanical. The Borg Queen's alabaster, fine-veined flesh is pierced, pinned and stapled to her body armour. Her sexual conquest of the *Enterprise's* android officer Data (Brent Spiner), premised on grafting human flesh on to him so as to give him true sensation, proceeds with all the precision of the dominatrix. My wife, no *Star Trek* fan but a good sport, reports with cool objectivity that, during the movie, my fingers drummed suggestively on her knee every time Krige smiled. Yet I found my concentration on the film curiously disturbed by the recurring thought that among my fellow moviegoers might lurk one or another of the contributors to a volume of essays I had in my jacket pocket, *Enterprise Zones: Critical positions on Star Trek*.

Enterprise Zones is unfortunately far from impressive. Its contributors are mostly young, junior scholars, and they write with the enthusiasm of those who have recently discovered the joys of manipulating the algebra of theory. One wishes them well. Yet the volume is, like so many others, merely the template of fashionable identity politics applied to yet another popular cultural phenomenon; as training for young scholars, it bodes ill. What these essays have to say about *Star Trek* is entirely predictable as soon as they announce the identity under discussion, whether it is a matter of gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity. It all follows as though a

button had been pressed in a software program in which a series of screen prompts came up and asked the author to fill in the blanks. The theoretical templates are so fixed and their logics so expatiated that there is very little new to say from one application of them to another.

The problem of applying rote theory is exacerbated by the material of *Star Trek* itself. Spanning thirty years, with several incarnations

decades apart, and including dozens of different writers, directors, producers and novelists, *Star Trek* remains open-ended to the point that hardly anything constrains interpretation in even the most ordinary, untheoretical sense. The combination of a rigid theoretical apparatus and an open-ended world to be interpreted is largely fatal to producing insight. And yet, that said, it is necessary to take *Enterprise Zones* on its own terms as much as possible, which is why it was in my jacket pocket during my trip to see *First Contact*. Since this movie featured the Borg, I wanted particularly to read Katrina G. Boyd's "Cyborgs in Utopia: The problem of radical difference in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*".

Boyd's essay is one of the best in the volume. This is so despite the fact that she begins by declaring that the "cyborg alien invaders, the Borg, pose an extreme narrative danger because they embody a postmodern vision of radical difference that threatens to exceed the bounds of

Star Trek: The Next Generation's (TNG) utopian future, circumscribed as it is by nineteenth-century humanist assumptions."

One might have thought, watching the Borg on-screen, that they pose an extreme danger because they capture human beings, burn out their personalities in order to *assimilate* them to a collective robotic entity, and replace parts of their bodies with weird mechanical gadgets. They are technologically extremely advanced, and, since they are prepared even to travel back in time to assimilate the earth in its past, they appear (but for Picard) unstoppable. This all seems dangerous enough, even without post-modernism or nineteenth-century humanism.

But in what sense do the Borg represent a vision of "radical difference"? The central ethical issue of *First Contact* is Picard's ostentatious announcement, to a twenty-first-century earth-woman, Lily (Alfre Woodard), accidentally brought aboard the *Enterprise*, that he is not motivated by revenge to kill the Borg, because vengeance is no longer a motivation in his century. The movie's progressivist utopianism is even more strongly enunciated when Picard informs her that in *his* century there is no money, because people no longer accumulate wealth, but work instead for the betterment of themselves and others. But, of course, Picard is motivated by revenge, and he comes to admit it in what has become a set-piece not of Picard's twenty-fourth century, but of America latterly in the twentieth, in which a woman, and in this instance a black woman, brings a white male to confess that it is part of his essence to enjoy killing and be deeply attached to weapons – in this case the *Enterprise* itself. It is against Picard's desire to exterminate the Borg, using boys and their toys, that the question of the Borg's putatively radical difference must be set.

The peculiarity is that even if, or rather precisely because, the Borg are so radically different that one hates them, and rejoices in killing them, one can never manage to do so in the way that, for example, one can hate the Nazis. The Borg are not radically evil; they are radically threatening. Above all, hatred of the kind that Lily reproves in Picard is actually reserved for those who are sufficiently like us for them to have fundamentally betrayed us, as the Nazis did at Auschwitz. But the Borg have not betrayed their humanity; they are not human and they act, even collectively, as Spock put it in a moment of serene Vulcan philosophy in an earlier *Star Trek* movie, "each according to his gifts".

Boyd's problem of radical difference can thus be recast as the problem of cultural relativism. Are we relativists or not? If the Borg really are radically evil, then is it morally acceptable to "let the Borg be Borg" so long as they stay far away in their corner of the galaxy? Suppose the Borg somehow come to live among us, even peacefully. The organic part of their bodies must be born, perhaps, like ordinary humanoids; should Borg parents be allowed to "mutilate" their children to implant them with the mechanical devices necessary to Borgness? Should the Borg be banned from proselytizing among us for converts, as the German government, for example, has banned the Scientologists?

Relativism is an issue on which both generations of *Star Trek* took strong, if ultimately ambiguous, stands. These stands correspond to larger shifts in American culture and attitudes over the decades of the two television shows. *Star Trek*, of the 1960s especially, was committed, in the Vietnam years, to the famous Prime Directive of "cultural noninterference". Granted, in keeping with the ambiguity of the era, Captain Kirk violated it in numerous episodes, and did so (when not nakedly to save his ship) in the name of an oddly universalist, therapeutic interpretation of the growth and development of cultures; Kirk saw himself free to interfere when interference would "liberate" a culture from "pathological" development in order to pursue "healthy" development. It was a model of cultural progress which matched that decade's faith in homogeneous developmental stages of modernization. And yet the enunciated norm was none the less a relativist one, even when overcome in practice by Captain Kirk's universalist impulses or undermined by a therapeutic universalism distinguishing normal and pathological cultures.

One striking development of the intervening decades, however, has been the decline in American public culture of any significant commitment to relativism – relativism with any teeth in it. This may come as a surprise to those conservatives who, reading the *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, imagine that relativism is rampant and the source of endless social ills. It may also come as a surprise to Left-liberals inclined to see current multiculturalism as nothing if not relativism enshrined as public culture. But cultural relativism is largely a dead philosophy in the United States, and what killed it was something perhaps akin to Borg body mutilation: feminist, and later a socially much broader, revulsion against female genital mutilation, not just as practised by immigrants to the West but as practised even in their own, non-Western societies.

This is not to say that relativism has been affirmatively rejected, but the thing into which it has evolved – multiculturalism – is altogether different. First, multiculturalism, partly because it embraces feminism, cannot encompass the idea of permitting, let alone approving, truly radical differences – differences which you revile – at least not when they involve the subjugation of

women, anywhere and in any culture; much contemporary feminism is deeply universalist. Second, multiculturalism, as the philosophy of the "New Class" for the management of race, ethnicity and gender relationships among the administered masses, is not a philosophy of passive toleration. It is instead an aggressively proselytizing ideology, which believes that oppressed populations within the ordained categories of race, gender and sexual orientation cannot be made safe from persecution by the application of neutral laws governing public, outward behaviour, but only by the psychological reconstruction of populations; hands will be outwardly clean of racism, sexism and homophobia only if hearts are pure. Multiculturalism is a doctrine of purification, and those on a mission to purify are not relativists; relativism may have opened the New Class's eyes to certain categories of difference to be protected from oppression, but the New Class is relativist no longer.

Conservatives, for their part, confuse relativism with permissiveness. Cultural relativism has nothing necessarily to do with permissive-

ness; it is instead a doctrine alternating fundamentally between modes of tolerance, on the one hand, and arbitrariness on the other. It always carries a double message of the contingency but, simultaneously, the hegemony of culture. The permissiveness, by contrast, that has so troubled cultural conservatives arises not from cultural relativism, but from subjectivism – a doctrine that replaces cultural hegemony with the hegemony of any individual's beliefs. Subjectivism is, of course, fraught with many objections, and conservatives and many others wear themselves out trying to make them all. But their curious sensation of constantly missing the target results not from a heedless, Godless culture slouching, in Robert Bork's phrase, towards Gomorrah, fit only to have the dust of the shoes of the righteous shaken off against it, but instead because there is, on closer examination, less and less that is "permissive" about contemporary American culture at all.

It is but a small step from the relativist doctrine that standards of social behaviour are relative, to another doctrine – post-relativism –

which is far from permissiveness. Since standards are arbitrary, one may as well arbitrarily enforce a standard, and indeed cleanse the culture, to conform to an arbitrary standard. This is multiculturalism, but it is also conservative majoritarianism, the view that no individual liberties can stand against the majority's conventions. These are conclusions that both the multiculturalist "New Class" and cultural conservatives have drawn from 1960s *Star Trek*'s gentle relativism; so long as the culture is reshaped towards conformity, from which can be drawn a convention, there can be no external constraint

(such as those that morality or religion might provide) on the content of that convention and the exercise of authority to enforce it. True, relativism teaches that there are no constraints except contingent cultural ones. But, always mindful of the lesson of the hegemony of culture, multiculturalists and conservatives alike conclude not that there can be no constraints on individual behaviour, but that there can be no constraints on the power of society, or anyway its cultural governing class, to enforce a nakedly

arbitrary cultural standard with the nakedly arbitrary power of the state.

This is the governing philosophy of the Left in America, but given powerful support by communitarian statists and cultural conservatives desperate to see standards enforced in any degree because they see the issue as societal permissiveness rather than state arbitrariness. But, ultimately, even the most religious and moralistic among them (the Supreme Court's Justice Scalia, above all) has accepted the proposition girding post-relativism's iron cage: that the ultimate source of value in society is not morality, but convention. This post-relativist authoritarianism, unchallengeable by morality or religion because it admits of nothing except multiculturalist or majoritarian conventionality, is surely not what either Captains Kirk or Picard, or their gently progressivist authors, had in mind. But then the future never is. Where no man has gone before, indeed.

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Alice Krige and Patrick Stewart in *Star Trek: First Contact*