

Anthony Comegna ([00:21](#)):

Welcome back to another week of Ideas in Progress, everyone. I'm your host, Anthony Comegna, once again, joined by my former boss and good friend, Aaron Ross Powell, to talk about liberalism and science fiction. We'll pick up right where we left off last time with that discussion of what sci-fi gets right and what it gets wrong. Now, the thing I find most interesting about this topic is that all of us associated with IHS, faculty, students, staff, well-wishers and everyone else, we're deeply engaged in this very process of building the future. Sure, in some sense, everyone is building the future with every action they take, but especially so for those of us who do work with magnifying effects. All these new ideas, these ideas in progress, we cover week to week. All of it builds out, spread sort of virally mind to mind. It impacts other people's actions and changes the shape of the future in ways that planners just can't predict. And neither can we, of course.

When sci-fi authors sit down to write a novel, which requires an intricate plan in mind, we should naturally expect things to go awry and stop conforming to reality. The fact is the future isn't a reality yet and we certainly don't have to simply accept the way things are as if they are the way things always have to be or always will be. Anyways, that's enough for me for now. Let's get to the interview.

All right, so Aaron, last time we were talking, you left off mentioning, I believe it was an author who you said did really great, over the top super dense space opera type stuff and that just got me thinking, that's kind of what I've been driving at in the course of our first interview here that I really want to see more sci-fi that takes place after the singularity that is supposedly upon us right now. I want to see somebody's very best guesses about what life really looks like after that. And I was thinking that the last time we had you on the show with Paul Matzko talking about your book, *Visions for Liberty*, that is something that still resonates with me a lot from that book and that discussion that the future is unplanned and it's eminently malleable. It's constantly malleable.

It's not something that you are going to decide, you can't plan how it's going to unfold but you do impact it little by little, in a way that single pounds of the hammer shaped some lump of metal into a functioning thing. And so while sci-fi generally seems to agree that the future is malleable, it also as we sort of got into discussing before, seems to imply that it's also something that can be planned in this, Gene Roddenberry style, crisp, clean, nice, neat future. Maybe that has to do with why you've gotten more into the crime dramas lately. And like you said, you're more into that noire style sci-fi.

Aaron Ross Powell ([03:33](#)):

On the one hand, there's bound to be something of a disconnect because the author necessarily is a planner. The author has to sit down and come up with this world, what this world looks like and has to have a vision that he or she articulates and details that have been worked out that as a solitary author sitting in your room, typing away into a Google Doc, you can't run the emergent process that led to our culture and will lead to what our culture looks like a 100 or 200 or a 1,000 years from now.

But there does seem to be at least there has been, a strong pro planning element. This was the foundation novels are very much this, that the people have screwed things up and a handful of smart people have figured out exactly how they've screwed it up, when it's going to go down and what steps are necessary to put it all back together again. And then the novels are just about these smart people putting society back together again, based on their own rational preferences. And yeah, the Star Trek of Roddenberry is not as explicit about that, but it is very much a, there's these discreet societies out there doing their thing and we are the enlightened people in our spaceships who are going to come and address their problems or help them out or get caught up in this but then go back to our enlightened stable society with obvious exceptions of there is some war in Star Trek, Deep Space Nine deviates from

this formula in a way that makes it, I think, easily the best Star Trek series or at least the most interesting.

But there has been, I think the cyberpunk movement really did represent a turning away from that. That it stopped being about the planners and started being about the rabble on the street who circumvent the planners. There's the great William Gibson has a lot of great lines and a lot of deep insights about culture and the future of culture. One of them is he says, "The street finds its own use for things." That this shows up a lot in his novels of the planners, so the engineers of the corporations or the government people give us products that they think we're going to use one way and then the street, meaning those people who aren't part of the planning system or the higher echelons, subvert that technology.

And I think a good example of this and it may be apocryphal. We don't actually know, but when Trump led his first rally several months ago, the one where they kept bragging about how big the crowd was going to be and then the crowd was pretty thin. And that TikTok users had used this technology that a Chinese company had made for sharing short videos, to organize to buy up tickets that they were never going to use so as to embarrass Trump and that's a perfect example of the street making use of something that was never intended and in a very subversive way. And youth culture plays a large part in this.

And I think that that is a real emerging theme in certain genres of science fiction, is an anti planning of the people on the street are going to do their own things and the planners, again, whether the corporation or the government are kind of distant and cold and manipulative, but the street fights back. And as we discussed earlier, I think that is a strong libertarian theme in a lot of science fiction.

Anthony Comegna ([08:05](#)):

One of my Twitter friends shared a picture from a copy of Science and Invention Magazine from May 1924. I think it was yesterday they shared this and it's a picture of a radio police automaton. And so it's plans for, it's this complicated picture of a gigantic two or three times human sized robot, looks like a giant trash can with legs and one arm and it's equipped with caterpillar treads on the feet so it moves like a tank and it has on its arm it's got this spinning death wheel of little lead balls to beat protestors with and it's got a light and a radio loudspeaker attached to it. And the idea is, oh my God, we can use radio control to move machines around autonomously from a distance we'll have this car that has the radio control in it and we'll have all these robotic policemen out in front of the car and they'll go beat the hell out of the protestors. And it's got a tear gas tank in it and so it can unload tear gas into the crowd.

It's just ridiculous. I think, forget cyberpunk, let's bring back a steampunk and make this a great sci-fi show from HBO, because boy, that'd be a great way to combine the two. Tesla's trying to build a super weapon and he doesn't know what side he's on and they're all trying to get the death ray. I could see that.

Aaron Ross Powell ([09:39](#)):

It is also just how much of new tech gets interpreted via law and order and weapons. That that seems to be the first thing that we think of with new tech that we have these radio waves, what are we going to do with it? One of the things we can do is build a robot policemen to beat people up or we have these amazing devices in our pockets that give us access to the world and can record audio and video and broadcast it, what are we going to do with that? Well, in the Dark Knight, Batman turns it into a surveillance system. That drive to use tech for those purposes seems pretty strong and it's never the

way that this stuff plays out, that it's we end up finding amazing and I think hopeful uses for tech that was imagined first as a way to control or to inflict violence.

Anthony Comegna ([10:47](#)):

Well, I kind of think again, this is just the paradigm that we're used to. I'm always saying about history, yeah, I'm a historian, but I hate history. It's horrible. It's just one awful story of people being terrible to each other after another and just refusing to learn for thousands of years. It's awful. And yeah, you can read it as a good story in some respects or in some time periods, but a professor of mine who was a Russian specialist, he once said that he had to stop doing Russian history and switch to colonial America because he couldn't even find, he's like find five years of Russian history where things are just, okay. It's always horrible and depressing. I wonder if we're just so used to that, that this really is the paradigm in which we think and it's genuinely. Sorry for my dogs. It's genuinely difficult to break out of that.

Aaron Ross Powell ([11:46](#)):

I think that's true. And I think, this goes to that classic worry about the TV news is unrelentingly negative and if it bleeds, it leads idea and that we're just simply attracted to that. And so then when we engage in storytelling, that's the kind of storytelling that we want to do. And I'm not even necessarily criticizing that because as I said, I read a ton of crime fiction, which is about people being really awful to each other for very stupid reasons and everyone ends up dead. This isn't uplifting fiction at all and I think, and the most persistently popular genre or plot basically since it was invented is the murder mystery for all sorts of reasons. But that's a dead body sets the plot in motion and this gets to every now and then I'll come across discussions of, I was on the RPGnet, which is a tabletop gaming website, their forums earlier this week and someone asked, "Why is it so hard to play tabletop RPGs in optimistic settings?"

There'd been a number of Star Trek tabletop RPGs, but they don't do as well as dungeon crawling or cyberpunk or space opera where you're blowing each other up. And I think there can be this kind of human nature element of that's what attracts us, but there's also stories need conflict and physical conflict or threats of violence is a way to make conflict very acute. You could tell a story that was the conflict between the editor at a newspaper and to the reporter who wants to get a story published that he doesn't want, but that's not as easy to tell in a edge of your seat way, as there's a murderer out there and bodies are piling up and if we don't figure it out, there's going to be more deaths or these great powers are at each other's throats and war is about to break out at any minute.

It's a way to hook people into the stakes in a powerful and an immediate fashion that's harder without that. I think that drives a fair amount of it. And then I wonder too, if there's like a feedback loop of the stories that we grow up on or the stories that we love are so often ones that at least heavily feature violent conflict of some kind or where people's lives are in danger. There's the threat of violence or harm. And then history is ultimately just stories of the past and so the stories of the past that we find compelling are the ones that look similar to the narratives that we have found compelling and so they're the stories of conflict.

Anthony Comegna ([15:05](#)):

Now, you know that my favorite sci-fi show is the X-Files. And I was very honored and privileged somewhat recently here to go on libertarianism.org's culture podcast, Pop and Lock, which is a wonderful show.

Aaron Ross Powell ([15:19](#)):

It's really fun.

Anthony Comegna ([15:20](#)):

I was joined by Reason's Jesse Walker, the conspiracy theory expert.

Aaron Ross Powell ([15:25](#)):

And they were disgusting that episode, that was you and Jesse Walker, was my dream casting. I cannot imagine two better people to sit down for an hour and talk about the X-Files than those two guys.

Anthony Comegna ([15:38](#)):

That was a really great conversation, but I just wanted to give you an opportunity to say whatever amazing, wonderful, good things you have to say about the X-Files and how perfect it is. Go ahead.

Aaron Ross Powell ([15:51](#)):

I was a big fan when it was first airing. I guess I would have been in high school. And it's a little bit weird thinking back to it, because that was at the time when this will, your younger listeners will be baffled and astonished and dismayed at this, but there was a time when television shows came on at a certain time each week and you had to tune in at that time and if you didn't, you missed it. And unless you lucked into it being on the air again several years later, you would simply never see that episode again. It was a very odd way to consume entertainment, but that was how I consumed the X-Files. There were a lot of episodes that I missed because in high school you have lots of other things going on and I never caught back up with it. It's something I ought to do in part, just because it's fun to see those nineties style super loose suits and big ties.

Anthony Comegna ([16:50](#)):

The giant chunky cellphones.

Aaron Ross Powell ([16:52](#)):

Yes. It's got a nice vibe to it, but I do think, I loved the X-Files. I'd always been a real fan of conspiratorial storytelling of stories about conspiracies because of the hidden element of it and the figuring it out element of it. And I think the X-Files, if you talk about libertarian science fiction, I don't think the X-Files is a self consciously libertarian show by any means, but it certainly is one that in kind of a post-Watergate world and this was X-Files was Clinton era. When people's opinions of government, the nineties were pretty good from a government standpoint, at least compared some of the other times and they seemed it was a fairly prosperous time, but the X-Files was telling us that that government is all up to all sorts of awful things.

And not just that it's hiding the truth from you, that there are wonders in the universe that they don't want you to know about, but that the government is doing, is actively engaged in nasty stuff. There's a real cynicism about the state in that show that I think is fairly powerful. And the dynamic between Mulder and Scully plays into that in cool ways. Because if the show was just about Mulder as the conspiracy nut, who thinks the government is engaged in all sorts of conspiracies, you could write him off in the same way that if you got stuck spending an hour listening to your QAnon, obsessed uncle tell you all about what's really going on, you'd just be kind of tired of it and think, basically all of it was junk.

But the Scully character, her arc of coming to realize that it's not as crazy as she thought, I think plays into is a version of, I guess, what I hope a lot of us. I don't think that all of us should decide that there are aliens and weird creatures swimming around in the sewers, but the skepticism about government as in a more abstract way is a valuable thing. And I think Scully represents kind of that arc of realizing that these institutions that you had taken for granted, that had through propaganda and their versions of history and so on, convinced you that they were the pillars of society are actually pretty significant threats to it. And doing that through a character who is so grounded and rational makes that arc and that discovery real in a way that I think it wouldn't be if it were just the kooky conspiracy guy.

Anthony Comegna ([20:14](#)):

Well, there you have it folks, Aaron Powell, once again, refuses to disavow QAnon. Moving on here. Now you've said plenty of times, I believe you've written a book to this title or to this effect, that politics makes us worse. And I'm wondering, are there any examples you're aware of at least of stateless societies in science fiction that are just as advanced and normally functioning and operational and everything else like Anne Hutchinson's Rhode Island or something like that, where there's basically no state here. Even the Ferengi, for example, the arch capitalist race of aliens in Star Trek, they still have a government, it's just based on graft and corruption between business and the state. Are there any big stateless societies you're aware of?

Aaron Ross Powell ([21:09](#)):

I think there are. I think there's a lot of stateless societies in science fiction, depending on how you frame that. There are lots of stories of places that are beyond the reach of states, as we understand them. All of the outer planets, the fringe areas of Star Wars fall within this. That they seem to be, you don't go to Tatooine and there's an overarching government that rules Tatooine. It seems to be a stateless place and maybe it's not the best place, but people seem to be getting along fine without a government. And that kind of shows up fairly frequently, or again, depending on how you frame cyberpunk, these are anarco-capitalist, if the capitalists had gone very wrong, but they're still anarco-capitalistic societies because the government is so weak, but they're not necessarily positive societies.

Recently I was reading the Scottish science fiction author, Ken MacLeod, who I don't see. He gets mentioned among libertarians sci-fi occasionally, but he doesn't have the kind of canonical status. And I recommend him really highly, particularly he has a four book series called the Fall Revolution that in the first book of that called the Star Fraction, he has an introduction to it where he says, basically what happened was he was a hardcore Marxist, a Trotskyite and then he came across Hayek and Mises and started reading them and then started reading some of the anarco-capitalists and was struck because he thought that this was a powerful critique of the ideas that he had of the political ideas that he had held. And so he decided to write a series of science fiction novels to essentially work out these ideas in his head.

And the core question that he had is what if it turns out that capitalism is unstable but socialism is impossible? What do we do with that? And the second book in that series, the Stone Canal, which is set on Mars is a really interesting anarco-capitalistic society. There is no state. There's private arbitration agreements. There's protection agencies. It is like someone read Rothbard and David Friedman and decided to turn it into a sci-fi setting. And it's very interesting and MacLeod remains I think a socialist, but is incredibly well versed in individualist anarchist theory, in market anarchist theory, in libertarianism, in Austrian economics and is sympathetic to them. And so is able in these stories to portray them, I think fairly. Not perfect because they're stories of conflict, but fairly to pass the Turing test, I guess. And so that, as far as in recent memory of stuff I've read when we talk about, if you're

talking about stateless societies, that those books and particularly the Stone Canal immediately jumps out at me as a just wonderfully written and interesting example of exactly that and one that is deeply informed by theories and economics.

Anthony Comegna ([25:01](#)):

Now, I think this is going to be a pretty tough question here, but we were talking earlier about some of the ways that sci-fi and just its presence in the culture has impacted the culture, for example, like race. Just showing Black people in the future. But it's also, of course, other things that we're all aware of by now, like tablets and wearables and things like that. They've covered, anybody remember that episode of the Next Generation, where Riker has an affair with a non gender binary alien. Very progressive stuff on sex and gender. Respect for the disabled and all sorts of issues we would consider still social justice worrier territory today. It's really pushed the cultural boundaries a lot.

But then there's DARPA, and then there's the people who get influenced and inspired by sci-fi who do go out and make the Tesla death rays for the military. They do make the autonomous killing machine robots that might well wipe us all out metalhead style from Black Mirror one day. You know what I mean? DARPA is always extremely troubling to me. Maybe it's again, that X-Files background, but I really worry about the balance of good and bad inspiration here. What do you think you could say about that for us to close us out?

Aaron Ross Powell ([26:29](#)):

I do think that there is a divide here in science fiction and it's not a bright line, but it certainly is there between science fiction as I'm going to use fiction to explore where specifically technology can go and hard science fiction does this a lot versus the technology doesn't really matter to me. What matters to me is the people and the cultural adaptations and where society goes. And I wonder if what you're describing maps onto that divide. That on the one hand you might have the people who, the only thing that they are interested in when they read a work of science fiction is how the rocket ship functions and they want to build the next rocket ship. But the cultural implications of it, the dangers of a lot of sci-fi is about we've invented this new thing and it creates a whole lot of power or it grants power and what are the dangers of that power?

Those kinds of plots are less interesting. That it's almost a divide between say Isaac Asimov's foundation on the one side of, we can figure this stuff out versus Dune, which is all a series about the problems of power and fanaticism and charismatic leaders and so on. And then, there's the other side of the sci-fi line, which is, I think cyberpunk very much represented this, that I remember seeing an interview with William Gibson once where he, after I think Neuromancer came out or early on in his career, some tabletop gaming company approached him because they wanted to do a tabletop game set in his Sprawl trilogy world. And they started peppering him with questions. And one of them was, where are these people getting, they keep eating I think krill is, it's some sort of seafood is the main stock food of the people in the Sprawl.

And he was asked, "Where are they getting that? Where are they getting their food?" And he said, "I don't know. I never thought about it. I don't care. That kind of detail doesn't matter to me." I just thought it was kind of neat to think that they are consuming mostly krill. And that humanistic side of sci-fi I think, would push back against it, that it's almost the nerds versus the artists split. And so, yes, I think a lot of people have been influenced by science fiction into their careers as engineers or inventors or people who would like to direct society or guide it and if all that they are consuming is the how rocket ship works stuff, then they're not going to have that humanistic grounding that I think is the real value.

Literature is great. It's a lot of fun, but it also is valuable because literature is a moral education of sorts. It's a way for us to, the way that you become morally, I think better, more open, more informed is to be able to put yourselves into the heads of people who are different from you and experience what things are like outside of your own perspective. And literature is the best way to date that we have found for doing that at a really deep level. And so if the people who are guiding or exercising power over us haven't had that kind of humanistic education, if they are focused on the science fiction that doesn't do that then I think the danger that you are articulating is real.

But if on the other hand, science fiction continues this legacy that we've been discussing of pushing cultural boundaries, increasing toleration and acceptance, showing us how, even as the world becomes radically different, we can live together in increasingly peaceful ways and that we don't need monolithic, absolute powers telling us what to do, but that we can scratch out our living on the fringe or on the street and become the people we want to be, then that direction to me seems quite hopeful.

Anthony Comegna ([31:27](#)):

My very greatest thanks to Aaron Powell for joining us again on the show. I can't wait till we can have him back again. And I very strongly encourage everyone to go subscribe to all the podcasts put out by the good folks at [libertarianism.org](http://libertarianism.org), especially Aaron's show, Free Thoughts and the culture show I mentioned, Pop and Lock, but you definitely can't stop there because [libertarianism.org](http://libertarianism.org) is jam crammed full of amazing content. And if you find yourself rushing onto your favorite pod catcher to subscribe to excellent shows, why not also drop a rating and review for your absolutely favorite IHS Bay show, Ideas in Progress.