"Star Trek" and "Star Trek: The Next Genera

With a new ensemble cast, science fiction's m popular television series continues to evolve

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In October of 1987, Gene Roddenberry returned us to the final frontier. "Star Trek: The Next Generation" boasted a new, bigger and better Enterprise as well as a new and, perhaps not necessarily, improved crew. The basic premise of this show is the same as the original that ran from 1966-69. "To seek out new life and new civilizations . . ." has been the noble cause of the Starship Enterprise. But, in its new incarnation, set some 85 years after the original, they desire "to boldly go where no one has gone before." Obviously this advanced civilization cannot accept the word "man" as meaning "mankind," so they went with the non-gender specific "one." So much for advanced intelligence.

But in this updated version, much has changed. The feared Klingons are no longer to be feared. In fact they are friends of the Federation, and a Klingon is even in charge of Enterprise security. I suppose it's a kinder, gentler galaxy.

Roddenberry explained this change while visiting UNC last spring. It seems that he disliked the idea of a race whose sole purpose is to be evil. In the old series, the Klingons were to the Federation what the Russians were to Reagan's America in the early 1980s. But after Roddenberry left UNC, we discovered that maybe plotwise it was necessary to give the Federation a major opponent, thus the Romulans declare that they do not like humans (or Klingons) and that "we are back."

The new technical advancement is the Holideck, a recreational area on the Enterprise in which the computer generates a requested situation. So far, Capt. Jean-Luc Picard (Patrick Stewart) has been his favorite detective in 1940s San Francisco; First Officer — often called "Number One" — William Riker (Jonathan Frakes) has played trombone with a New Orleans jazz band; and Lt. Cmdr. Data (Brent Spiner) has become Sherlock Holmes in what became a serious science fiction problem. When one of the computer-generated characters begins to think independently, he discovers that he is not in 19th century London, but rather a computer image in a ship. He thinks. Therefore does he exist? He wrestles with the question which may shortly confound us, as our own scientists work to develop artificial intelligence.

But what may be the most interesting new development of the new "Trek" is the pacifism of the new and improved Federation. It doesn't seem we can expect repeats of Capt. James Kirk's retaliatory attack on a terrorizing Klingon. Capt. Picard is less volatile than the young Kirk. Picard has the command abilities and respect that Kirk had, but he also has the maturity and restraint that Spock exhibited. However, Picard's steadfast loyalty to and love for the Enterprise is equal to Kirk's, and you can expect trouble if you threaten his ship or his crew.

Then there is what is somewhat of a disturbing new development. A friend pointed out the similarity to Marxist doctrine in "The Next Generation." I always knew the old "Star Trek" leaned a little to the left, but Marxist? My friend explained one of the tenets of Marxism is that when the society can meet the survival needs of its people, then the people can turn all their energy to the development of art and culture and knowledge. A noble, if unrealistic, idea.

The new Trek had an episode in which three Americans from late 20th century Earth are picked up, drifting in space, their bodies suspended in time. One was a popular country singer, who just wanted a drink and a guitar; another wanted to find out the fate of her long dead children; and the third seemed to want nothing more than to call his broker or read the Wall Street Journal. Picard eventually explained to the man that the need for wealth no longer existed, for all the needs were met by the advanced society. Our contemporary asked the question which was in my mind, "Then where is the challenge?" The challenge as Picard explained was in bettering the society with art or science.

No, I don't believe Roddenberry is trying to push communism on the legions of Trekkies. But it does seem he could be taking some shots at capitalism. The new bad guys in the universe are the Ferengi, who want nothing more than to make a profit. Sure, extreme capitalism with no feeling for good or evil is not a good thing. But it's quite a statement to show the essence of capitalism to be evil and the essence of Marxism to be benevolent.

Then comes the irony. If the United Federation of Planets is a working and successful communist, or at the least socialist, society as Picard implied, then isn't it strange that the television program is centered on what would be the last refuge of capitalism: the military, where there is still a class system of rank and the desire to climb the corporate ladder.

But as I'm sure many are thinking now, it's only a television show, albeit one which is in the top five of those in syndication. "The Next Generation" is currently rated higher than reruns of the original.

But back to the characters and less serious stuff. "The Next Generation" relies heavily on some of the ideas of the past. The characters seem derived from different parts of Kirk, Spock, McCoy, Scotty, etc. Capt. Kirk was split into two characters: Picard and First Officer Riker. Picard is the respected commander, and Riker is the young and impulsive first officer. Riker also seems to be the most hated. While at UNC, Roddenberry was asked if he had any plans to kill off Riker. The question drew applause from the audience.

Mr. Spock, who developed into the most popular, and most interesting, character of "Star Trek" has been transformed mostly into Lt. Cmdr. Data. The emotionless Spock found his way into the one-dimensional Klingon, Lt. Worf, while the analytical, and "human" side of Spock, are evident in the android, Data (who receives most of the show's fan mail). But where Spock supressed his human qualities in favor of logic, Data dreams of being more human.

The new crew of the Starship Enterprise as seen on "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Sure look like a happy bunch, don't they?