

# The Politics of Fandom

## Science Fiction's Historic Struggle over the Future

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A dedicated band of idealistic working-class teenagers crash a meeting of techno-fascists at a New York hotel, confronting the group's dictatorial leaders.

It sounds like an Antifa adventure plucked from today's headlines—but in fact, this plot unfolded at the first ever World Science Fiction Convention in 1939. Despite its reputation for campy story-telling and escapist plots, science fiction (SF) has always been highly political at its core, and this story began when Dave Kyle, a member of a fan club known as The Futurians, attempted to distribute a pamphlet criticizing the convention organizers.

The headline read: A Warning: Beware of Dictatorship! Today Be Aware of any Movement to Coerce or Bully You into Submission!

The Futurians were a famously scrappy club of leftist New York science fiction fans that included a remarkable roster of fledgling talent, including Donald A. Wollheim, John Michel, Isaac Asimov, Virginia Kidd, "Doc" Lowndes, Leslie Perri and Frederik Pohl, among others. Famous for their bohemian lifestyles, incendiary self-publishing, and penchant for themed costume parties, the Futurians were among the earliest proponents of what we now call zine culture and cosplay.

Their work helped define the Golden Age of SF and their radical philosophy later contributed, in a small way, to the cultural upheaval of the 1960s.

Peter Balestrieri, Curator of Science Fiction and Pop Culture at the University of Iowa Special Collections, is an authority on early fan culture and a self-described anarcho-syndicalist.

Balestrieri sees the Futurians as pioneers in the transformation of the genre.

He writes: "At a time when the world was plunging into a war against Fascism, the Futurians Science Fiction Club of New York, filled with leftists, sought to act like a radical labor union and tried to organize fandom to engage in that conflict.

Their opponents in New Fandom were interested in creating a single fan group with themselves at the top, acting more like dictators and opposing any Popular Front activities of the Futurians. However, validation for the Futurians came in the following decades as members of the club became some of the most prominent authors, editors, and publishers of science fiction, even as New Fandom became a footnote in fan history.

Balestrieri points out that the techno-fascist (my term) were also very influential in early fandom. The three young organizers of the 1939 convention, Sam Moscowitz, Jimmy Taurasi and Will Sykora were known as the Triumvirs and personified the right wing of SF fans.

The Futurians christened them "Der Fuhrer of the Newark Swamps, Il Duce of Flushing Flats and The Mikado of Long Island City," respectively referring to the leaders of World War II Axis powers. They were the Futurian's interborough rivals, known for their rigid views and devotion to the space operas featured in pulp adventure magazines.

When the Triumvirs got wind of the Futurians plans to distribute "Red" propaganda at their convention, they barred the club's members from the meeting hall, outraging many of the fans in attendance. The event became

known as “The Great Exclusion,” and created a political fracture in fandom that rages even today, erupting in conflicts like Gamergate and Sad Puppies affairs.

Looking at the traditional space opera sub-genre, with its militarized vision of space conquest and technocratic ideals, one can draw a direct line from the techno-philia of the Italian Futurists and Mussolini, to Robert A. Heinlein’s 1959 *Starship Troopers* and today’s Halo video game franchise. Even *Star Trek*, with its heaping helpings of progressive social commentary, is at heart a descendant of the techno-utopianism of the Futurists and the neo-liberal vision of peace through superior firepower.

In his essay, “Why I Hate Star Trek,” John Zerzan writes, “Even quite a few ‘anarchists’ are, of their own volition, very big Trek fans. Which brings to mind one of its most repulsive features, its predication on a strict hierarchy. The order-giving/order-taking military framework is always present and constitutes the model of social reality; for the crew is never seen in a different context.” He notes the move from a military model in the original series to a corporate-style hierarchy in the Next Generation era.

As anyone who is even casually familiar with the SF genre knows, there is plenty of science fiction that offers an alternative view of the future to that of the space opera. Science fiction has always been inherently political. It developed in response to the rise of technology and the existential struggle between humanity and its mutant brainchild.

Cautionary dystopian stories exist in constant tension with techno-utopian ideals. From Thomas More’s *Utopia* to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to today’s “cli-fi” (climate fiction) and Afro-futurist writings, SF has served as a sandbox for alternative visions of technology and its implications.

In an interview by Bitch Media in 2016, Walidah Imarisha, a community organizer and co-editor of the anthology, *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* says: “All organizing is science fiction. When organizers imagine a world without poverty, without war, without borders or prisons—that’s science fiction...Being able to collectively dream those new worlds means that we can begin to create those new worlds here.”

Within the SF community, Imarisha’s collective vision is unfortunately not universal. The arguments over the future raged even within the ranks of the left-leaning Futurians. Judith Merrill, a Trotskyist, and James Blish, who flirted briefly with theoretical technocracy (what was referred to among the Futurians as “paper fascism”) argued constantly.

In Damon Knight’s definitive memoir *The Futurians*, Merrill said of Blish, “I thought he was very snotty and affected, and I frequently suspected his authoritative information...Jim and I would get into the same political argument each week, and I would beat him to the floor...and at the end of it he would say, ‘You’re right,’ and then he would come back the next week and start the same argument all over again...”

Blish went on to write novelizations for *Star Trek*. Merrill became an influential editor and moved to Canada during the Vietnam war to help found an alternative college. She later became a beloved Canadian TV personality, “The UnDoctor,” who introduced each episode of the Doctor Who television series.

Fifty years after the “Great Exclusion,” a 70-year-old Dave Kyle, still a devoted SF fan, reminisced about the debacle. In the program for the Boston Worldcon, he wrote:

“[F]andom was hardly a decade old...In this cauldron of the 1930s, many young sf idealists decided that science fiction not only dreamed of brave new worlds, but offered reality. Fans, therefore, should become activists as well as dreamers...”

Although Ursula K. Le Guin wrote that, “Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive,” it has also served as a leading indicator of wider cultural movements. Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* was an unlikely companion to imprisoned Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* on many bookshelves of the 1960s.

Today, marginalized people are again finding a voice through SF, much as the Russian-born Jewish, Isaac Asimov and his poor, NYC outer-borough teenage companions did in the 1930s.

The Futurian’s rallying cry lives on: Today, Be Aware of any Movement to Coerce or Bully You into Submission!

## Related

### **All about the Futurians**

<http://fancylopedia.org/futurians>

### **To view Futurian fanzines**

<http://fanac.org/>

<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/hevelin>

### **The quintessential book about the club**

*The Futurians* by Damon Knight (John Day, 1977)

### **More about SF and Social Justice**

*Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*

adrienne maree brown & Walidah Imarisha, editors (AK Press, 2015)

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