

Resist!

Against a precarious future

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Edited by Ray Filar

Part of the Radical Future series

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Preface

It is a sign of how far the conversation has moved on, that since the initial book in this series, the idea of generational politics has become commonplace. We all know what the opinion pieces say by now. Disgruntled gen-Yers bitch and moan about the excesses of baby boomers. We shout about how we want our future back from the greedy bastards who have hoarded away our share in society in gold-plated pension funds and five bedroom houses. Meanwhile, columnists of our parents' age write about how no-one appreciates the challenges of caring for elderly grandparents while supporting those good-for nothing twenty- to forty(!)-somethings who still can't afford to leave home.

This media cliché tells a good story, but it's a false one. It turns a set of difficult social changes into a familial conflict within the broadsheet reading classes. The reality is more complex and this book, like its predecessors, captures that complexity. Not only is there critique of the current moment, articulated passionately by Ray Filar in their introduction, but there are also alternatives to dominant discourses, new directions in action and activism and the possibility of a different political reality to be found in this book's pages. And that's the key thing, because this isn't about petulant young people coveting their parents' wealth; it's about the need for new solutions (and reclaiming old wisdom) to tackle the social, political, economic and environmental problems that neoliberalism either ignores or exacerbates.

And here's the rub. This book, this series of books, shouldn't have to exist. Generational politics should be an irrelevance. Any society that has its eye on survival nurtures its young, and stewards those institutions that effectively support the lives of its citizens, so that struggles do not have to be repeated and lives improve with each generation. Politically, we seem to have forgotten that. One by one, many of our enclaves of social justice, born from the traumas of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are being dismantled or destroyed.

The NHS? Up for sale. Co-ops? A target for vulture funds. Education? If you can afford it. Jobs? Maybe, but don't expect a real contract.

Neoliberal capitalism has broken the intergenerational bonds that enable society to continue in a way that is humane, just and sustainable. It is a politics that arrests the possibility of progress towards ever-greater human flourishing and leaves us all diminished. Books like this are important not just for their analysis and ideas, but for their energy: they inspire us to imagine a better future and, when confronted by the brutality of the present moment, they exhort us to resist.

Ben Little
Series Editor

Who groks Spock? Emotion in the neoliberal market

Matthew Cheeseman

Any topic can be used to think seriously about the future, even science fiction. I'm not particularly a fan of *Star Trek*, but I was drawn to it by the phrase 'I grok Spock', which I encountered whilst reading about the 1960s. The words lodged in my mind and became a cipher for an approach to politics, a way of thinking about radical possibilities. Shortly before *Resist!* went to print, Leonard Nimoy, the actor most associated with Spock, died. His death doesn't change my argument, it gestures alongside the text, to the significance that death always seems to evoke.

As many will know, the original TV series *Star Trek* followed the crew of the starship Enterprise as they explored space, 'the final frontier'. Like other products of the 1960s there were many utopian aspects to the show, which included a peaceful constitutional republic (the Federation), an ethnically diverse, multicultural (albeit highly gendered) crew, effective technology, and a classless, post-scarcity, post-capitalist economy. These radical ideas seemed to diminish whenever the *Star Trek* franchise was re-exploited: in the 1980s as *The Next Generation*, 1990s as *Deep Space 9* and *Voyager* and more recently as a series of films which have re-imagined the initial crew as youthful cadets, embarking on their adventures for the first time.

This recent reboot has proved popular. *Star Trek* was the seventh highest grossing film of 2009, *Star Trek Into Darkness* the eleventh of 2013, and *Star Trek 3* will be released to huge fanfare in 2016 for the fiftieth anniversary of the original series. In the new films Kirk and Spock behave more like soldiers in an uncertain world of passion and discipline. They are stridently militaristic, perceiving themselves as besieged by intergalactic terrorism. *Into Darkness* was dedicated to 'our post-9/11 veterans with gratitude for their inspired service abroad

and continued leadership at home'. Just as Batman has recently been recast as a capitalist fascist thug,¹ contemporary western anxieties are played out in the once-hopeful but now bleak and depressing twenty-third century. The screenwriter of the fiftieth anniversary film, J. D. Payne, says it will explore a moral dilemma: 'Where you could argue ... that "this" is what you should do, and if you're advocating "this" then it's actually evil'.² These words would not seem out of place in the mouth of a Western military 'advisor' to the Middle East.

These new films diverge from the 1960s *Star Trek* via the plot mechanism of time travel, which creates a parallel universe in which the new films are set. The idealism of the 1960s, with its daring attempts to imagine an equal society without socio-economic problems, are therefore being slowly erased by our more pessimistic era, which does not believe in anything beyond capitalism. A more liberated fictional future is being rewritten by films which deliver relentless spectacle and make huge profits for their makers. Only one thing connects them to the past: Spock, or rather, the late Leonard Nimoy, who played 'Spock Prime', the same Spock who lived through 'the original' *Star Trek* and then travelled back in time to appear in these new films, alongside his younger self. His screen time is hauntological, a ghostly reminder of a lost, perhaps better future.

The old Spock, green-blooded and telepathic, was a famously complex character split between two distinct species, human and Vulcan. Spock identified with his Vulcan heritage, burying his turbulent human emotions and focusing on logic. This made for a long and prosperous career, both on the USS Enterprise and with the 1960s public, because his logic-obsessed demeanour appealed to many. If not revolutionary, Spock was seen as evolutionary, the next step, a natural son of the Age of Aquarius, who represented the coming social changes that many in the 1960s, especially in the wider, transatlantic youth culture, believed in. Spock physically and emotionally articulated the rebellion that many people felt. It was Spock who, in an episode titled *The Way To Eden*, sat down and jammed with space hippies on his Vulcan lute. He was an iconoclast: he looked different, spoke in a different way and was in control of his own destiny.

This faith in Spock is represented by a slogan seen on t-shirts and badges from the late 1960s: 'I grok Spock'. It was this phrase that drew me to thinking about *Star Trek* and contemporary youth politics. The verb 'grok' references another alien, Valentine Michael Smith, a char-

acter from Robert A. Heinlein's wildly successful 1961 novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land*. This book was a counter-cultural touchstone, largely for its free and easy attitude towards group sex and mysticism.

Valentine Michael Smith was an orphan human brought up by Martians. Like Spock, he didn't understand 'human' emotions like jealousy or desire: the implication being that these were social traits learnt on earth, rather than an essential part of the human condition. He was also telekinetic, suggesting that earth humans aren't using the full capacity of our brains, a cultural idea that is repeatedly returned to, as in Luc Besson's recent film *Lucy* (2014). The verb 'to grok' is Martian for instantly understanding the essence of something. Imagine the dry atmosphere of Mars, where water is precious and exalted. When drinking water it is absorbed into the body, its substance and essence co-mingles with the drinker as one. In the novel, just as Martians grok water, they can grok people, situations or ideas.

Within this lies the Gnostic ideal of knowledge without learning, of a spiritual communion which appealed to more and more young people as the 1960s developed. Grokking became a counter-cultural buzzword, a synonym for the generational sense that something was happening, a change was occurring, that there was a new dawn on the horizon. This same sense was captured by the (slightly tongue-in-cheek) slogan 'Never Trust Anyone Over Thirty' which indicated that if you weren't part of the generation, you could never grok 'it', even if you tried. Grokking was beyond reason. It was this contradiction, between the highly logical Spock and the intuitive grokking that struck me. It reminded me of neoliberalism, which pretends to be scientific and logical and yet appeals to people's emotions, values and desires.

In his provoking 1972 book *Towards Deep Subjectivity*, Roger Poole describes the international student movement of the 1960s and 1970s as a mass movement of Romantics, embracing nature in their rejection of social conformity, capitalism and language. They believed reason had failed the world and had made it a poorer place. If you didn't grok that, there was no point arguing about the present or the future. Rationality itself had been poisoned, society was sick, so it was necessary to confront it with a spectacular development of the self: individuals marching, sitting-in, occupying space and chanting poetry. Individuals found the confidence to be themselves together.

These identity politics changed the west and gave impetus to the movements for gay rights, feminism, and racial and ethnic liberation.

Respect, tolerance and space for difference was fought for and, in some contexts, secured. Situated within such a movement, the appeal of Spock makes sense: an alien respected, integral even, to mainstream, human society, an alien blind to prejudice, who makes his own mind up on evidence. It is no accident that homosexual fantasies were focused on his relationship with Captain James T. Kirk from the 1970s onwards. Slash fiction, indeed, draws its name from the slash separating the two in K/S erotic fan fiction.

While the west developed greater confidence 'to be' Spock as the 1970s and 1980s progressed, it was grokking that had the most impact on how we relate to each other. In the last *Radical Future* book, *Regeneration*,³ I wrote about how the right to intoxication, a tenet of the western quest for freedom, has been monetised by neoliberal processes until it has become an obligatory search for punishment. The way many people, especially politicians, conceive of the world has similarly been monetised. Free trade and market forces are now routinely given as the only sensible way to conduct public life. Because of the emphasis placed on individual choice, society has been ceded to the market, which is now held to be the final arbiter of fairness, efficiency and 'rationality'. The market is everywhere, dealing with production, labour and 'services' such as water companies, the Royal Mail and the NHS. It is as if the 'invisible hand' of the marketplace has become sentient, attached to a brain capable of making decisions about the public good.

As I write this essay, thinking about invisible hands, I learn from the internet that Robert A. Heinlein had coined many words other than 'grok'. One is taken from the title of his 1942 short story *Waldo* which imagines a misanthrope, Waldo Farthingwaite-Jones, living in a satellite above earth, which is populated, in his account, by 'smooth apes'. Waldo is weak, unable to lift his head or even a spoon, and yet manages to perform many actions via a series of robotic telemanipulator claws. Since the story was written, such devices have been invented. They allow scientists to handle materials in remote locations and are known as waldos or waldo claws, from Heinlein's story. It struck me that the waldo claw is a much better metaphor for the action of the market in neoliberalism than Adam Smith's 'invisible hand'. A waldo has something behind it, operating from a distance. In neoliberalism's case it is perhaps not a misanthropic weakling living in a satellite, but certainly a set of ideas, an ideology that makes claims on

human nature and 'common sense'. The hand of the market knows us, groks our situation and does what has to be done, a waldo claw with ideas of its own.

There are other echoes of neoliberal mutation present in the language we still use today, like twangs from Spock's Vulcan lute. The verb 'to grok' is retained in computer culture, where it means to know a programming language so thoroughly that one can inhabit its code. One of the most pervasive and durable slang terms, 'hip' represents generational identity more than any other. From an old drug term for opium – lying 'on the hip', smoking drugs in a stupor – to being cool and 'with it', the hip is how we linguistically inhabit our generational body, from hip-hop to hipster, from the world's most popular musical style to its most exalted state of consumerism. Hipsterism, indeed, evolved from consuming cultural products thought of as 'awesome' (surely the closest contemporary analogue to grokking).

Nowadays awesome, hip bodies grok code as automated claws operate the market. Consumerism has become a second nature, recognised as logical and scientific by the grokking way of knowing. We have internalised our helpful waldo manipulators who have married logic with desire. This is why it is so difficult to imagine the end of capitalism: such an act is now against nature itself.

There is an argument that claims that if we can construct this situation, so we can deconstruct it, and just take power out of the claws of the market. This is one of the reasons why I write, especially about popular culture: to reveal these hidden telemanipulators and demonstrate the extent of their complex grip, locatable in characters such as Spock and Valentine Michael Smith. But this analytical power requires concentrated thought and action, which is difficult to achieve in a climate designed to prevent just that.

This is the irony buried within this essay: we are so embedded in media, data and trivialities which are not trivialities, just like Spock and *Star Trek*, that we can't find the way out. So although today we are all a little more powerful in our individual identities, just like Spock, we can't stop grokking data, media and images. The constant bombardment serves to disrupt thought, space and rationality. This makes it very hard to wrestle with the claws.

Many activists and theorists placed hope in the internet as a tool for organising thought and action. While useful, it has not yet presented a social grammar capable of rerouting (or rebooting) society. Indeed,

it seems, especially in the last few years, that the digital mutation is becoming all too fleshy and familiar. Numbers have never been more physical, from the super-complicated equations which manipulate the 'mood' of the market, to systems constantly notating the vibration of the psyche through clicks and keystrokes. If you are reading this text there are bound to be many models of you out there, selfies in clouds that will only grow in value the longer you stay alive and accumulate more browsing history, purchase information and sociometric data. This really is the contemporary manifestation of grokking, so real and tangible that it leaves a metallic taste in the mouth, the weight of data on our tongues, a film of pollution. This is most evident in cities, where the physical and digital move fastest, caught in a flow of fashion, predictive text and hashtags. We are in communion, grokking the moods of the market, mirroring the fluctuations in radiation from abstract finance. This sense is at its strongest in London, our capital of derivative ghosts.

That's why ghosts and madness have, in the last decades, proliferated. We may find inspiration in them, but we are frustrated by their cyclical recurrence. *Star Trek* is fated to perpetually 'reboot' on our screens, this time with added terrorists and violence, packaged to thrill and seduce. Counter-cultural Spock (RIP) now becomes part of the problem, a chimera capable of delivering the Vulcan nerve pinch. As I said, it is hard to be coherent, to 'make sense' when capitalism has invaded time, language and space.

Words drift from the count, become meaningless, feed repetitious thoughts producing more chatter and ink. In moneyed London, even the Occupy movement was out-of-place, displaced from the Stock Exchange to St. Pauls, where it stayed for an incredible 136 days. 136 days of encamped protest in the shadow of the City of London! And yet there was something ghostly even in this fortitude. Perhaps what is missing, or stolen, is the sense of communion, of collectivity, the generational confidence of grokking, of knowing and absorbing the inevitable other. Perhaps this is what we need to take back from the market.

There are some groups who have already done this. The 'terrorists' that are generated every day by the news provide plotlines for our rebooted science fiction stories. They use grokking. Fundamentalism gives some young people something the claws of consumerism can't provide: a sense of purpose and unity. A power that cuts through the

layers of media, data and endless reboots. Through the unlikely pen of Robert A. Heinlein, we can imagine why young people might want to teleport out to the Islamic State:

Grok means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed – to merge, blend, intermarry, lose identity in group experience. It means almost everything that we mean by religion, philosophy, and science – and it means as little to us (because of our Earthling assumptions) as colour means to a blind man.

Whatever its provenance, there is a thirst driving young people to feel the heat here, a desire to live beyond the twenty-first-century, beyond the grasp of the waldo claws. These are not logical processes, not Vulcan motivations, but desires from the human side of Spock, burning drives to eclipse the market masquerading as nature. Our radical future must be built between two extremes, the savage market of chrome and data and the desiring pit of militaristic heat and fervour, both capable of erasing bodies, of turning them into ghosts, living and dead.

It is never easy to construct something, argue over it, explore and achieve consensus. A radical future must come from ideas, words and action. And that, really, is the only conclusion: we must continue to listen, read and discuss, plan and protest. We must understand the power of grokking, expose and oppose and think about hidden powers. We must speak the limits of our thought while at the same time not be afraid to restate arguments or to find the same arguments and ideas in other forms. We must experiment. We must reiterate and continue to claim Spock, not only because others will reboot him, but because we must think with what has been made. Only by doing so will we create space to explore a future, to gesture towards a time when the phrase ‘Live Long And Prosper’ can be spoken with meaning.

Matthew Cheeseman is a researcher and writer. He teaches at the University of Sheffield, blogs at www.einekleine.com and publishes *The British Esperantist* (which probably isn't what you think it might be). In the future, he plans to write an exciting thriller about GOSPLAN, the Soviet state planning agency. @eine on Twitter. I would like to thank Florian Roithmayr, whose Platform residency at Site Gallery led to this essay.

Notes

1. Dan Hassler-Forest, *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*, Zero Books, 2012.
2. *Star Trek 3* scriptwriter J. D. Payne speaking at the LDS Film Festival, quoted on trekcore.com <http://trekcore.com/blog/2014/03/video-jd-payne-offers-hints-to-star-trek-3-plot-describes-moral-dilemma-for-enterprise-crew/>.
3. Clare Coatman and Guy Shrubsole (eds), *Regeneration*, Lawrence and Wishart, 2012.