

***Star Trek* and the American Society of the 20th Century**

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Abstract

*This paper explores the effect of the television series *Star Trek* on the equal rights struggle in the 20th century USA society. Analysis of two main topics – the fight for equal rights of minorities and the position of women in society – shows that by depicting minorities as equal partners and placing women into better positions, the author of *Star Trek* Gene Roddenberry prepared the television audience for the changes to come and helped them to be more receptive to things “alien” to them.*

*“It speaks to some basic human needs, that there is a tomorrow - it’s not all going to be over in a big flash and a bomb, that the human race is improving, that we have things to be proud of as humans. No, ancient astronauts did not build the pyramids - human beings built them because they’re clever and they work hard. And “*Star Trek*” is about those things.”*

Gene Roddenberry - the creator of *Star Trek* (Adler)

Star Trek can be considered the most important television series of all times, for its impact on the culture and society as whole was as profound as its effect on the minds of individual people. Moreover, Gene Roddenberry’s (the creator of the series) vision of the future inspired many contemporary scientists and nowadays many inventions considered common have basis in similar devices from *Star Trek*. Despite its humble beginnings, it expanded to attract millions of viewers to a television screen and generated billions of dollars of income. But *Star Trek* is not only about entertainment, money and fantastic trips “*where no one has gone before*”, which was originally the name for the pilot episode of *The Original Series* according to David Alexander and has subsequently been used in opening credits of all but two *Star Trek* series. Gene Roddenberry’s original idea was to depict current problems of American society and place them upon the background of 23rd century adventures of the crew of the USS Enterprise. His concepts were quite new to television series making and *Star Trek* was well received by the audience – not only as a mirror into the American society of the period but also as an attempt to show the solutions. Among the most pressing issues were the position of women in society and the integration of ethnical minorities.

MINORITIES play an important role in *Star Trek: The Original Series*. Roddenberry reflected contemporary society in his futuristic stories, analyzing the problems and 'solving' them in a non-violent, often overly-optimistic way. Roddenberry's utopian scenarios, although unrealistic, have always shown the peaceful way out of the situation despite the fact that contemporary people would never deem such things possible. The question of racial politics and equality in the American society was something about which Roddenberry felt very strongly, and as a consequence he used *Star Trek* to express his social conscience. Roddenberry's notion of unified, racially and ethnically united nations and even a 'unified' Earth led him to do something quite unusual for a 1970's television series. The crew of the USS Enterprise was multiethnic, including an African-American woman, Scottish, Japanese and Russian men and, for the first time in a science fiction television series, a human-alien hybrid, the famous Mr. Spock.

The Japanese character, helmsman Hikaru Sulu (portrayed by George Takei), was depicted, in spite of all television or movie trends of the time, as a proud, respected member of the crew and not a funny character or the bad guy. Bradley Darryl Wong has commented on this in an interview for *The News Tribune*: "The only people that were Asian and had a face like mine were people who were being made fun of" (Soren). The interviewer Soren Andersen later adds that B. D. Wong credits

Japanese-American actor George Takei, who played Lt. Sulu on the original "Star Trek" series, as having begun what he calls a "huge shift" in how minorities are depicted on television. For a black woman to play a nurse rather than, say, a maid or a cook, and for an Asian to play a starship helmsman in a role where his race was what Wong calls "incidental" to the character, was revolutionary at the time, a clear product of the civil rights struggle redefining American society in the 1960s. (Andersen)

Takei's character did not speak with any strange Asian accent nor was he a subject to certain cultural stereotypes such as practising karate or meditation. Making Takei's character an equal and respected member of the Enterprise's crew was but one of many Roddenberry's ideas of how to show that race or ethnicity will not matter in the future, while keeping the concepts of national pride still alive and within margins.

Gene L. Coon explained in *The Making of Star Trek* that for the show's second season, Roddenberry wanted to introduce a young British

character. However, upon receiving a note from Russian sources and in an attempt to somehow reflect the ongoing Cold War, Roddenberry changed his mind and made the character Russian. Ensign (later captain) Pavel Chekov (played by Walter Koenig) may have been Roddenberry's main "national pride keeping" character, judging from his many statements and reminders that certain important things in human history had been invented by Russians (e.g. scotch or the saying "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me" [1]). Despite the mildly funny effect of such notes, the Chekov character, and indeed the name chosen, was certainly an attempt by Roddenberry to remind the American public, which was being constantly manipulated by the period's anti-Soviet propaganda, that the Russian nation has played an important part in world's history.

The single most important character representing minorities was lieutenant Nyota Uhura (portrayed by Nichelle Nichols). She was the first female African American to have a major role on American television. Nichelle's character displayed strong individualism and was in no way treated by the common social standards of the 1970s. Despite this, Nichols felt her character did not get enough space on the screen and wanted to leave the show. However, as *Cultural Impact of Star Trek* explains, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. intervened and convinced her that it was imperative for the American public to see an African American woman in an equal position with white men on television. Staying another year and a half on the show, Nichols not only helped in the American Civil Rights movement's struggle to abolish the racial discrimination but also in improving all women's position in American society. Nyota Uhura was also a part of another of Roddenberry's revolutionary television stances. According to Richard Zoglin's *Trekking onward*, *Star Trek* holds the primacy of showing the first kiss between white and black characters (although not the first interracial as *Star Trek* itself had before shown white actors kissing Asian and Hispanic women [2]) in the history of American television (*Star Trek: The Original Series*, season 3, episode "Plato's Stepchildren"). The kiss itself, however, never made it into the final cut of the episode. In the scene where cpt. Kirk holds Lt. Uhura in his arms and is ready to kiss her, were both characters under a telepathic influence. William Shatner in his *Star Trek: Memories* describes the whole situation around the kiss. NBC/Paramount officials urged the fact that the characters do not kiss willingly and moreover prohibited the actors actually really kissing each other. So, in the episode, just before their lips are supposed to touch, the actors turn their heads away from the camera.

Mr. Spock (played by Leonard Nimoy) was the first human/alien hybrid on television science fiction show, but very surprisingly, according

to Nimoy's autobiography *I Am Spock*, the American audience regarded the controversial issue of cross-breeding humans with alien species (or as some might call it – polluting human gene pool) as something so inconceivable and remote, that they did not let themselves be bothered with thinking about it at first. However, in later seasons, the attitude towards Mr. Spock changed and setting aside the mass of devoted fans of this half-human half-Vulcan, Nimoy's character helped the audience to be more receptive to things 'alien' to them.

In later shows, *Star Trek* continued to go against stereotypes set by current cultural tendencies. In *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* an African American was the main character (Captain Benjamin Sisko, a single father trying to raise his son, played by Avery Brooks) for 7 years, in *Star Trek: Enterprise* (formerly known as *Enterprise* only) the long omitted element of sexual orientations was present and in *Star Trek: Voyager* was the starship captained by a strong, leading woman (Captain Kathryn Janeway, portrayed by Kate Mulgrew).

WOMAN and her positions and roles in *Star Trek* is also an essential issue which has undergone a great deal of changes and evolution over time. The road from being a mere set decoration to a captain's uniform was long and not always easy. No doubt that *Star Trek* again had, as in the case of minorities, a profound effect on the society and vice versa. The reflection of problems and wishes is apparent throughout all main *Star Trek* series.

In *Star Trek: The Original Series* the roles of women were really a straightforward ones. The women in Starfleet wore short, revealing (for the time period, of course) uniforms, were low ranking officers and had no or very simple lines. They could be easily classified as only a decoration of captain Kirk's bridge and probably even the red shirts (a term used for nameless security officers that would beam down to the planet with main characters and catch a weapon blast within next 5 minutes) were more important to the storyline. The only other type of women were the long legged alien beauties whose only purpose in the storyline was to seduce captain Kirk, either to gain his trust and use it for evil purposes of their master (usually a man or an unknown entity) or in a plea for help with some situation that is developing on the planet captain Kirk is visiting (in the former case, the red shirts usually die from the hands of evil entity's underlings). Either way, the sexual element was always present in some form, in most cases to please the male audience. Lieutenant Uhura was, of course, a special case due to her minority status. A notable fact is that the first African American woman in space, Mae Jemison, was, as explained by Mona Chiang, inspired by the character of lieutenant Uhura.

The budding scientist also enjoyed watching the 1960 TV show *Star Trek*. She found the character lieutenant Uhura particularly engaging. Played by African-American actress Nichelle Nichols, the chief communications officer explored the galaxy with a crew made up of people from all over the world. This vision fuelled Jemison's belief that she, too, would explore space. (Chiang)

Mentioned in Andrew Billen's *Spaced out* is the fact that Jemison's first words to Houston flight control were also inspired by *Star Trek* - she said "all hailing frequencies are open" (Billen).

Position of women gradually improved in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Women's roles were much more diverse, ranging from ship's councillor (Deanna Troi, played by Marina Sirtis) or ship's doctor (Dr. Beverly Crusher, portrayed by Gates McFadden) to the ship's tactical officer (Natasha Yar, played by Denise Crosby). The latter, however, was true only for the first season, since Natasha Yar was killed and replaced by a male alien, Worf (portrayed by Michael Dorn). Although there were remnants of *The Original Series* women worn uniforms (according to *Memory Alpha* called 'skant uniforms'), these were worn only by councillor Troi and lieutenant Yar and not by other women aboard Enterprise-D. Overall increased respect, higher ranks and more important positions differentiate the attitude towards women in *The Original Series* and *The Next Generation*. There are also no seductive alien women that captain Kirk had to 'deal with', showing the transfer of women from additional crew and support staff more to the centre of action.

Total equality of men and women finally came in *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*. Starfleet personal is now fully unisexed; women reach high positions and are always treated as equals. One of the main characters, Kira Nerys (played by Nana Visitor) is an alien woman in position of power on DS9 station and her apparent self-sufficiency and will to match any opponent is a clear sign of completing the emancipation not only in *Star Trek* but also in the society its reflecting. However, it would not be *Star Trek* if it did not partially tease the male audience; so for this purpose, there are the characters of bar dancers, one of whom decides to 'stand on her feet'. She starts a new, successful and productive life, which once again shows that women are fully capable to fend for themselves.

Last but not least, women in *Star Trek: Voyager* have even better position than in *Star Trek: Deep Space 9*. Captain Kathryn Janeway (later promoted to the rank of Admiral, achieving the highest rank in Starfleet) is a strong and determined leader of her crew on their distressful way home

to Earth through enemy territory. Chief engineer officer of USS Voyager is also a woman, a Klingon-human hybrid B'Elanna Torres (acted by African American actress Roxann Dawson) who later conceives a child with another human, thus completing the legacy began by Mr. Spock over 30 years ago and proving that *Star Trek* has always shown its viewers 'the final frontier'.

Star Trek has reflected many issues of American society since it went on air in mid-1960s. Solving the minorities' problem by integrating them and treating 'the other' as respected social constituents and partners helped in the struggle for racial equality and helped the American public realize that THEY are people too, only with a different colour of their skin. By reflecting the wishful position of women in the society, *Star Trek* helped to fulfil the goal of equalization one step at a time. Among many of its accomplishments, the effect *Star Trek* had on the society is the most important one. It is not every day that people have learned so much from a television series originally intended for entertainment and very occasionally has, although only partially, society transformed itself according to the ideas, thoughts and dreams of one visionary. *Star Trek* and its creator managed to achieve both.

Notes

1. Chekov's remarks about Russian inventions can be found for example in the following episodes:
Star Trek: The Original Series, season 2, episode "Friday's Child"
Star Trek: The Original Series, season 2, episode "Who Mourns for Adonais?"
Star Trek: The Original Series, season 2, episode "The Trouble with Tribbles"
2. Madlyn Rhue + Ricardo Montalban (*Star Trek: The Original Series*, season 1, episode "Space Seed")
France Nuyen + William Shatner (*Star Trek: The Original Series*, season 3, episode "Elaan of Troyius")

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