

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

I hope you're all familiar with my next guest, and not just because he's been on the show before, but mainly for all the amazing work he has inspired and enabled as the Cato Institutes Director of Libertarianism.org. You may know, that Aaron Ross Powell gave me my first job out of graduate school as his Assistant Editor for Intellectual History over there. That's my obligatory full disclosure. More importantly though, he's been a good friend for many years now, and we've always had wonderful conversations about the intersections between art and radical politics. As you'll hear me say here in a minute, I think we could all use a bit of a break right now. So Mr. Producer, set a course for the liberalism cluster, maximum warp. Engage. All right. Aaron, thank you so much for being back here. We wanted to have you back on, basically, just to have a fun episode because my God, this year has been horrible. This season right now, it's just awful.

I know you're a Red Letter Media fan, like I am, I've used a big part of my quarantine to just watch all o their whole back catalog, everything they put out. I have loved that recently they started putting out episodes, Star Trek episodes that they like. They've been talking about, "It's enough criticizing everything, and everything is awful. Let's talk about classic wonderful sci-fi, that we love, and what's great about it." That's why I wanted to have you on. You and I used to talk about this stuff now and then, when I was working at Cato. Start us off here, just tell us, give us the terrain a little bit about you and sci-fi. What's some of your favorite sci-fi, in general? In whatever form, books, movies, TV. I know you like tabletop games. Whatever it is, tell us your favorite stuff.

Aaron Ross Powell ([02:17](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I think I got into it through tabletop. The first grown-up novels, if you can describe them as such, that I read, which would have been in fourth or fifth grade, were the Forgotten Realms, Dungeons and Dragons novels. That was most of my attention. Then I went from there. There has been this crossover for a long time. My favorite stuff, though, tends to run... I'm more of a sci-fi guy than a fantasy guy. I'm more of a gritty and cyberpunk sci-fi guy, than say a star Trek guy. My favorite movie of all time is Blade Runner. My second favorite movie of all time is Blade Runner Sequel. I adored William Gibson's works. Cyberpunk has been a big thing for me. Then we talked about tabletop, my favorite tabletop RPG setting, forever, has been Shadow Run. That's where my tastes go. It runs noir sci-fi, but I've always been a big fan of the genre, across the board.

Anthony Comegna ([03:29](#)):

What about specifically libertarian sci-fi? I don't necessarily mean the usual things that people will say, even though I've never read anything of it. I can't even pull it out of my memory. I know I've heard over and over the same things mentioned as libertarian sci-fi.

Aaron Ross Powell ([03:47](#)):

There are certainly the Canonical Texts, Heinlein, and so on.

Anthony Comegna ([03:50](#)):

Yes. That's it. That's what I was trying to think of. Heinlein.

Aaron Ross Powell ([03:55](#)):

I've read some, but it's never my fiction, and I guess entertainment consumption tastes, have rarely been guided by my political views. I've always had something of an aversion to didactic, or outwardly

political media, fictional media. A story that sets out to give you a political message, in my experience, tends to be not as good of a narrative as one that doesn't, even if the one that doesn't has a lot of political elements to it. As far as science fiction, or fantasy with libertarian themes, there are the obvious ones. I'm a big Star Wars fan, and Star Wars is largely, especially when we look at the full trilogy of trilogies, now, is largely the story of the failure of centralized power that you have. You have the failure of the old Republic that collapsed just under its own weight, and was replaced by authoritarianism. Then the authoritarianism is taken down by the plucky rebels, and then the rebels are given their chance to run things and they fail, as well. I think the ultimate theme of Star Wars is decentralization. That the only thing that seems to work is the people scraping by on the fringes. Tatooine is much more successful than Coruscant. There's that. FireFly has these themes, as well.

You had sent me, before this conversation, these are some of the things we might talk about. One of those was one of the libertarian science fiction pieces. I was thinking about this, and I think there's a lot of science fiction, in particular, that has strong libertarian themes without having libertarian politics. In the cyberpunk that I'm really into, the villains are always the corporations. The corporations are the evil things that run society for their own interests, and will basically kill anyone who gets in their way. Governments, to the extent that they exist in these societies, are minimal, basically, just pawns of the mega corps. They still, I think, have strong libertarian themes of the failures and abuses that come from centralization of power. The mega corps in *Shadow Run* are effectively state in a very barren sense. They have militaries, they enforce their laws upon their subjects and their citizen employees, they have absolute control. They're monolithic. From my perspective, they look less like free market participants and more like mini states, or mini non-territorial states.

I think a lot of the interesting themes that you can pull out about libertarianism from science fiction is in that, is in the way that that power is the villain in a lot of science fiction, and decentralization and individuals on the outskirts, and people who just want to live their lives the way they want to lead them, peacefully and mostly just trading with each other, are the heroes. The ones who are standing up against these powerful centralized authorities, whether we call those governments or call those corporations.

Anthony Comegna ([07:42](#)):

Yeah. When I had this question in mind, I am not... Heinlein is I think the obvious example. That's what I was trying to think of. The obvious examples that so many people go to for libertarian sci-fi, that's explicitly libertarian. Other than him, I'm not sure that there's much out there. Certainly not in the realm of TV or movies. I am interested in, then what shows, maybe even despite themselves, and the intentions of their creators or writers, what shows and TV, and books, do nonetheless, present libertarian themes really, really well? I think, for example, in fantasy, *Game of Thrones* obviously does power dynamics and politics extremely well. A lot of people take away many libertarian messages from that. I'm thinking, also for example, *Babylon Five* is a show that you recommended to me, just in the past few years here. I'd never seen it before. One wonderful libertarian thing I continually take away from that, I think, is that the whole point is that you've got this space station built out there, designed to bring a bunch of different alien species together as a point of diplomacy, like a UN floating around there in space.

You've got all these different aliens crowding together on this big space station. As you move through the space station, you have to keep switching between types of atmosphere, from one room to another. They have to put on a gas mask, or they have to shift the atmosphere with a panel on the wall, or something, because there are different types of aliens living in different places. It's just this great reminder of the values of cosmopolitanism, and the idea that you are going to have to shift around your

comfort levels and your atmosphere that you're comfortable with, a lot, if you want to engage with different types of people and benefit from those interactions. That's the whole dynamic of the entire series, is figuring out how to do that. I just love things like that. I'm wondering if you can tell us a little more about examples of this, or maybe you could jump straight to *Blade Runner*, and tell us why you love that so much.

Aaron Ross Powell ([09:52](#)):

I'll say, I hadn't thought about *Babylon Five* that way. I think it's a really interesting and fruitful way to think about it. It does seem to fit in with the thing that *Babylon Five* did so well. It does a lot of things. I still think it's probably, when it comes to serialized sci-fi storytelling on television, it remains the high watermark, even if you know the special effects and some of the acting have not quite held up. That idea, one of the things that it does is, that it shows aliens as alien in a way that say *Star Trek* doesn't, that *Star Trek* famously has they're just humans with strong opinions about certain things and bumps on their heads, but they're not genuinely alien, and their planets all look like our planets with more of a Wendell Berry vibe.

That idea that it is truly cosmopolitan, and that cosmopolitanism doesn't just mean accepting some different viewpoints, which is I think the message from *Star Trek*, but then it means this fundamentally different people with deeply different ways of living, including breathing different atmosphere and having radically different body shapes and languages, and so on, but that we can get along. Getting along can sometimes be inconvenient, but it's largely as easy as putting on the gas mask before you walk into that one area in *Babylon Five* where the weird atmosphere is, and talking to people.

Anthony Comegna ([11:24](#)):

Or the White House. You might need those.

Aaron Ross Powell ([11:31](#)):

I think that's an interesting way to do it. I think one of the themes of all of these shows is difference, and that difference... That nationalism say, or tribalism, is the way to failure. *Babylon Five*, for example, is we've got the space station where it's the last best hope for peace and all of the species have sent their representatives, and there's all of the traitors and vagabonds and people coming through. The thing that makes it not work is people who governments, or particular leaders, who've got it in their head that the great man theory of history is correct and laudable and what they ought to pursue, and so who tried to be great men and muck everything up, and cause a whole lot of suffering and get a whole lot of people killed. The heroes, *Babylon Five* has your military people and whatnot, but the heroes are often the ones who don't want to be great men, and just want to live and let live, and wander through their station and put on their gas masks, and deal with different atmosphere.

Anthony Comegna ([12:52](#)):

Yeah. The tragic hero is the guy who, oddly enough, ironically enough, looks exactly like Napoleon. His whole imagery is a great hand. He keeps having these images of a great hand reaching out of space, and he wants to control as much as he can. It all collapses on him. It's a tragedy. I love *Babylon Five*. I can't tell you, I'm so grateful for you recommending it. It's so good. Anyone out there who hasn't seen it, watch *Babylon Five*. It's great.

Aaron Ross Powell ([13:25](#)):

Yes. I second that.

Anthony Comegna ([13:28](#)):

Now, another thing I really wanted to talk to you about on here is these... Libertarians, we can be so pedantic and annoying, but among each other it's fun.

Aaron Ross Powell ([13:38](#)):

I don't know any libertarians who are like that.

Anthony Comegna ([13:40](#)):

Okay. All right. Yes. All right. Sure. I'm going to move on. One thing I like doing when I watch sci-fi is pointing out the, I think, weird ways that libertarians understand the future will not look like this. These writers have it very wrong. It might be for strange reasons. For example, to me, one of the more obvious ones is, why does so many sci-fi premises include some gigantic, fascistic, interstellar empire, given that at those levels, the problem of prices that Mises identified so long ago, apparently means nothing. We understand that that problem, the calculation problem, only ramps up in difficulty as you get to bigger and bigger scales. Why are we expected to believe that this is anything what the future will be?

Aaron Ross Powell ([14:42](#)):

I think that's absolutely true. There's a lot of examples of this where it seems that as imaginative as authors are, they get stuck in certain tropes that they don't seem to be able to think past or imagine could be different. On the one hand, there's a flip answer to a lot of this. When my oldest daughter was watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and she asked me why all the aliens looked like people. The answer is, because it would be expensive to make them look different. They didn't have CGI, and makeup effects are expensive. Just putting lumps of latex on someone's head is within the show's budget. I think that there's a similar thing going on with a lot of this, which is not the cost, because if you're writing novels you can describe anything you want to, but there's, call it a storytelling budget, that I think if you go... On the one hand, going really far is hard. It's cognitively hard for the author, but it's also cognitively hard for the audience. What the audience wants is a story where they can fill in the details because they don't want to read... Every one of these movies, or series has their series Bible, where someone has written out all of the lore. It's the Wikipedia of whatever the series is. Your audience doesn't want to read that.

They don't want a character to sit down at some point, and info dump all of that to them before they can understand it. That limits how far you can spin your setting out from what we have now. You can do it in some areas, but if you get really alien in some areas, you have to stay closer to the baseline and others, or your audience is just not going to be able to keep up with the level of difference. I think that that plays a part in what you're describing. That we are familiar with, particularly a history that is the conflicts between large empires and nations, and that those are stories we're used to hearing, and that they're stories that feel epic to us. It's one thing to tell a small personal story, I read a lot of crime fiction, and crime fiction is about individual people on a very small scale that never matter. Science fiction, and fantasy, aim for epicness. I think we just imagine epicness to be battles between great empires, or battles between all of us and some invading alien force, so we all band together and all the nations effectively become one empire for the purpose of our story. I think there is that storytelling efficiency to it.

I think, also, so much science fiction is just the age of the age of sail, writ large. It's just analogizing out from we have the British empire, and that was a real thing. We had the competing empires and we had the pirates and stuff, and it wouldn't be cool if instead of floating in wooden boats on the ocean, we had them in cool spaceships flying through the sky. That analogy carries with it those elements, which is if we have the British empire on Earth, we're just going to have the British empire across the stars, and each planet becomes a little port, which is another thing you see a lot in, especially visual sci-fi, is that planet Star Trek does this all the time. You have a whole new planet, but the whole new planet is a village. It's a small port that then just happens to have a whole lot of land around it.

Anthony Comegna ([18:44](#)):

It's always a farming colony.

Aaron Ross Powell ([18:47](#)):

It's always a farming colony. Yes. Which is not the most efficient. If you're going to go to the expense of setting up a space colony, having it produce some agriculture doesn't seem the best way to recoup the costs.

Anthony Comegna ([19:01](#)):

It's a farming colony, or a mining colony, with a thousand colonists on it. I never understood that. I'm glad you mentioned, especially that comparison with the age of sail, because I've been thinking, for a while I've been making this argument that the Telegraph was the first example of a proper technological singularity in American history. The only one, so far, I would say. I realize there's plenty of room for argument there, but the Internet, I think, is actually just an extension of that technology. It's not a serious break from the Telegraph. It's just a smoothing and perfection of the form. But, something like artificial intelligence would probably be a genuine singular type of leap into the future that would entail all sorts of things. I think that's, to me, in our time right now, that's the thing that sci-fi writers and TV producers, and stuff, do not seem to have gotten as good a grasp on as I would like. Especially, in books. I'm sure there are people who are much more creative and thoughtful than, like you said, they can afford to be, even on TV, about what the world would be like after the artificial intelligence explosion.

Star Trek, they do, they're constantly calling back to the Age of Sail, or the Cold War, for all of their stories and their politics. They do try to touch on some genuine, singular leap type technologies, their warp drive or weather control, or whatever. For the most part, they don't really deviate from our current experience. Are there other examples of that, that you can think of, or, that particularly tickle you?

Aaron Ross Powell ([20:54](#)):

The two that seem most obvious, as far as sci-fi authors can imagine all sorts of out there vistas, but can't seem to get past certain present things, are first, taxis. It's remarkable how many, even today, I'll read a science fiction novel that is way, way out there and set hundreds or thousands of years in the future, but there'll be a scene where someone hails a cab, and that cab is driven by some person who they then in a very Tom Friedman way, have a plot advancing conversation with. Taxis is a bit one. And autonomous stuff. The main one, and this shows up all the time in science fiction, is science fiction writers seem incapable of imagining that in the not too distant future, we won't have a drug war. That the number of science fiction plots that are some new drug is on the street, and it's being manufactured and distributed by the criminals, and we have to take them down, or the drug is a front for some other nefarious plot. That drubs are illegal, and junkies are taking them, and cops are trying to stop the

manufacturer and distribution of this stuff, is a ridiculously common plot point. One that seems so obviously wrong, that it will feel just dated in the way that Isaac Asimov's miniskirts and ray guns, and all the women as. space secretaries feels today.

I don't quite know why, except maybe that the drug war is such a just baseline plot point across the board. I think, still the most popular genre of show on television is police dramas. Many of the most popular shows have been police dramas. They're largely about that, or often about that, that I think it's just so ingrained, and it's an easy thing to hook a narrative onto. You can say here's this bad thing, and our heroes have to figure out what's causing it, and how to stop it. Drugs maps onto that pretty easily. That does seem to be a real blind spot in that it feels obvious to me that, certainly within 100 years, we will look back on the fact that armed agents of the state routinely beat people up and locked them in cages, or killed them, because they were consuming or selling to their friends a plant, or a chemical substance that makes you feel funny, or makes you feel sedated, or makes you see strange things. We'll look back on that with the same level of horror and embarrassment that a lot of us now look back on, say the way that people reacted to the Civil Rights movement, of just, "How could they not see how wrong they were?" The drug war, I think, and especially from the libertarian perspective, is the most interesting one of those, for me.

Anthony Comegna ([24:26](#)):

Yeah. Oh my gosh, I love that you mentioned that one, because it just reminds me of what I always thought was one of the worst Star Trek: The Next Generation episodes, which is called The Game. It's infamous as an anti-drug, it's a late-Reagan era say no to drugs episode of television where Riker comes back. Riker, of course, is the womanizer, handsome guy, who is always looking for a good time. He goes to the Pleasure Planet all the time for his vacations, whatever. He's sleeping with this woman there, and the shady alien gives him this headset game thing that creates an endorphin response that gets you addicted, or whatever, as you play it. It's horrible graphics, and it's ridiculous premise and acting, and steadily this game takes over the whole ship. Only abstinent young Wesley Crusher can save the drug addled crew from their own vices by saying no. It's just ridiculous and over the top, and crazy,

Aaron Ross Powell ([25:36](#)):

It does raise, though, there's an interesting alternate angle on that. That thing, the headset that does the stuff, shows up a lot in cyberpunk, too. I think that's called Simsense in Gibson's work. It's BTL, better than life chips in Shadow Run, I think it's called Brain Dance in cyberpunk, in the cyberpunk tabletop RPG, and soon to be the game that consumes my November Cyberpunk 2077. That people will, it's not so much chemical substances that you take that make you feel funny, but VR, or something that takes over your senses, and puts you in another world, and you become addicted to that other world, and that that is bad. This is this destructive thing. That too, seems interesting from a libertarian perspective, because you can make the case.

One of the cases that we make against the drug war is, "Yes, there are people who become addicted to drugs and that it's destructive in their lives, and destructive in the lives of their friends and family." A lot of that destructiveness is the result of the drug war, itself. The drugs are expensive, hard to obtain, that you become a criminal if you have them, and so on. But, there is, drugs do damage to people, and we admit that. We make the case that lots of people use drugs recreationally without any problem. Lots of people are casual drinkers of wine. You have a glass of wine every night, and alcohol is not a great drug, as far as its effects on your body, or the things that it can make you do, or the long-term consequences, and so on. Most of us recognize that we're not hooked to that degree, and a glass of wine is fine, if not culturally elevated.

The headsets and things, you can make a similar argument of, if in these future societies there's stratification, and there are people who the real world is not great for them, or they don't have an interest in climbing the corporate hierarchy, or becoming the rockstar musicians that are popular in these settings, or whatever else the other characters might do, becoming agents for hire who break in and do extractions of research scientists, that turning on, tuning in, and dropping out, for the evening, doesn't seem all that much worse than binge watching *Game of Thrones* on HBO. It's just in a more immersive variety. There does seem to be this running theme of, and maybe this goes to why the drug war remains a trope in science fiction, is there does seem to be this theme of no matter how much reality changes, what really matters is that you continue to only live in that, and don't construct your own. Maybe that's also why AIs are often portrayed as villains in these things is because they're a constructed alternative reality, and that there's something wrong societally, and just morally, ethically, with tuning out from the world into a better one.

Anthony Comegna ([29:10](#)):

Two of these social areas, or questions, that sci-fi seems to have a very good long-term track record with now is race and sex, in the sense that... I'm a huge *Star Trek* fan. I'll keep talking about *Star Trek* over and over, as long as y'all let me. We don't have to belabor that shows groundbreaking history with race, and shattering those barriers, and integrating the crew and putting black people in the future, and things like that. Then, I've also noticed, I've been re-watching *Star Trek* recently, inspired by Red Letter Media's positive reviews, and I've noticed that in *The Next Generation*... Back in the 60s, women are objects, still. But, in *The Next Generation*, sex is off the table. It's an uncomfortable subject when any of the characters bring it up. It's awkward and strange. They're all perfectly monogamous, and expected to marry and have kids, and all these perfectly neat little things. Very conservative in its way.

Then just a few years later, with *Deep Space Nine*... The other thing is in *TNG*, people are barging into the holodeck all the time. It's not locked, and they just walk right in, no matter what you're you might be doing in there, on the holodeck. A few years later in *Deep Space Nine*, suddenly privacy and your sex life is a huge deal. It's illegal, all of a sudden, in the Federation, to go walking in on somebody in the holodeck. It's a massive invasion of their privacy. Sex is perfectly normal topic of conversation. There are all different permutations of relationships going on, and it's a topic of humor and fun, and it's not awkward. I think that dynamic has really been ramped up, both for race and for the treatment of sex in sci-fi, in recent decades. Do you think we're better on some things like that than on the drug war, or taxis?

Aaron Ross Powell ([31:17](#)):

Absolutely. The race stuff, and not just in... Yes, there's the portraying actually existing races and culture in the future, in a positive light, but there is also so much... Science fiction has been about, there are people who are different than us, even radically different, and we're better off if we come to accept them. That's the erect of *Blade Runner*. *Blade Runner* is about a guy, his job is to murder manufactured people who are different, and have been forced into slavery because of their difference, or manufactured specifically for slavery. Over the course of this, it's a pretty tragic movie, but the silver lining of it is the recognition that this was wrong all along, that these people are... Let's not get into whether Deckard, himself, is a replicant or not, but they're as human as he is. That theme shows up a ton. We encounter the new aliens. We have some cultural misunderstanding.

This is the beginning of *Babylon Five*, the minbari, there was the whole war was a cultural... Was a misunderstanding that they then just got over when they realized it was stupid. That's a real theme. It extends further out, and it says people who are way, way different, we should also extend the same, not

just tolerance, but embrace of difference that sci-fi has shown us for people who are different from us on our own planet, extend those to people who are radically different. That's a really positive message, and one that is present, even in the most dystopian science fiction. That seems to be a common theme, no matter how bad the world has gotten, people are often, in these sci-fi settings, more accepting of much larger differences than we unfortunately see people be willing to accept today. I think on the sex and relationship things, it feels like there has been a lag there, and I wonder how much of that lag is just cultural change and toleration happens among the young. I'm loathed to admit that there's something. I'm not going to gripe about the kids these days, but one of the things the kids these days tend to be good at is being more accepting of a changed world than their parents and grandparents are.

There's a lag because the kids these days aren't the ones who are getting hired to run a show for HBO or CBS. That's the older generations. The older generations are writing their own values into it. I think you're right. That seems to be the emerging frontier in a lot of the storytelling. Is just pushing that difference, accept the degree of difference, and the kinds of difference, that was can, in an ideal world, be indifferent to. It's one thing to do a very special episode about your character coming out as gay, and make it this whole thing. That's an important step, but it's even more... The progress really comes when you have the gay characters, and they're just there as the characters, and you don't have all of your other characters remarking on it because those characters don't see it as the thing that's a difference that needs to be remarked on, in the same way that all the other differences that we might have, are just people are different. That level of acceptance, and just baking in, you mentioned different structures of relationships, and not being uncomfortable the way that *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was with displays of sexuality, is areal sign of progress.

Science fiction does seem to be at the cutting edge of that. Sci-fi readers are more willing to accept stories of those kinds, in a way that mainstream people watching sitcoms or whatever, it takes them longer to catch up. I think that's the value, and it pushes into now stories of trans humanism, where people aren't just having different sexual relationships, but are radically changing their bodies and their genetic makeups, and becoming different things entirely. Having all crazy... One of my favorite contemporary sci-fi authors is Peter F. Hamilton, who writes these incredibly epic space opera stories that are unbelievably dense in their world-building, and one of the things that he's super into is pretty out there forms of sexuality and relationships, but one of the values, I think, in that is that as described, "This is out there, but it seems, for all the characters, it seems perfectly fine. I can see maybe that's not what I would want, but it seems to work. I don't know why we should make a big deal out of it."

Anthony Comegna ([37:10](#)):

Aaron Ross Powell is the Director of the Cato Institutes libertarianism.org. He's co-host, with Trevor Burris, of the *Free thoughts* podcast. He's also the author, or editor, of several books, both fiction and nonfiction, including *Arguments for Liberty*, *Visions of Liberty*, and *The Hole*, all of which can be found on Amazon. If you like what you've been hearing from Aaron on sci-fi so far, then you want to be sure to subscribe to his personal podcast, as well, *The Aaron Ross Powell show*, for more conversations like this. My best to all. Happy Thanksgivings all around, and as always, keep the progress coming.