

SWIIDL



#23

Spring 2014

Table of Contents

Editorial:	May Day Balagan
Thrashing Trufen:	The Way the Future Isn't
Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings:	a modest column by Lester Rainsford
Flogging a Dead Trekkie:	Violating the Fables Norms of Science Fiction Part 6 of 8 - Truly Hard Science
Scribbling on the Bog Wall:	Letters of Comment
Endnote:	Back to the USSR?

SWILL is published quarterly (Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter) along with an annual every February - in other words, five times per year.

SWILL

Issue #23 Annual - Spring 2014

Copyright © 1981 - 2014 VileFen Press

a division of Klatha Entertainment an Uldune Media company

swill.uldunemedia.ca

Editorial: May Day Balagan

Neil Williams

It's May Day (or at least it will have been when this issue goes live). And this issue is a May Day themed issue. Now, when I first informed Lester of this (with a front cover preview) his response was, "Truly alarming. Lester will beware of ice picks." I informed him that the issue would not toe any Bolshevik, Stalinist, etc. party lines and that he should not worry regarding his (possibly) Trotskyite leanings and that he was free to spout any false consciousness, counter-revolutionary, politically incorrect (in the original sense of the term) drivel that he so chose to do. He could even be reactionary and pretend that the May Day theme did not exist. There would be no penalties, assassination attempts, or one-way trips to a gulag.

So, why a May Day themed issue? Why not? It is the true international day of labour, after all. And while, our masters and their fellow travellers have been gleefully chortling their victory over "communism" for the past 20 plus years; all is not right in the world. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the Western democracies have been eroding democracy, in the USA, it is getting harder to even pretend that they are not living under a plutocracy masquerading as a democracy. Here in Canada, it is a little better, but the current government has centralised power, and with the recent Fair Elections Act (read - unfair elections act) is further withering away our democratic system in this country (the governing Conservatives are now back-peddling on this legislation - we can only wait and see, and hope). The growth of the Right-To-Work movement within the Western democracies is also unsettling; where this ideology has been transformed into legislation, the result has been the right to work for less, reduced minimum wages, decreased health and safety in the workplace, and laws that prohibit union membership. At the same time, for the majority of the population within the Western democracies, the actual standard of living has stagnated¹; taxes may be down, but user fees have gone up, and

¹ While there is the recent study out that states that the Canadian middle class is doing okay, what the study really says is that the Canadian middle class is just not doing as badly as the middle class in other Western

wages are barely keeping pace with inflation (if you are lucky) or dropping behind the rate of inflation. Add to that the fact that industrial capitalism is not very healthy, remember the recent Great Recession, and our entire global economic system is heading towards a wall at high speed; increased overproduction and overconsumption will not save it, it only accelerates our velocity and the wall is still there. FYI: that wall is the fact that we live on a finite planet with finite resources - something that is ignored by most economic theories or classified as an externality (therefore external to economic formulae and therefore unimportant) because most of our economic theories claim, as a "scientific fact" that it is possible to have infinite growth within a finite and closed system.

So, maybe the Western democracies were not as "victorious" as they have claimed to have been. True, it has been a victory for the top 10% and the corporate oligarchies. But has it been a victory for the average person; I say that it has not been. I say that we should re-examine the so-called left.

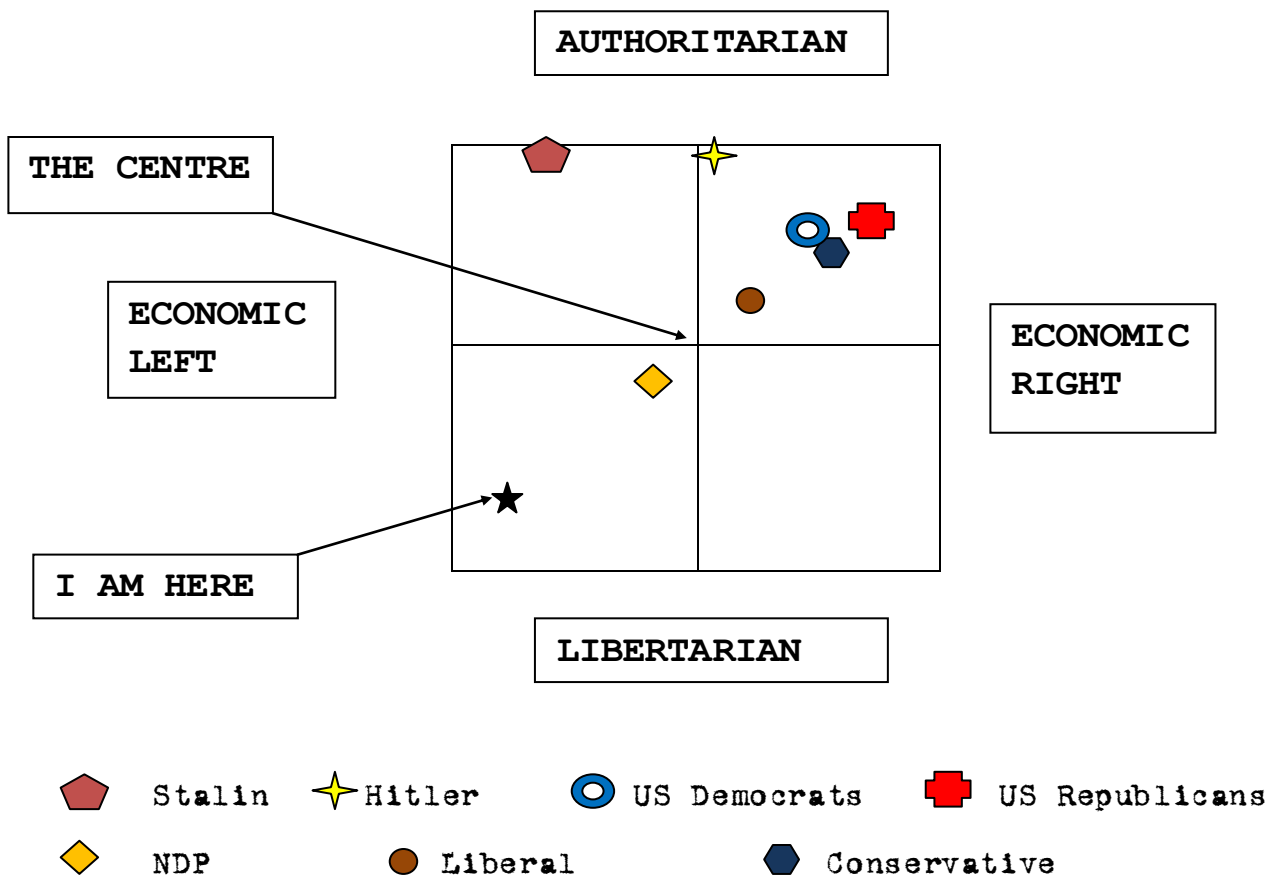
Before, I continue, I just want to place this on record (to reduce the fear that the previous sentence - as well as the theme of this issue - would induce for American readers): I have not, nor have I ever been, a member of a communist party.

I have however, in the past, hung out with, had as friends, dated, fucked, and lived-with card-carrying members of communist parties. In years gone by I have dated and slept with women who were members of the Communist Party of Canada (then Moscow line), the Communist Party of Canada: Marxist-Leninist (then Albanian line), the Workers Communist Party of Canada (an odd blend of Maoism and feminism in Ontario and Maoism and soft separatism in Quebec), and the Canadian Party of Labour (neo-Stalinist). In spite of the best attempts by these women, I never did join a communist party. As a sidebar: as it turns out I have never dated or slept with a Trotskyite as I was always deemed too politically incorrect by this variant (perhaps that should go on my bucket list). And, to place further fear into Americans as to my ideological contamination, most of my former commie

democracies. Not declining as badly as, say the USA middle class, does not mean that the Canadian middle class is doing well.

girlfriends were members of the (Moscow line) Communist Party of Canada.

Why was I spending time with radical leftists; I was a radical leftist myself, just not a communist. As my former partners have told me, I am a petty bourgeois idealist individualist, with no appreciation of the vanguard of the proletariat or the discipline of the Party (and for the women involved in the CPC:M-L and the Workers Communist Party, I was also a crypto-class traitor). In other words, I am an anarchist - more specifically, an anarcho-syndicalist (not because I believe that unions will set us free, but because bottom-up workplace organisations are probably the best foundation - initially - for the re-organisation of society after the social revolution becomes a political one). I also at times describe myself as a libertarian-socialist - as this more clearly states where I sit for some people.



The above chart goes by several names, some of them branded, but it adds an extra axis to the old Left/Right axis. Remember, how they used to say that the far Right and the far Left are one and the same - far Right being fascism and far Left being communism. The addition of the Authoritarian/Libertarian axis², illustrates why that appeared so. For example, both Hitler and Stalin were strong Authoritarians, of the type we call totalitarians; Stalin was well over to the Economic Left, but Hitler wasn't of the far Economic Right, he was more a centrist on economic policies.

Regardless as claims made by the Conservative Party of Canada, the political centre remains where it always has been; this party is no longer anywhere close to the political centre. In the case of the Liberal Party of Canada, it used to sit at the political centre, or in a tight orbit around the political centre, but it has moved to the right to occupy the position once held by the old Progressive Conservative Party. The NDP used to be a little further to the left and has drifted closer to the centre over the past two decades.

The USA Democratic and Republican parties are shown here to illustrate why there is the Canadian joke about these two parties: "What's the difference between a USA Democrat and a USA Republican?" "A USA Democrat is sort of like the left wing of the Conservative Party and a USA Republican is sort of like the right wing of the Conservative Party."

Me there with my little black star in the lower left (Libertarian Left) quadrant am in favour of collective ownership of property (we are not talking about having to share your toothbrush or underwear communally, people) and limited interference by the State (preferably no State, though there may still have to be a quasi-State bottom-up organisation). That has always put me in conflict with most other varieties of socialism (including the

² Authoritarian: you believe that the government should be able to interfere in or tell people how to live their lives, up to, in the extreme, where the State governs all aspects of the individual's life, the totality of the citizen's life, or totalitarianism. Libertarian: you believe that the government should have little interference in the individual's life, up to, in the extreme, zero influence or anarchism (which means without rulers or without government).

ones that call themselves communism) as these types of socialism tend toward being more authoritarian. While, I do not support their means, or their ends (usually totalitarian); I do support their views regarding property and collective economic security as being beneficial for society as a whole.

So, according to neo-liberal wisdom, socialism is a failed system and should not even be considered for the future. Really? It is true that the state socialist (what anarchists call the forms of government that called themselves "communist" and which the Trots call "degenerate workers states" or "state capitalism") systems of the Soviet Union and its client states did fail. But what about the democratic socialism; did that fail? No, it didn't.

In Europe, where they are not the current government, where they are not part of a current coalition government, they are the major party or parties in opposition. And where there are centre-right governments, these tend to be lead by Christian Democratic parties - which support a mild form of social conservatism and embrace welfare state policies - that really are centre-right on the political spectrum (from a Conservative Party perspective, Christian Democrats are at best, almost like the Liberal Party, and at worst, leftist Papists).

The neo-liberal academics and pundits state that the works of Karl Marx are also a failure and should be ignored as the rubbish that they are. Again, this needs to be questioned. Marx was an economist, a historian, a philosopher, a political scientist, a sociologist, and a political activist. Of his works, what are most remembered are his works of political science (e.g. The Communist Manifesto and Capital) and that political emphasis bleeds through into his other works; this is because Marx viewed Industrialism as the dominant and most society-changing economic system of his time and thus the political, social, and economic relationships of this system were thrust into the foreground. There are indeed flaws in the work of Marx, but the majority of these flaws are rooted in the level of knowledge that existed in the 19th Century (in other words, he was not alone in this failing and his opponents of the same time period - and those of today who draw upon theoretical foundations frozen in the

temporal amber of the 19th and 18th centuries - are equally flawed).

What was the centre of the matter, according to Marx? That economic systems are, at their foundations, relationships between the means of production (everything that goes into creating goods - the resources extracted, processed, manufactured, transported, distributed, the money or capital used, etc. - except for the labour) and the society that they exist within. Within Industrial Capitalism there are two classes, the bourgeoisie (who own the means of production whose income is based upon that ownership - therefore they technically do not have to work, they can hire others to do the work for them) and the proletariat (who work the means of production and sell their labour - physical and intellectual - to the bourgeoisie in exchange for wages/salaries).³ Marx claimed this relationship between the classes was exploitive because the proletariat are never paid the full value of their labour - this gap is, in part, where the profit comes from. Okay, I think that is enough to work with for the purposes of this piece...

So what did Marx predict? One: he predicted that the circumstances of the proletariat (the 16 hour day, 6 days a week, for less than \$1.00 per day, and living in cramped and filthy slums) would, over time, continue to deteriorate until it reached a point where the proletariat would rise up, overthrow the bourgeoisie, and take control of the means of production, creating a classless socialist state. That the bourgeoisie would never permit any reforms (keep in mind that at the time that in most of industrial Europe, unions were illegal and in some nations the organising of a union was a capital crime) and that the only way that the proletariat could improve their lot would be to unite as a class and have a revolution. Two: that capital would, over time, become more centralised and the ranks of the

³ Marx also had the sub-classes of the petty-bourgeoisie (small scale owners and self employed) and the lumpen-proletariat (unskilled and uneducated labour). Max Weber was one of Marx's near-contemporaries who strongly debated Marx's classes; however, Weber does not negate Marx, he argues that Marx's categories of class in an industrial society are incomplete. Weber is often misquoted as an anti-Marxist in American political thought - this is due to bad translations, misquoting, and cherry-picking - which is erroneous; Weber was critical of Marx, but not an anti-Marxist.

bourgeoisie would shrink; that the bourgeoisie would gobble each other up (economically) over time and that there would be a consolidation of capital.

So, Prediction Two was on the mark; this is 100% what has happened and continues to happen worldwide. Marx was right. Prediction One, not so much; there are two factors to consider here - the Marx factor and the union factor.

The Marx factor is that Marx was not just an academic and theorist; he was also a political activist. His theory may not have gained the prominence that it did had he been content to sit back and just discuss this theory with fellow academics. But no, he was involved in spreading his theory in the fertile environment of the Industrial Revolution. Plus, his was one of many forms of socialism that existed (and there were the anarchists too) but Marxist socialism gained ground on the basis that it was not linked to a particular denomination of Christianity or to a particular variety of philosophical thought, it was supposedly objective and scientific.⁴

The union factor was linked to the Marx factor through fear. The growth of all forms of socialism during the 19th Century created fear among the bourgeoisie and (like the present) those highly paid members of the proletariat who manage and operate the means of production for the bourgeoisie - after all, there had been the Paris Commune, and calls for radical overthrow of industrial capitalist governments, and the literature (especially the drawings and cartoons) published by and for the socialist reader that depicted these elites being disembowelled and hung from the streetlamps by their own intestines. And fear of outright socialist revolution produced a climate of grudging compromise or negotiation on issues like wages and working conditions. In the 1870s the first legislation is passed that legalised unions (or at least decriminalised unions). However, legalisation did not mean acceptance. All the way up to the 1950s there have been strikes in industrial nations where the police or military were called in to bust the strike and weapons were used on unarmed strikers. Certainly, prior to WWII in the USA, it was still

⁴ Not really; but certainly more objective and scientific than the other forms of socialism at the time.

dangerous to organise unions; the Pinkerton's Agency used to proudly declare that they regularly killed (usually by that old American favourite of lynching) union leaders - as part of promoting their firm - hire us to deal with your pinko commie striking workers.

Nevertheless, working conditions, wages, benefits, etc. did rise during and after WWII and throughout the Cold War. It gave rise to the oxymoron, in Marxist terms, of the middle-class worker. So the second prediction of Marx did not come true, yet (we'll get to that in a moment). However, everything was heading in that direction Marx had predicted until the elites and governments (after all, the government is supposed to represent the people too) fearing revolution or civil unrest, allowed for reforms. However, getting half of your predictions correct and the other half partially correct (Marx did state what would have to occur for his first prediction to be incorrect; he just didn't accept that the bourgeoisie would ever be willing to compromise and allow for modest reforms to industrial capitalism as a probable event) does not equal a total fail. This is also why the works of Marx are still examined to the present day.

When the neo-liberals talk about the failure of Marx and the failure of socialism, what they are really saying is that the 20th Century variants of Marxist theory (Leninism, Maoism, Stalinism, Trotskyism, etc.) and the state socialist systems that they advocated and/or created failed. And that is true, but only partially true. While these Marxist variants may not have succeeded in creating any classless societies or workers' paradises, they were very successful in creating some valid critiques to industrial capitalism. I will focus on one of these critiques as it is relevant today - it is also been deemed a failed theory by neo-liberal, upper-right quadrant of the political spectrum folks; I shall briefly discuss Imperialism by Lenin.

In brief, and not to do the work justice, Lenin states that classic colonialism created the means by which industrial capitalist colonial powers could soften the effect of exploitation of the proletariat at home, by exporting the harshest forms of exploitation to their colonies. This created a

"labour aristocracy" back in home countries that was insulated from feeling the full extent of capitalist exploitation and alienation. Lenin called this the highest stage of capitalism and predicted that it would be the final stage of capitalism (he believed that WWI would, upon its conclusion, lead to the end of colonial empires and thus increased exploitation of the proletariat in the industrial homelands). He was wrong there, in part.

What happened after WWI was the transition from classical colonialism (where you physically occupied the colony nation and had expenses such as colonial administration, military, etc.) to neo-colonialism (pioneered by the USA and the foundation of their "empire"). In neo-colonialism, if you control the economy of a less powerful nation-state, or the key exports, you don't have to physically occupy it; you don't have all those extra expenses and can often work out a deal where the neo-colonial nation-state pays you to have one of your military base on their soil (for their protection). Lenin didn't see neo-colonialism coming, so he was in error. However, as the developing world continues to develop, there have been impacts back in the developed nations as those manufacturing (and other jobs) move to the developed world (where they can engage in 19th & early 20th century labour practices, with little or no environmental regulations) which has resulted in the de-industrialisation of the developed nations and increased unemployment and under-employment. So, old Lenin, on this one is partially wrong, and partially right, and we'll just have to see what happens down the road.

This is a long and drawn out chaotic mess of an editorial, but I will make the attempt to bundle it into some sort of a conclusion. The central point I am making is that regardless of what our powers-that-be state, what our media says, what the tame academics and experts do claim - socialism and the works of Marx are not failed theories, are not failed political systems, and should not be (and are not) consigned to the rubbish bin of history. That the "victory" of industrial capitalism is a temporary one (we can only hope) as it is an unsustainable and unstable economic system that will, eventually fail - and fail very badly when it does. Even state socialism has had some triumphs, and while this is not a preferred system (by me; I

don't care too much for vanguards, dictatorships of the proletariat, or totalitarianism); it is a system that could better address the global problems that we are currently ignoring, far better than industrial capitalism is capable of.

At some point, in the next twenty years, we will have to face those global problems and we will have to make major changes to our global societies if we are going to save this technological global civilisation. And when it comes to that task, industrial capitalism (centred on competition, hierarchy, inequality, etc.) is "just in over its head" and will have to be discarded. With hope, it will be one of the democratic forms of socialism that prevail.

So, to each and every one of us - even the bourgeois reactionaries - on this pale blue dot we call Earth; Happy May Day, comrades...

Thrashing Trufen: The Way the Future Isn't

Neil Williams

Way, way back, to be precise 33 years ago, I wrote an editorial for SWILL #4. This editorial lamented that the political views of the SF of the 1940s and their hopes for the future, were not present in the SF of the early 1980s. Upon re-reading, it is very obvious that the reading of Pohl's The Way the Future Was must have been relatively fresh in my young brain. Nevertheless, much of what I ranted about in that editorial remains true today, altered slightly, but still relevant. And so, where do I begin...

Perhaps, I should start with what type of future do we want?

From most science fiction, it would seem that we want a future not too different from right now, just with more and better gadgets. You want your flying car, mind-internet interface, easy-peasy nanotech, some bioengineering (you that your life is extended), and tame AI to do the tasks that you think you are too important to do. So you just zip out to the mega-mall to consume, etc. in what is still some sort of capitalist economy except that everyone appears to work as hard as the average doctor, lawyer, business executive in a daytime soap. Yeah, that is just some escapist, comic book-like, daydream. Any of these changes are going to have a major impact on society as a whole, both positive and negative - i.e. nothing is going to be really similar to the present.

What would I like to see; what type of future do I want? There are many things I would like to see, but at the top of my list is World Government. We really need this and the sooner the better.

Now, I realise that on all sides of the political spectrum, there are those who strongly oppose this idea, sometimes for rational and sometimes for irrational reasons. For example, the conspiracy theories that world government is a leftist plot to establish global communism or that it is an elite/corporate plot for world domination, that it is a secular-humanist plot, etc. ad nauseum... The fact is (and that is why all these conspiracy

theories are flowing on the internet) that we are moving in this direction anyway. Like it or not, the world is stumbling toward political integration, in a two-steps forward, one-step back, a jump to the left, and a step to the right, stuttering fashion; we don't exactly want to do it, but we are being pulled or pushed in that direction by the forces of our own making.

Right now, the world is completely dysfunctional. Image that you lived in a neighbourhood, where everyone is armed to the teeth with walled yards, and some people can afford better arms and security devices than others. If your neighbour is playing their music too loud, you machine gun their home (and hope that they don't have superior firepower to lay waste to you, your home, and your family). This is not the type of neighbourhood that people live in (in Canada) and this is not the type of neighbourhood we want or tolerate in this country and in most⁵ of the developed world. No, we have restrictions of what weaponry individual citizens may own and we have police and the rule of law - however imperfect that may be, it is the preferred way to live over the armed camp perpetual warzone.

But, internationally, we live in that dysfunctional neighbourhood. And it is time that that changed. Not just because of the waste of warfare, but also because we have serious global problems that cannot be addressed in our current state of a massively dysfunctional global society.

So, what can be done?

Fortunately, a plan does exist. It is only partially worked out in detail and that is because, those finer details require serious negotiation and discussion between the nation-states, and that hasn't happened yet. So what is the plan?

It is the UN Parliamentary Assembly. This would create an extra body to the UN that would act as a "house of commons" with the General Assembly being like a "house of lords". Note to Americans: there has been little involvement by the USA in this discussion - USA governments have been in total opposition - and most of the work in this area has been done by nations who have a Westminster or Westminster-like parliamentary system, and the proposed changes reflect this.

⁵ USA as the exception where this is de jure tolerated to some extent (and is how paradise works in the eyes of the USA Libertarian Party).

So the Secretary-General is the head of state, with powers similar to that of a Governor-General in Canada. The General Assembly would operate like the UK House of Lords or the Canadian Senate; each nation having a single seat and the representative appointed by the ruling government of the particular nation-state. The Parliamentary Assembly would be composed of elected representatives (on an agreed upon formula, more on that later), like a Westminster-style legislative assembly. Initially, the Parliamentary Assembly would have consultative powers to the General Assembly and, over time, more power would be transferred to it and its councils and commissions (ministries and departments) until it was the major governing body of the planet; the Security Council would also be phased out and abolished during this transition.

The formula for electing representatives to the Parliamentary Assembly is one of the bones of contention. China and India are in favour of a pure representation by population; this would give these two nations a majority voting block, so that formula is not going to happen. When the USA does speak on this issue, they make it clear that they will only support a one nation, one seat formula (which would render the entire exercise of a Parliamentary Assembly as futile). So, the only formulas that would be acceptable by the majority of the world's nations would be one of the weighted systems that balance representation by population with annual contributions to the UN (wealthier nations pay more) - some of these weighted systems also include factors such as the level of freedom, number of years as a UN member, and so on, but rep by pop and UN contributions are the two major factors.

Nevertheless, it is a workable system, with international precedents, e.g. the European Parliament. Is it perfect? Nope; then again, nothing is perfect. And there would be bumps and stumbles along the way, that is for certain. And it would not be utopia, or even utopian; it would be pragmatic and rational and would provide us with better tools to resolve the global problems of our age. And we would still have problems and issues; there would be regions of the world who would be winners and others that would be losers, some intrusion of the UN into the sphere of domestic politics (Russians would be pressured not to discriminate against gays, Saudis would be pressured to increase the status of women, USA would be pressured to reduce the amount of arms their individual citizens possess, China would be pressured on human rights, Canada would be pressured to properly address the issues of aboriginal Canadians, and so on). I'm not

saying that this would be perfect and that everyone would be happy with it all of the time and all will be absolutely wonderful; I am saying that it would be better than what we currently have. Just for a moment, think about what could be accomplished if there was a way to address global issues, if there was the rule of law worldwide, if the trillions spent annually on arms could be spent elsewhere.

A world government, as proposed via the UN Parliamentary Assembly, while it is a difficult task, is also an achievable goal. Peace and love, espoused by many of the world's religions and by the hippies way back in the 1960s, would be great; though this is not immediately anywhere on the horizon. However, tolerance and co-operation (with degree of justice and fairness) -- that we can do (if we choose to do so); it is after all how many of our current nation-state democratic governments work.

And for those readers who wonder why a petty bourgeois anarchist is advocating for more government, there is a method to the contradiction; perhaps then there could be an actual social evolution that leads to a political evolution without all the mess of an actual revolution. And if not, then it is pragmatic; when the social revolution comes, there is only one government to be overthrown.

Pissing on a Pile of Old Amazings

...a modest column by Lester Rainsford

Ah, see splendid. So much Old Stlye Thought in the last Swill. Comrade Lester is here to correnct you and reeducate you to Think New Model Thought (the Only Thought You sShould Be Thinking). You capitalist rning-dog revisionists you.

Taral: TL;DR. Your extended ap9ologia fro inappropriate historical revisionism is noted and dismissed without deemed worthy of a critical criticism. There is only one past. It is clear. Do not muddy the water past, or the biting fish of the pond of ideologically pure water will bite your fingers off and pluck your eyeballs out. Promise.

Taral and Chairman Swill: get a room already. yhour petty squabbles block the dialectical unfolding of necessary and self efident class struggle.

Lloyd: points deducted for ~~reading comprehension~~ an unfortnate tendency to misread Comrade Lester. Comrade Lester did not say that science fiction was obsolete. Lester d said that some SF was obsolete, and other SF was irrelevant. Llloyd, are you a part of the bourgeois reactionary anti-sicence-fiction tendency? Be very careful, or things will go seriously with you. The camps are not full, and due to the gloriously clear thinking of Comrade Lester, there will always be spaces open for comrades who need some e additional enlightenment.

Ah, so, irrelevant SF. Les Comrade Lester denounces the so-called bbourgeois western "Mil SF" as being irrelevant to the clear progress of people's SF. Perhaps at some time in the prerevolutionary past there was some relevance to "Mil SF". Gordon Dickson in some moments of class consciousness did examine the military mind and the evolution of the human state to a higher level of social organization. However, you take your Ringos and your Webers and your runnyng dog Lackeys, and you have trash designed to mislead the proletariat and opiate to the masses of oppressed.

There is no "science fiction" in "Mil SF". It's a formula.

Your protagonist is a great military mind. Therefore everyone at the academy hates them, except for a couple of loyal sidekicks. The academy authorities have it in for your protagonist, and there are class enemies who are enemies in the class because of their higher class and jealousy. (This part actually hews to Correct Thinking. It is an exception.)

Your protagonist knows exactly how to fix things to make the world run correctly, but of course it is a counterrevolutionary, reactionary model straight from the bourgeois imagination.

At some event or another, your protagonist has to take control because everyone else is struck dead. Your protagonist shows an individualist genius in resolving the situation. Your protagonist is not rewarded for this; or, actually, is rewarded by more hate and malice from the so-called privileged elite class.

Your protagonist then goes out and struggles in their commands, grudgingly given. This is because they are not part of the great egalitarian people's space navy, but rather some oppressive instrument of the repression of the people. So maybe this is a good thing. However, your Ringos and Webers and running dog Lackeys make it out to be a bad thing, which shows just how much reeducation they need (a lot, a very very lot).

The SF masses must be freed of this probagandist opiate and made to read Correct Thought. Mil SF is only written to obscure the class struggle and categorical imperatives of true right-thinking thought as given by the Great Steersman.

Note, Rosemary Kirstein is NOT writing about the Great Steersman. She too is very ideologically impure. ~~Lester~~ Comreraade Lester denounces utterly and without hesitation.

You have been warned.

Flogging a Dead Trekkie:

Violating the Taboo Norms of Science Fiction

Part 6 of 8 – Truly Hard Science

Neil Williams

Malzberg's Taboos of Science Fiction or in my terminology, Norm Violations. These are story concepts and/or plots that if written -- if the norms are violated -- are unpublishable; no professional editor in the genre will touch these stories with a three-metre pole, and certainly would never, ever publish them.

NORM VIOLATION FIVE: Truly Hard Science

'Science fiction truly at the hard edge of contemporary scientific investigation...'

Most of what is called "hard science" science fiction really isn't. As both Lester and I have discussed in recent issues of SWILL, there may be advanced nanotech and AI, etc., but a lot of this is not truly hard science -- there is a lot of handwavium and baloneium tossed in the mix. I have also over the years discussed the problem that much of the "hard science" science fiction, while it may deal with cutting edge discoveries in physics or biology, often becomes very soft and mushy when portraying the human social systems of 200 to 1,000 years plus into the future; so I have stated that they are only partial "hard SF".

Writing science fiction on the actual frontiers of current scientific investigation (as opposed to the fringes, which is more tolerated) can raise the hackles of both the reader and the editor -- preconceived notions are challenged. Both, may flinch

and respond that the story in question is "unscientific", i.e. heretical, and therefore unpublishable.

Nevertheless, both readers and editors are probably more open these days than they were back in 1982 -- they have to be, because of the pace of change in technology and in the sciences. Nobody can keep up with everything going on in science and the less you attempt to keep up with current advances, the greater the probability that you will label the present cutting edge as being, "that-just-can't-be-right". I cannot speak to the cutting edge of physics or any of the other natural sciences, but I can speak regarding the cross-over from genetics to my field, anthropology -- in particular, physical anthropology.

It used to be that new evidence within human palaeontology would follow a punctuated equilibrium model; new data would emerge in fits and starts with periods (years to a decade) of stasis. That is because, the prime area for making these fossil discoveries was in Africa, and best within selected areas of Africa (that allowed for absolute dating techniques to be used), and it was expensive, sometimes closed off (due to civil war/unrest). There was also a certain amount of luck involved. Ideally, you set up your field camp after the local rainy season is over and see what has eroded out of the rock from the previous season. Often, you would successfully add to the catalogue of animal species already known to inhabit the region in that time period, but yield no new human or hominid fossils. And other years, there would be significant finds that would set off debate and further research.

Genetics and human palaeontology has changed all that. We are now making genetic discoveries at a much more rapid rate than fossil discoveries. Here are some of the things that we have learned over the past four years, most during the past year and one half...

As SWILL readers have probably already heard (after all, if it was reported in the Hamilton Spectator, it would have been reported in your regional news outlet) we now know that modern humans and neanderthal interbred. Contemporary modern human populations whose ancestry is from outside of Africa (in particular, outside of sub-Saharan Africa) carry up to 2%

neanderthal DNA. This was first reported in 2010 and has sparked a hot debate between the lumpers and the splitters (lumpers who claim that neanderthal is a subspecies of Homo sapiens and the splitters who maintain that neanderthal is a separate species). As there had been some fossil evidence of admixture (interbreeding) prior to the genetic findings, I was already a lumper on this issue, supporting the taxonomy of Homo sapiens neanderthalensis for neanderthal and Homo sapiens sapiens for modern humans.

But it gets muddier yet. There are now the denisovans, who we know more about genetically than through the fossil record, who interbred with both neanderthal and modern humans. Homo sapiens denisovanensis reside primarily in Asian extending west to the Near East, Homo sapiens neanderthalensis in Europe and the Near East, and Homo sapiens sapiens in Africa. But, there is also another sub-species or species to add to the mix, unknown archaic human DNA within the denisovan populations. Big question marks, with no clear answer.

Add to this the more recent evidence that neanderthal and modern humans share hidden DNA. What that means is because both populations are so similar, the same DNA is indistinguishable between the two populations (by present DNA testing techniques). And that north-western European populations may have up to 40% neanderthal DNA, most of that being hidden DNA.

But there is more... Over the past four months it now appears that all of the variation between modern humans, neanderthal, and denisovans may be due to epigenetics. This would imply that they are all the same species and that different sequences of genes were switched on or off between populations.

And the final spanner in the works, indirect evidence that the unknown archaic human DNA found within the denisovan populations (up to 5%) may be that of Homo erectus. So, if the standard definition of a species is that of organisms that are capable of interbreeding and producing fertile offspring; where do we draw the line? Especially as modern humans, neanderthal, denisovan, and erectus were all contemporaries up to 145,000 years ago?

Then there is the "Little Foot" controversy. Is this fossil a member of the genus Australopithecus or is it Homo? Is it 2.2 million years old, or is it 3 to 3.5 million years old. This will take a long time to settle (kind of like the old days in palaeoanthropology) as, based on present techniques, there is no viable DNA to extract and because the fossil is from South Africa -- fossils are more difficult to reliably date from this region.

And new evidence, keeps coming in every four to six months. It is an exciting time in human palaeontology, but it is also a messy time.

My NORM VIOLATION FIVE story draws upon all that current excitement and mess and has the working title, "All Our Kin".

Scribbling on the Bog Walk

Letters of Comment

Neil Williams

As I write this, there is one LoC from the usual suspect (Lloyd) and an uber-long LoC from Taral. My comments are, of course, in glorious pudmonkey.

1706-24 Eva Rd.
Etobicoke, ON
M9C 2B2

March 28, 2014

Dear James:

Many thanks for the newest pile of Swill, issue 22. There is always something to say about it, and who knows, it might even be complimentary! You rolls the dice, you takes yer chances. Let's see what happens.

And with this roll, you get; whoo-hoo, State Socialism!

Congratulations, comrade...

The more I see the adventures of trufen fandom, the more I find myself edging out to the outside of things. This started happening to me pretty well as soon as we retired from con-running, and many saw this as our gafiation and eventual disappearance. Well, as I've said, you don't get rid of us that easily.

We like to say that we've been kicked out of our own house by those we let in, as if we were the original tenants. As always, we forget our own neofannish days when we were the newcomers.

There are generations of fans before us, and with some luck, there will be generations after. All we can really do is add to fandom what we can, take out of it what we can, and leave it to carry on in whatever form it takes as the years go on. Fandom is a social construct, really nothing more, which as you say has split into various interests within science fiction, and the idea of fandom has been applied to non-SF properties, too.

Oh no, you have used an actual social science term of social construct (or socialist constructalicious expedia lidocus in trufenese). Yes, fandom is a social construct and different groups of fans do construct it differently - the greater the diversity, the more parallel social constructs...

I enjoy going to some panels, as it is a slightly controlled conversation with those with whom you share that particular interest or idea, and I used to offer myself as a potential panellist. I don't do that anymore, mostly because I came to the conclusion that my experience was so out of date that I really had nothing to offer to any panel discussion, or would be chosen to be on any panel. Besides, these days, we really can't afford cons any more. We plan to be at Ad Astra for the Saturday only, so see you in Richmond Hill.

I enjoy doing panels. Though, after three years, I am beginning to run out of ideas for new panel topics. I have also learned that just because I like a particular series/film/author and read all their books/seen all the episodes does not make me knowledgeable on that topic. The true fan of the series/author has done that as a starting point and then read every article published, the author's entire blogsite, etc. I will remain open to being on panels, though...

The local...I have read that when many long-time SF readers get tired of SF, they will often move over to murder mysteries/suspense/detective fiction. I've actually taken a break from reading as a whole, and I am not really missing it. I know that sounds heretic, but perhaps that's just an indication that I have had enough, at least for a while.

If I had to read a myriad of EQA literacy tests, I would want a break from reading too. I have on occasion read some mystery fiction, but I tend to find it more formulaic than most SF & F. Once I find an author I like, they rarely write completely different stories in each novel - they will often focus on a particular "detective" or setting and thus after book three it starts to get a little dull. Of course, I also have my academic reading when I want a break from SF...

Disorganization at Ad Astra...it just comes down to people not willing to put the effort they put into their professional jobs into their volunteer jobs, especially the ones they take on with Ad Astra, or any other convention for that matter. As an example, this year, I got in touch with Ad Astra three times, asking for dealer information, to see if we could run our steampunk table there. I never did get the information, so we figured, that's okay, there are other conventions we can be at to deal, so we have tables at the upcoming CostumeCon and Anime North.

The past three years of attending Ad Astra, all I can say is that it is disorganised. Polaris may have been just as disorganised internally as Ad Astra, but on the surface (for the individual dealer, panellist, attendee) it certainly appeared to be organised.

We're all too human in that we want things to stay the way they are, just as we like them. But many of us are in our 50s, 60s and even 70s, and we may share that desire, but that is more a function of age than things changing around us, and a function of other people changing your fandom until it is unrecognizable to you. Tara mentions OSFiC a number of times here, and while it was meant to be Toronto's local SF club, Yvonne and I were never members, and after all the politics we heard about, we never pursued memberships. We may have asked at one time, and were refused admission...that was a long time ago, and there has never been another club to come along that was a general SF club, no matter what any of the local Trek clubs thought.

Other than the fragmentation and the wide array of SF media, a lot has not really changed over the past 30 years in several ways. General cons, like Ad Astra (and formerly Polaris), have both literary and media tracks in their programming. Even SFCOntario, which appears to have been founded as a small literary convention, has substantial media programming. The amount of SF & F released in all mediums every year is staggering in comparison to 30 years ago and this has been accommodated and has also, in part, been a major factor in the fragmentation of fandom.

There are a greater number of women visibly involved in SF & F fandom than there was decades ago. There is a greater visible presence of GLBT persons in fandom today, than in the past. Both of these changes are positive developments. Nevertheless, SF & F fandom, who attend fan-run conventions, do, for the

most part, appear to be an over-35, European-descent segment of the population.

In repeated conversations with the under-30s, it would seem that this whole geek-culture thing is just a generational re-branding of all things SF & F. There is a generation gap (probably gaps if we include sub-generations) in lingo and in expectations. The under-30s want more experiential, participatory, customised programming in the fan run conventions. Their idea of how a panel should run tends more towards that of the parliamentary scrum than a moderated colloquium (depending on the sub-group – some would prefer the “talking stick” forum). In brief, there is no one, single fandom anymore.

And therein lies the dispute with Taral (and his fellow travellers) who only consider the type of fandom that existed when there was a single fandom, as actually being fandom.

Ah, OSFiC... Regardless, as to what Taral continues to say, OSFiC was not the most welcoming and inclusive of organisations, which, to compare it with a general SF fan club of the same time period, BCSEFA actually was. Both claimed to be provincial clubs and both were really just Toronto and Vancouver clubs (at the time). BCSEFA is still around and, on paper looks healthy; OSFiC is extinct.the whole

Based on your comments to Taral, the next issue should be interesting. Let's see if he comments, or ignores you. Either may happen...either way, I am looking forward to that next issue. See you then, but before then, see you at Ad Astra, about a week away now.

Yours, Lloyd Penney.

Sorry Lloyd, but no fireworks for the LoC Column. While Taral did not ignore me, his comments were NFP. Let us just say that, for now, we agree to disagree. Good to see you both briefly again and again at Ad Astra. My next con will be SFCOntario in November – and there will be a SWILL party...

It has been a long time, since I have written at all about science fiction or for the fandom of science fiction; it is too depressing, as is the future. But, I saw a picture of you wearing soviet t-shirt on Facebook and that makes me smile. This is not the future imagined in 1980s. Today is a capitalist dystopia science fiction nightmare the whole wide world. Trotskyites said that Soviet Union was "state capitalist". You called it "state socialism", but you are a petty bourgeois anarchist individualist and ideologically incorrect. Your state tolerates your beliefs because they do not fear you. Without vanguard of the proletariat there can be no success, no revolution, no challenge to capitalism. Capitalism has won. Today is grim the future even more dire.

Russia is capitalist, for now. Putin was KGB. Who knows, he may bring back the old ways. Is possible with Eurasian Union plan. I miss the Soviet Union.

Seeing picture of soviet shirt gives me hope. This I thank you for.

Nazdrovia.

Vladimir Schnerd

Comrade,

Always great to hear from an original SWILL contributor. Yes, I am still ideologically incorrect and I did wear a Soviet t-shirt to the event you refer to. Perhaps all is not as grim as you think..

As for Comrade Putin, read on...

Endnote: Back to the USSR?

Neil Williams

While I do not have any longing for the USSR (like Comrade Vlad), there are times when I do actually miss the Soviet Union. Not the purges, the totalitarianism, the gulags, the restriction of freedoms, but I do miss there being an ideological adversary to the USA. I do miss there being a check and balance to USA imperialism. And, who knows, Comrade Vlad may get his wish from that other Vlad, Vladimir Putin.

It has been 22 and one half years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. And that dissolution has been chaotic in part. The USA and the NATO nations did not rush in a reconstruction plan for the former Soviet Union as they did for Western Europe after WWII (ah, but that reconstruction aid was to prevent the spread of "communism"; silly me...), but instead opted for imposing Milton Friedman's economic shock therapy on Russia and the former Soviet republics. A bully-boy tactic of kicking one when they are already down (and a perfect example of the sore winner). So, what Russia got was massive privatisation of their assets (aka structural adjustments), a tight monetary policy, lifting of price controls (as part of liberalising trade) and hyperinflation. This created an instant depression and business oligarchism (some legitimate businesses, others criminal, and many a bit of both), and government corruption. Not admirable.

While there has been improvement over the past decade, there remain problems in the Russian economy and in the government. There may be a freer economic market, but there is massive government and corporate corruption, and not a substantial improvement in individual freedom. Nevertheless, for the past 13 years I have been telling my students that at some point, Russia will get its act together again. And when that happens, it will be a force to contend with. That is starting to happen.

Russia, in its own words, has been "left in the corridor" by the USA and the European Union (and Canada) over the past twenty years. Russia has been left out and thus has decided to go it

alone in the "if you can't join them, beat them" philosophy. And so, the Eurasian Union is born. Although an economic union, there would seem to be a subtext of a deeper political union, e.g. the Union State that already exist between Russia and Belarus. Putin has stated that the Eurasian Union would embody the "best values of the Soviet Union". The USA has dismissed the Eurasian Union as "re-sovietization" or as the "Neo-Soviet Empire".

Now, I do see the Union growing and perhaps most of the former soviet republics will join (not the Baltic states or the Ukraine, though the later will have lost Crimea and possibly south-eastern area historically known as Novorossiia to Russia). Will this be a new resurgence of the Soviet Union? To early to determine. It will be a union, it will be more authoritarian than the European Union and the democracies of the West, and it will remain more socialist than the USA and Canada. Will there be a return to Marxist-Leninism? I wouldn't bank on it, nor would I rule it out.

Putin is a former KGB officer who took part in the 1991 hard-liner August Coup attempt and only switched sides when the coup went sour. And looking at the United Russia Party, it carves a sort of middle road in the centre that rejects state socialism and fascism, while at the same time retaining structures similar to that of the old Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It is more probable that we will see a Eurasian Union, that is no more democratic than its current members, with a mixed economy (socialist and free market), that is at best Western-neutral and at worst hostile. I wouldn't call it a new Soviet Union, but it would have Soviet Union aspects.

How knows, it is not yet the 2020s -- Ken MacLeod could be right -- maybe the Eurasian Union will re-institute Marxist-Leninism and the old name too...

On Names and Things

Some of you may have noticed that I have changed my name, yet again. I have discussed things with the Union lawyer and it would seem that the corporate runningdog reactionaries of HR at my place of employment cannot make any claim on my actual birth name as I have not used this at my academic institution. And, since in the fanzine community, the keepers of fannish history, have declined (possibly for the sake of continuity) to use my current legal name, preferring my old unmarried name, I will use **Neil Williams** for my fannish writing.

Fiction and unapproved academic work will be by **James William Neilson** and employer-approved academic work will be under **Neil Jamieson-Williams**.

This is probably as clear as mud, but welcome to corporatised Canada...

Pith Helmet and Propeller Beanie Tour

November 2014 SFContario 5 -- Toronto

