

The Economic Fantasy of "Star Trek"

by P. Gardner Goldsmith

A friend of mine is an award-winning science-fiction novelist. When we first met, I happened to mention to him that I was working on a science-fantasy novel, just as he was. He bristled.

"I write science-fiction, not fantasy," he said. "Those two genres shouldn't even be in the same section at the bookstores."

It was an early lesson in the difference between those who write books that employ real science to drive the plot and those who create unrealistic worlds, even if those worlds conform to their own internal logic. I was not to encounter again the difference between science fiction and science fantasy until years later, while in the script department of one of the many "Star Trek" spinoffs.

Sitting in a "story pitch session" with one of the producers, I happened to offer a story outline that involved a *Sting*-like scheme by the main characters to retrieve a sizeable amount of stolen money. But as I told the story, the producer held up a hand and informed me that I needn't go any further.

Seeing my puzzled face, this warm and genuinely friendly person told me something I did not know.

"Gene," the producer said, referring to Gene Roddenberry, the creator of the series, "stipulated before he died that there was to be no money in the Federation."

I was still puzzled.

"No money?"

"Right. He believed that by the 23rd century, mankind would have evolved past the need for money."

I wondered if Roddenberry meant that mankind would develop some sort of bio-electronic monetary data system, something that would allow the characters to eschew paper money and walk freely, without bulky wallets and pocketbooks to get in their way on the transporter pads. That was, however, far from the case.

According to this producer, Roddenberry, who was known as the "Great Bird of the Galaxy," simply thought that humanism would strip mankind of the acquisitive tendencies it had shown throughout history, and that the use of money was a vice his utopian "Federation" would eliminate.

The producer looked at me and said, "It was one of the biggest mistakes he ever made. You have no idea how much of a headache that rule has been."

Given my background in economics, I actually had a pretty good idea.

Roddenberry's belief was nothing new. In his eyes, money was clearly a vestige of man's base past. It was a symbol of greed, a cause of war and hatred and anger and loss. The drive for it was something mankind needed to overcome, and in Roddenberry's pristine world of the future, man would rise above his dirty urges for riches and concentrate on more noble goals, like science,

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adventure, green-painted women, and mind-melding rocks.

Given this idealistic concept, it can only be assumed that Roddenberry believed man would somehow surpass the need for products and services, would move beyond the subtle and noble differences in interest and skills that prompted the ancient differentiation of labor and free trade, and would glide toward a socialistic method of living, where there would be no need for money. There would be no need for money because there would be no need for exchange, and there would be no need for exchange because man would “evolve” beyond the need for private property, the division of labor, and the gauche acquisition of goods, services, and funds that come with them.

It was at that moment, sitting there in the Paramount Studios on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood, that I realized “Star Trek” was not science fiction, but science fantasy.

The No-Money Fantasy

This is not to deride the series. I like it. But despite the attempt on the part of the producers to back up facets of the stories with well-researched science, the fact that Gene Roddenberry outlawed money means his creation can be nothing other than fantasy.

The reason is simple. Like Roddenberry, many thinkers have tried to envision a world in which there is no need for money, no market exchange, and no property. And every one of those thinkers, be they followers of John Lennon, Michael Moore, or Karl Marx, has overlooked one key insight: man’s nature does not change.

When people try to fulfill their needs, their varying interests, talents, and skills will prompt each of them to concentrate on what he does best. Such differentiation of labor will allow each to use his capabilities in the most productive way possible. Each person will soon see the benefits of trading some of the fruits of his labor for those of another. The way to maximize one’s labor in a world of differing skills and interests is to enter into market exchange with others, offering what one makes or does well in exchange for

what others make or do well. Thus if you are a lumberjack, you can offer wood in exchange for food from the farmer. That way you don’t have to farm and the farmer doesn’t have to cut down trees. Since the two of you are doing what you do best, you are maximizing your work, and there will be more of both products than would exist if you and the farmer had to concentrate on the two forms of labor.

But what if the farmer has already traded for all the wood he needs? In that case, you will have to find a product the farmer *does* need, approach the producer of that item, and see if that producer needs wood. If he does, you can exchange your wood for the new product, then approach the farmer to finish your original exchange.

This becomes complicated when myriad interests, needs, skills, and products begin to come into play. Therefore, man, in his striving to maximize convenience, gradually evolved a method to facilitate exchange: money.

Money allows all participants to employ a universally recognized medium of exchange. No longer will you have to find a third or fourth or fifth party to trade your lumber to in order to get goods from the farmer. You can use money. You can hold it, spend it, and even lend it for a return sometime in the future. The flexibility of money, with its ability to let disparate persons work in harmony, is (far from Roddenberry’s view) one of the most glorious developments in the history of mankind. Money is the machinery of peace, not of war.

Furthermore, without money, it is impossible for the value of consumer or producer goods to be expressed in a practical way. Prices reflect the countless subjective valuations of sellers and buyers engaging in peaceful exchange. Prices are the result of each participant’s decisions—the essential carriers of information and the indispensable elements of economic calculation. They not only reflect preferences, but also the relative scarcity of goods and resources. Without money, there can be no systematic expression of value or scarcity. Even in Roddenberry’s “Federation,” someone had to buy

the “dilithium crystals” for Scotty to use in his famous Engine Room.

Utopian Socialism

If one looks closely at “Star Trek,” Gene Roddenberry’s United Nations-based concept of the “Federation” and the military life of his space travelers, one concludes that he adhered strongly to the fanciful ideas of utopian socialism. Like the socialists who preceded him, he favored large-scale blocks of control instead of small political bodies or individual autonomy. He rejected private property and market exchange, believing that man would “grow out” of those childish idiosyncrasies. He embraced a paternalistic view of the future that would inevitably lead to depleted resources, impoverishment, and economic stagnation, not a galaxy-hopping culture that found adventure at every turn.

Oddly enough, his stipulation that there be no money in his high-tech space series means that his main characters, when in dire need of some product or service out in deep space, have to revert to the inefficient and outdated method of exchange we replaced thousands of years ago. In fact, this is precisely what the producer who sat before me explained when I asked her how they wrote stories that required some kind of market exchange.

In the “Final Frontier,” she said, they are forced to barter for what they need—just like the olden days.

How frustrating for both the writers and the characters they created. It’s no wonder Captain Kirk always wanted to be beamed away. He wanted to get to a world where the universal principles of economics applied, not the fanciful dreams of a visionary whose ideas had been tried and failed many times throughout human history. □



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