

Philipp Kneis

Finding Atlantis Instead of Utopia: From Plato to Starfleet and Starfleet Command¹

The longer and complete version of this talk can be found in the following book:

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see also: pjcx.com/eau

1. Introduction

America has always been a utopian idea. The American Dream, real or not, is still seen by many, especially immigrants, as a dream of economic opportunity and of democracy. In the following, I will be considering in how far that utopian vision of democracy is realized in the two biggest American science fiction franchises, *Star Trek* and *Stargate*.

What is striking now is that both shows are military shows. *Star Trek* is set in the future, *Stargate* in the present time. Both regularly deal with questions from the utopian repertoire: Like in the works of Thomas More and Jonathan Swift and Tommaso Campanella, different worlds are imagined that show rule that is sometimes better, sometimes worse, but in any case, different.

Specifically *Star Trek* sets out to “seek out new worlds and new civilizations, and to boldly go” where no human soldier has ever gone before. When Gene Roddenberry set his “wagon train to the stars” in motion in the 1960s, he created a space western that deliberately invoked the metaphor of the frontier, the “final frontier,” to frame science fiction within familiar terms. And even though the original *Star Trek* is set in the 23rd century, we basically follow a (maybe more benevolent) US cavalry into a new imaginary American West, filled with different kinds of Indians, called aliens, and utopian islands, called planets.

How, now, is American democracy represented in these shows? In the center of the narration of both these and other shows can be found either a military and/or a small chosen group of people. Both phenomena do not necessarily depict democracy at work. They depict rule that is either based on merit or other kinds of selection processes, that is deeply hierarchical and fundamentally heroic. These people watch over the universe, they are the forefront in wars against overwhelming enemies. They are not necessarily perfect individuals, but their suitability to lead the fight is rarely if ever challenged and will not be overthrown. That kind of rule is solidly aristocratic, as it constitutes the rule of the *aristoi*, the best; it is never democratic in the sense of involving the entirety of a people, the *demos*.

This eclecticism of the groups of warriors/guardians, the elements of chosen-ness and aristocratic rule can be said to be inspired by Plato and discourses surrounding the cornerstone of all utopian tales, his story of Atlantis and Ancient Athens.

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2. Plato's Atlantis Story as Political Science Fiction

Plato's Atlantis story it is clearly fictitious, yet nevertheless functions as a political metaphor, modeling Athens after Sparta, and Atlantis after the seafaring Persia and the more prosperous Athens of the late 5th century (Welliver 42). The story is told in two dialogs, *Timaeus* and *Critias*, the latter ending abruptly. The context of the narration is that of a follow-up thought experiment on the ideal state described in the *Republic*. Stated very clearly, Socrates desires to observe the ideal state in action (*Timaeus* 19b-c), i.e. war, so as to evaluate its merit. The story is told by a character called Critias, thus allowing an identification with one from a group of 30 tyrants that conspired to destroy Athenian democracy.

According to the *Republic*, Children are supposed to be told myths (*Republic* 377a) explaining the structure of the city, and especially their function within society. These myths have to be controlled by the state (*Republic* 377c). One of the most central of such myths is that all citizens are brothers, but that the creator-god has mixed gold into those destined to reign (*Republic* 415a), who are then guardians (*phylankes*) by nature (*Timaeus* 18a). This divine choice leaves not much open to interpretation: Some are chosen to rule, all others to be ruled. Violating that truth is injustice, is a sin, which follows from accepting that the greatest evil would be that which would disunite a state (*Republic* 462a; Popper 95-96). Unity is welcome, diversity and dissent are not.

Survival is clearly tied to an essential, almost eugenic element *within* (the gold); the loss of which will lead to the downfall of the specific group of humans. On *Star Trek*, this motif occurs in discussions of eugenics and drugs. On *Stargate*, this is even more prominent.

For instance, the Ancients, an early "evolution" of humans who built the *Stargate* network and also Atlantis, possess a specific gene which allows them to operate their technology. This gene has been lost subsequently amongst the diverse human populations, and their societies have on many occasions descended into primitivism. Only specific individuals, such as Jack O'Neill, possess that gene and are thus chosen.

In another example, humanoid populations are "polluted" either by an insect, or by a serpent. This biological corruption changes their societies and makes them prey on ordinary humans.

Furthermore, the technologically advanced Asgard civilization is destroyed through genetic cloning experiments; their physical degradation leads to mental and societal degeneration and their ultimate demise.

3. Atlantis Transformed

This narrative of purity and impurity can also be found in Thomas More's *Utopia*, in which the city is controlled by social engineering, especially in a rejection of the family and the repression of individualism (cf. Pradeau 48). This utopian engineering appears to follow the same recipe as Plato's. Control over the family means not just social but eugenic control: Should "breeding" not succeed, according to Plato, this will result in a decay of the human material out of which the state is built. Naturally, this follows from Plato's analogy of the state with the human soul: An individual human soul is more important than whatever components contribute to it; yet should the basis of it be flawed or corrupt, the soul itself suffers. Liking the state to a soul, it becomes clear that it is the state that is important, not its citizens; yet the corruption of the citizens, morally and biologically, will lead to the downfall of the state. Moral corruption, though, has a clear source: As commented by Karl Popper, "the history of the downfall of the first or perfect state is nothing but the history of the biological degeneration of the race of men" (Popper 83).

4. Utopia Deformed

When we now look at aspects of leadership and politics, it seems that the narration in the two science fiction examples is set inside the military, that democracy hardly ever gets a fair chance for balanced reporting, and that generally, politics and political discourse outside of the military chain of command are ridiculed, vilified or simply not shown at all.

This fixation on mere leadership can already be found in Plato's *Republic*, which boasts an almost exclusive focus on the rulers (Popper 47). Questions of rule are reduced to finding the best ruler; whereas the role of institutions, which are critical for any true democracy, is downplayed. By personalizing rule and focusing on what Karl Popper has called "unchecked sovereignty" (Popper 129), by eliminating true education (Popper 141-45) and thus aiming to perpetuate a totalitarian system, Plato's *Republic* describes exactly the opposite of what would constitute a democracy.

It could be said that there even lies a latent totalitarianism in the mere establishment and dreaming of an ideal society, a society that cannot, and should not be improved upon *by definition*, as it is *the best*, and changing the best of all worlds would indeed be a crime, even a sin, as maintained by Plato. Of course, democratic societies are not perfect — they are, to use Popper's term, *open*, constantly evolving, constantly changing; the very opposite of Platonic thinking. It is the very *imagining of perfection*, and the resulting idea of utopian engineering (Popper 167), which create a new authority and precludes discussion afterwards. Putting such a scheme into existence necessitates an act of authority, not consensus, as put by Yves Charbit:

The City is not built on consensus among the citizens, but is imposed by an individual who assumes the right to re-think man and society as a philosopher who possesses truth and reason and wants to establish them in the City. (Charbit 232)

Or more bluntly, by Karl Popper:

[T]he Utopian attempt to realize an ideal state, using a blueprint of society as a whole, is one which demands a strong centralized rule of the few, and which therefore is likely to lead to a dictatorship. (Popper 169) [...] Any difference of opinion between Utopian engineers must therefore lead, in the absence of rational methods, to the use of power instead of reason, i.e. to violence. (Popper 171)

This negates the possibility of the very existence of the ideal state for any length of time without descending into totalitarianism. The act of foundation is an act of constitutional violence, especially as lying is seen as one of the prerogatives and even duties of the leader (Popper 146f) and the disabling of dissent does not curb but in fact merely postpones it until it may finally erupt from the systemic distrust of human individuality. It is thus not incidental that Plato, in envisioning his utopia, combines this with a demand for not just social but biological engineering. His Brahmin state is founded upon a clear separation of powers, yet in the sense that power is hoarded amongst an upper caste naturally seen as superior to the rest. Education thus has only one purpose: As it has been put by Neil Postman: "As our first systematic fascist, Plato wishe[s] education to produce philosopher kings" (Postman 172). The lower classes hardly figure at all in this depiction of an ideal commonwealth. Herein, wealth is taken away from the commoners, and all the benefits of his "republic" remain only concentrated amongst the very few, the rulers. All this may again be attributed to the biologicistic model of the state: Why should limbs and lower body functions be seen on the same level as the brain?

How does this relate to the television franchises under discussion? Both *Star Trek* and *Stargate* are military shows. On *Star Trek*, the Platonic legacy is found less in the actual

argument of the episodes, which regularly speak out against exploitation of minorities and lower classes, but on the structural level:

Rarely if ever are human civilians outside of the military-philosophical complex centrally featured. If so, they are oftentimes immediate family, love interests, or Federation officials. The latter, in most cases, appear power-hungry, corrupt, or plainly incompetent. All the captains in all the *Star Trek* series are philosopher kings, their ships are little Platonic *politeiai*, with few exceptions.

Starfleet officers usually do not require money on their ships, and they usually work for other than monetary gains. Yet in the outside world, there appears to be money in the form of gold-pressed Latinum, especially since *Deep Space Nine*. That may appear to be a contradiction, yet it follows the Platonic logic that the guardian caste has no money (Plato *Republic*, 417a; Demandt 81). Crew quarters are usually rather Spartan (sic) by design, the acquisition of personal wealth surely not being a priority. Sharing appears common — of property, not of women and children. Therein the franchise departs from Plato.

The *Stargate* franchise is set within a military context as well, even if non-military scientists and academics are part of the respective teams. These scientist-philosophers likewise are capable fighters, and they are as much part of the guardian-warrior caste structure as the true soldiers. Yet *Stargate* goes further in adopting Platonic thought by incorporating even more specific elements of his philosophy:

Unlike Starfleet, *Stargate* Command (SGC) is a secret organization. Lies, meant to cover up any leaks, are continually fed to the general public. The President is the greatest protector of the secrecy and mission of the SGC. Critics of the program are shown to be power-hungry, their arguments for transparency are ridiculed, demonized, and painted threatening homeworld security. The verdict, time and again, is that the military knows best, and its secret operations should be left out of any political discussions whatsoever. “We the people” apparently are not truly sovereign and have to be protected not just only from evil out there but also from ourselves, lest there be panic.

In an important and almost singular departure from Plato’s demands, though, both franchises basically identify with a growing empire, whereas Plato preferred the small, stable city state. Part of the reason Atlantis is seen as degenerate is its being an empire; and by fighting it, Ancient Athens became one itself. Platonic isolationism, though, is fought vigorously on *Star Trek*, such as during the establishment of the Federation, likewise on *Stargate*, where the policy to keep the *Stargate* open and preemptively bring the war to the enemy is maintained over the course of the series. Poignantly, at the end of *Stargate: Atlantis*, the city of Atlantis itself is brought home to earth, anchoring outside San Francisco, which in its sister franchise is home to Starfleet.

5. Finding Atlantis in All the Wrong Places

Science fiction may seem to be setting out to discover strange, new worlds. The importance of science for these fictions probably goes back to Bacon’s *New Atlantis*, wherein Bacon takes Plato’s postulated love for truth as a veritable love for truth proper, whereas the purpose of Plato’s philosopher state could be said to be rather the opposite, namely a love for only that kind of “truth” that would maintain his ideal state.

Plato looms over the genre like a curse. As the inventor and most successful propagator of fictions of the ideal polity, it cannot be surprising that his influence is alive and well. More and Bacon are footnotes to Plato in that they set up crucial Platonic ideas on their imaginary islands, which, in Bacon’s case, even directly refer to the source. Yet it is even more so the

quest for the ideal state itself which, as seen above, is not as *eu-topian* as is always apparently being assumed in a benevolent and hopeful use of the word “utopia.” In looking for a utopia, it appears that most roads nevertheless lead to Atlantis, and with it, to Plato’s state.

The utopian elements associated with *Star Trek* are usually always named as peace, prosperity, and multiculturalism; yet the one value usually touted the most in America — and let me add, rightly so — namely democracy, is conspicuously absent. Were we now to truly read *Star Trek* as a utopia in the classical sense, as direct political commentary, could we then not justifiably read it as endorsing a Platonic, militarized state devoid of democracy or lower classes of any real meaning for society?

America, in these fictions, is not imagined as a democracy. The old subaltern question about who is represented, and whether the subaltern could speak, would be allowed to speak (Spivak), generates rather uncomfortable results in this very case. Of course, neither of the two franchises *consciously* advocates an anti-democratic stance. Yet such a stance is deeply embedded into the framework of the series, and it is at least interesting to see that apparently it is militarized politics and not democracy at work being depicted in two key American television franchises belonging to the utopian genre. Mere hope, it seems, is not enough to build the perfect society; especially if the cultural tools to imagine it are borrowed from one of the greatest enemies of democracy itself.

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