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Why Peter Thiel Fears ‘Star Trek’

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A spectre haunts Peter Thiel: the spectre of “Star Trek.” Earlier this week, in a cheeky exchange with the *Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, Thiel dove headlong into one of science fiction’s most venerable debates. Asked by Dowd whether he was a bigger fan of “Star Wars” or “Star Trek,” Thiel replied that, as a capitalist, he preferred the former. “‘Star Trek’ is the communist one,” he said. “The whole plot of ‘Star Wars’ starts with Han Solo having this debt that he owes, and so the plot in ‘Star Wars’ is driven by money.” This latest salvo in an ongoing nerd battle would be all fun and games were it not for Thiel’s deep involvement with the incoming Trump Administration—first on the campaign trail, and then as an adviser to the President-elect on technology. In an era when politics and entertainment are more entangled than ever, pitting the feudal heroism of “Star Wars” against the cerebral and technocratic “Star Trek” becomes more meaningful than it probably should. We’re way past the 1986 “Saturday Night Live” sketch in which William Shatner told his obsessive fanboys to “get a life.”

Peter Thiel has a life. A titan of Silicon Valley, he made his fortune betting on startups such as PayPal and Facebook. Yet he sometimes seems disenchanted by technology. In 2011, for instance, he told George Packer that he did not consider the iPhone a technological breakthrough. “Compare this with the Apollo space program,” he said, suggesting that feats of exploration, rather than advances in convenience and communication, are the real stuff of achievement. Two years earlier, in an essay published by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, Thiel expounded on his skepticism. “We must resist the temptation of technological utopianism—the notion that technology has a momentum or will of its own, that it will guarantee a more free future, and therefore that we can ignore the terrible arc of the political in our world,” he wrote. In other words, technology is not enough. Only the right politics can bring about a truly “free” (as in “free enterprise”) future. Such statements appear at odds with the popular vision of the Silicon Valley tech mogul, and especially with the image of Thiel, who has lately set his sights on vanquishing aging and death. (He plans to live to the age of a hundred and twenty.) So how do we make sense of them?

The truth is that, in certain ways, Thiel’s philosophy of tech aligns well with “Star Trek.” In the Trekiverse, technological progress is inseparable from society and politics. As even quasi-fans will recall, the TV shows and films feature a machine called the replicator, which can produce any inanimate matter on demand—food, drink, warp-drive parts. (In his interview with Dowd, Thiel calls this device the “transporter,” in what can only be a swipe at nerds. Surely he knows better.) The replicator solves, albeit fictionally, what John Maynard Keynes once called “the economic question”—that is, the imbalance between supply and demand, and the resulting need

for markets and price mechanisms to allocate scarce resources. The society of “Star Trek” has decided not to exact a fee for the use of the machine. Thus the replicator can be an engine both for the equal distribution of wealth and for personal enrichment. It does not bring about social change on its own. The post-scarcity world in “Star Trek” is the result of a political decision, not of pure technological progress.

What is anathema to Thiel in “Star Trek” is the notion, drawn from Isaac Asimov’s fiction, that the market is but a temporary solution to imbalances in supply and demand, and that technology and plenty will eventually make it obsolete. “Star Trek” replicators are nothing but Asimov’s robots disguised as coffee machines, let loose on the world as a public good. They dissolve the need for a pricing mechanism. They represent the logical endpoint of the Industrial Revolution, when all human labor has been offloaded onto machines. “Star Trek” and Asimov remind us that the market and all the behaviors associated with it are temporary and historically contingent. If that is so, then what Thiel thinks of human nature and motivations—that people are competitive, acquisitive, greedy—is temporary and contingent, too.

Contrast this with “Star Wars.” Although the galaxy that George Lucas created exists long ago and far away, it is in fact much closer to home than “Star Trek.” Forget the lightsabers and the Force: the essential story of the films is familiar, a techified version of a Wild West that existed only in Buffalo Bill’s travelling revue and its celluloid successors, the Westerns. In “Star Wars,” criminal potentates hire bounty hunters to recover debts from roguish smugglers. Robots are menial servants and sycophants rather than colleagues, and human slavery persists. Unelected tyrants and religious zealots make policy by fiat. A blaster, or a Death Star, is the only real guarantor of life and liberty. Fate and the lottery of birth reign supreme. It is a libertarian’s fever dream, a distilled expression of the idea that the greater good is best served through unfettered (and, if necessary, brutal) economic competition. This, rather than the liberal-democratic setting of the U.S.S. Enterprise, is the political environment in which Thiel seems to feel most comfortable. In his Cato essay, he places “confiscatory taxes, totalitarian collectives, and the ideology of the inevitability of the death of every individual” in opposition to “authentic human freedom.” Only the strong and lucky, like Han Solo, should survive.

“Star Trek” points to a future in which human civilization is advanced enough to provide everyone with the basic necessities of life. It also shows us the ways in which we have already achieved that society, even if we have not decided to make it available to all. (As the sci-fi author William Gibson has said, “The future is already here; it’s just unevenly distributed.”) The significance of Thiel’s remark to Dowd, however offhand, comes from what it may signify about the course of our world in the next several years. As technology progressively eradicates the need for labor, will we cling to Han Solo, to individual toil and competition motivated by material want? Or will we bend what Thiel calls the “terrible arc of the political” toward something resembling collective freedom?