

# SCIENCE FICTION: A VISION OF LIBERTY

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When I was hiking in the Rocky Mountains a few years ago, I was told that to the Indians, the mountain peaks were holy. The medicine men would climb up there to receive instructions from the Creator, and the young boys would spend weeks there, in the final stages of their initiation rites, to wait for the visions that would tell them what course their adult lives should follow.

I think that *we* must do something similar: as libertarians, we must seek visions, rather than complain about taxes, regulations, and the countless infringements of individual freedom. These infringements are bad, of course, but complaints rarely inspire anyone.

I have heard it said — and in my dark moments I think it is true — that the definition of a libertarian is a person who would rather spend his time complaining about the freedom he doesn't have than exercising the freedom he does have.

## I Ideas and Extrapolation

Science fiction is a literature of *ideas*. It is a type of literature which allows the writer to construct his own worlds, his own political systems and his own societies. It also allows him to take present trends to their logical conclusions; to extrapolate a certain tendency, work out

the consequences if this tendency is maintained and to show his readers how this will change society in the long run. A writer who is given this kind of freedom faces a double challenge: first, he has to construct a plausible background in terms of the world he wants to describe, and the people — or beings — who live there; their technology, their customs, common beliefs and myths, their politics and their economy. This he must do without taking too much time away from the story itself: if he does, the reader will lose interest and complain that he wants to read a *story*, not a technical handbook. Secondly, the science fiction author must make his whole construction plausible in terms of the complex interplay between different parts of the social machinery: people's beliefs and the way they behave must be consistent with the political and social institutions that these beliefs support — otherwise, these institutions would have collapsed before the story started. The technology described must be consistent with the economic system that supports it, as well as with the fundamental laws of physics, and so on.

I will take a simple example from a usually very good writer, Ursula K. Le Guin, of the kind of inconsistency that can ruin a story: in Le Guin's short novel, *The Word for World is Forest*, you have greedy capitalists exploiting the natural resources of a planetary paradise, some

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Oyvind Myhre is one of Norway's leading science fiction authors. He has edited the Norwegian SF magazine *Nova* and is the author of fifteen books, including two controversial works: *1989*, about a future collapse of the Scandinavian "welfare" state; and *Makt (Power)* a historical novel tracing the rise of the repressive state in pre-historic Irish society. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (Peter Nicholls ed., Granada, London, 1981) describes him as "a prolific writer of considerable story-telling power" (p. 518). A version of this paper was delivered to the Second European Libertarian Convention in Norway in 1985.

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fifty light-years away. People in this story live normal life spans, and there is no faster-than-light travel between the stars. In practice, this would mean that the greedy capitalists would have to wait at least one hundred years before seeing any return on their investments. Somebody should have told Le Guin that this is *not* how a capitalist system works!

One cannot be too careful in choosing a method of constructing a society for logical consistency. Poul Andersen, a very good science fiction writer who leans towards libertarianism, once published a very informative article called "How to Create a World". In it, he discussed how to build a planet when writing a story; how one should go about providing it with a suitable sun, possible moons, an atmosphere, climate, life forms, and so on, so that all these details would come out fairly convincingly as well as scientifically plausible. The next issue of the magazine in which his story appeared carried the following letter:

"Dear Mr. Andersen,  
That is not the way I do it.  
Sincerely yours,  
God."

## II An Outsider's Perspective

In order to enjoy serious science fiction, it takes a different *perspective* from that which is required by most contemporary fiction: it takes a fundamental realisation that things *could* be vastly different from one's own personal experience. The reader — and the writer — must be willing and able to put themselves *outside* the particular point in history which they inhabit, and try to distinguish between those parts of their own lives that are fundamentally and eternally human, and those myriads of details that are simply historical accidents.

The same kind of perspective is necessary to challenge any well-established political system. In order to become a libertarian in the Scandinavian "welfare" system under which I live, one must be able to question every basic belief that has been conditioned into one's mind from the first day of school. For most people, this is *not* an easy effort. During lunch breaks at my office, I now and then tell my colleagues a horror story from my own life. It goes like this: "Every payday, when I leave the office, I meet an armed robber down on the corner. With a gun in his hands, he demands two thirds of my pay. Being a sensible man, I always give him what he wants." "How terrible!" my colleagues exclaim. "You must do something about it. Have you tried to call the police?"

"I've tried a number of times," I reply, "but they never bother to help me. In fact, they only laugh at my accusations." "Well, we obviously need a stronger police force in our city," my colleagues conclude. "But at least you should follow another route next payday."

"I've tried that, also," I reply. "But then, he only follows me home, knocks on my door, and demands his two thirds plus interest." "Does this mean that he actually knows where you live?" they ask. "Oh, yes, he knows

more about me than I do myself. He's the tax collector in Nittedal."

"Oh, but *he* is not a robber," they reply. "He is a representative of society." "No, he's not — I know him very well; his name is Hnagen, and he lives with his family a few hundred meters from where I live. He owns a big house which he has bought with the money he has stolen from me."

At this point, my colleagues normally shake their heads and end the conversation. They can't grasp that I have only given a factual description of how a tax system actually works, and that the only difference between the tax collector and a robber is that the tax collector operates with the power of the State machinery behind him. My colleagues are so conditioned by the *myths* of the welfare state that they don't trust the evidence of their own eyes and ears.

## III A Sense of Difference

Readers and writers of science fiction, then, have *one* very characteristic trait in common with people who disagree fundamentally with the conventional beliefs and ideas of contemporary society: an independent, highly self-reliant *state of mind*. At the 1984 World Libertarian Convention in London, Dr Peter Breggin, during his speech at the closing banquet, asked all those present who, during childhood, had somehow felt themselves to be *different* from most people around them to raise their hands. At least two thirds of those present did so. The same question could have been asked, with the same automatic reaction, at any science fiction convention.

## IV Science Fiction and Libertarianism

In one sense, "growing up" means adjusting to and adopting the conventional outlook and values of society, including the automatic explanations and prejudices of most people around us. In my country, Norway, libertarians, like science fiction fans, are people who never *did* make the necessary adjustments: most of us are still overgrown, maladjusted adolescents who turned into impractical dreamers and crackpot intellectuals. And so it is not surprising that there is a large overlap between libertarianism and science fiction "fandom".

Science fiction, then, may have a limited following. Still, it can be a very powerful tool for our purposes, since it reaches a large number of people who could be readily converted to libertarianism, if only they were presented with the basic ideas in a consistent and entertaining manner. Also, science fiction offers the unique possibility to conduct large-scale social experiments *on paper*, without actually having to possess the power to involve a real society, with millions of real people in it, the kind of social experiments that, for instance, Pol Pot conducted with bloody consequences in Cambodia.

## V Utopias and Dystopias

Basically, there are two ways of making a political statement. One way is to describe what you are *for*. The other is to describe what you are *against*. Traditionally, free-

dom-minded writers have done a much better job of describing what they are *against* than of describing what they are *for*. There are very good reasons for this, which I will come back to in a moment.

A novel which describes a political system that the writer would like to see put into practice is called a utopia, whereas a novel which describes a system that the writer *dreads* is called a dystopia. They usually make for terrible reading. The reason is that a utopia, by definition and by the writer's intent, is a place where everyone is happy — or, at least, everyone who *deserves* to be happy is. In order to set up such a system, the writer must start with the assumption that he *knows* what conditions will make everyone happy. Also, to put this supreme knowledge into political practice, at least on paper, he must invest his knowledge in the political power structure of the system he wants to set up. Therefore, from the first known utopia, Plato's *Republic*, and onwards, you have the philosopher-kings who rule by absolute authority and absolute wisdom. You also normally have a population divided into different classes, each individual being allotted the kind of existence for which he, by the decree of the philosopher-kings, is best suited, and accordingly the existence which, objectively, will make him most happy. Other utopias of this type include Thomas More's *Utopia*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, Richard Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, William Morris' *News from Nowhere*, H. G. Wells' *Men Like Gods* and *In the Days of the Comet*, and B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. In all these lifeless utopias, you find people walking around being dutifully happy, and every now and then exclaiming: "How lucky we are to live under such a perfect system!" You find no conflict, no injustice, no human suffering, no tragedy and — I would say — ultimately no human dignity.

(Skinner, incidentally, is one of the most influential psychologists of this century, and one of the founders of the ideology of using psychology as a tool in social engineering. It says something about a man that he is able to write a book which *he* considers his crowning achievement, the summing up of his life's work, and entitle it *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. Think about it: "Beyond Freedom and Dignity" — *that* expresses the ultimate goal of the therapeutic state and its mercenaries, the social engineers.)

To my knowledge, no libertarian Utopia has ever been described in a novel. I hope I shall never see one. It is my belief that utopias, by definition, *have to be* authoritarian in outlook. A libertarian would realize that he *cannot know*, and *nobody can ever know*, what conditions would make Mr Smith or Mrs Jones most happy. That, they can only know themselves, and even, only imperfectly. Consequently, no political system — certainly not a libertarian system — should ever undertake the production of human happiness as one of its goals. The only thing a libertarian system can provide is the *freedom* that will enable each individual to pursue his *own* goals in life, and *one* of these goals may be a state called happiness. But realizing that people living under the freest possible conditions will still be people, the libertarian writer who would *also* understand that many people would *fail* in reaching their goals.

Let's see no sugar-coated utopias, then. Let's not look for complete answers to every human problem in a libertarian society, even a society that only exists on paper.

## VI Against Totalitarianism

As I said, freedom-minded writers have generally done a much better job of describing what they are *against*. A few examples of very good and influential dystopian novels will illustrate this: *We* by the Russian writer Evgeny Zamiatin, *Kallocain* by the Swedish writer Karin Boye, *1984* by George Orwell, *Anthem* by Ayn Rand, and *One* by David Karp. All these are novels that describe the horrors of a totalitarian, collectivist system. Aldous Huxley, by the way, is a writer who illustrates the fact that dystopian novels are generally much more fascinating than utopian novels; almost thirty years after the success of *Brave New World*, he decided to create his own utopia, and the result was a very depressing novel called *Island*. In Huxley's vision of a perfect society, most of the technology of *Brave New World* was used to make people happy in a more serene, intellectual way than in the hedonistic society of that earlier novel. Coercion was alright, Huxley seems to be saying in *Island*, since the controlling power was used to *encourage* the inner growth of the victim, rather than stifle it. My reaction is that I would rather live in Huxley's dystopian world than in his utopian one.

## VII The Necessity For Conflict

What is it that makes it much more interesting to read about the society you *dread* than to read about the *perfect* society? I think that we, as human beings, *need* conflict, drama, excitement in our lives. We *can't* stay happy for long: if we can't find a good conflict, we'll create one. And so we don't enjoy reading about people who, basically, *have no problems*. Perfection and total harmony become unbearable after the first few hours. Take Ayn Rand's books as an example: how long could you stand living in "Galt's Gulch", the laissez faire retreat briefly described at one point in her portrayal of America's collapse in *Atlas Shrugged*? Wouldn't you rather live in the terrible, collectivistic world of *Anthem*, struggling to change it? Take, for that matter, Ayn Rand's characters: whom would you rather meet — Hank Reardon, the flawed, struggling hero or John Galt, the hero who has attained a state of perfection? To me, John Galt is not a living person at all, not one that I can — or would want to — identify with. Or, to quote Dr Camille Castorina's remark: "Could *you* sleep with Dagny Taggart?" (the heroine of the same novel). I'm quite sure that *I* couldn't.

Sometimes, I get the sneaking suspicion that *if*, by some social miracle, a completely libertarian society was established, we libertarians would be very disappointed. What would we fight for in such a society? Don't we actually, deep down, *need* the State, for some obscure psychological reason, as the enemy that satisfies all our needs for conflict and drama? Winning this struggle might mean — at least to the most dedicated among us — achieving our life's goal, and thereby *losing* our direction in life. I admit the danger is remote. Since there never *has* been a completely free society, I doubt there will ever be one.

## VIII Science Fiction and Freedom

Let me now, to try to conclude this rather rambling essay, sum up what I believe *should* be the direction of serious science fiction as applied to the problem of freedom.

There is *one* central question that has been bothering me from time to time about libertarian ideology, one that I have been pursuing in my own writing, without coming to a satisfactory conclusion. Do human beings actually *want* real freedom? If history is an indicator, we don't. No state would be able to exist for very long without at least the passive support of the majority of the population. We can't just blame the submission of most people on propaganda — people won't *respond* to propaganda if it doesn't in some way satisfy a psychological need. In fact, since the State has evolved in all modern nations in the course of a social process, one can argue that there is a large social demand, a good market, for those who want to exercise power. Many people seem to prefer the psychological security of slavery — in one form or another — to the insecurity of freedom. If this is true, it may mean that a completely free society is not possible — or even a good thing, by libertarian standards, since people should have the right to “buy” the social system that they want in the marketplace of political systems. If liberty is not a marketable commodity, too bad for us.

A question like this could be analyzed through the medium of science fiction, for instance, by putting two different societies side by side, and letting *real* people go through the complex emotional process of choosing between the two. As libertarians, we would risk the temptation of *not* giving the other side a fair chance, since we know what the decision *should* be. Let's try, anyway.

This is just one example of serious questions a libertarian would like to see handled in fiction. A more general theme would be to describe fictionally, as honestly and as clearly as we are able, what a libertarian society would look like, how it would work, what kind of people would live in it. Let's *not* construct a mundane version of *Paradise Regained*. Let's remember that, by and large, people do not live by their ideas; they live by their dreams — even libertarians do that, most of the time. And if — as I still, hesitantly, believe a libertarian society is really worthwhile we must be able to show that it will have room for *more* and *better* dreams than our present society, not just more efficient protection agencies. If I dream — as I sometimes do — of vast, unspoiled wildernesses where I can walk for days without meeting anyone, you must offer me something better than less taxation. People have problems, disappointments, sorrows and pleasures, most of which, for most of the time, are *much* more important to them than the level of taxation.

The social order, therefore, should only be a framework around the conflicts and tragedies of human life: let us, by all means, try to analyze, through the story, how the social order interacts with, and changes, the common beliefs and myths of society, the mores and the prejudices, but let us always remember that to the central character, these questions are much less important than questions

like: *Does* Tchirani really love him? Will he get the promotion he so richly deserves? And *will* he finally be able to get back at that bastard who cheated him out of half a year's earnings? Since there is no inherent and inevitable justice in the world, even freedom can't guarantee that each individual gets his just reward: that is part of the central tragedy of human life, which is that whether or not you *deserve* to die, sooner or later you will. If *that* is not a cruel injustice, nothing is!

No society — not even a libertarian one — will ever be peopled by dedicated libertarians. Even libertarians are not *completely* dedicated, when it comes to matters of central importance to you as a human animal. If you hurt me deeply enough, I will punch your nose in, in addition to carving my initials on your most sensitive parts, whether or not you have technically aggressed against me. And if I am swimming from a sinking ship, and spot a floating plank that will only hold one person, I doubt that I will stop to tread water while you and I discuss the origins of property rights as defined by natural law and as applied to that piece of floating furniture. (I know people do this in libertarian manifestos all the time, but I warn you here and now that I may not follow the textbook examples in such a situation.) Even dedicated libertarians do *not* spend most of their time thinking profound thoughts about property rights, defence agencies, and the actions of the invisible hand. They spend their time, like most people, following impulses, confused feelings, and now and then a rational thought. They spend it thinking about their status, their incomes, their love lives, their hatreds, their fear of cancer, their impossible dreams, and now and then doing something about these things.

## IX The Icelandic Sagas: A Model for Speculation

If I should try to think of a *model* for serious, libertarian science fiction, I can think of nothing better than the Icelandic sagas. These stories, written down between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, belong to the greatest works in world literature. Most of them are set in the Free Republic of Iceland, one of the freest countries in history, and this background is taken for granted, more than described. The stories themselves concern the struggles and the fates of great individuals as well as whole families. They are stories about love and hate, blood feuds and dramatic lawsuits — about people who are intensely and heroically *alive* in a free society. To this model, I would like to add Robert Heinlein's insight into the nuts and bolts of a technological society, and the social inventiveness of Jack Vance, possibly the best science fiction writer today; and if it all comes together correctly, I would expect some great libertarian science fiction stories that just *might* make a few converts. They should be stories about the *visions* that fill people's lives. They should *not* praise the glories of freedom and the marketplace as much as they answer the question: “Alright, now you have *got* your freedom. What do you *do* with it?”

If nobody else writes these stories, I suppose I'll have to do it myself.