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Managing and Manipulating History:  
Perpetual Urgency in Asimov and Heinlein

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*Abstract: This article discusses the view of history presented in the early part of Isaac Asimov's Foundation series (original Foundation trilogy published in book-form 1950–1953) and Robert Heinlein's short story "The Man Who Sold the Moon" (1949) from his Future History series. Looking at the way these works are influenced by the 1940s pulp science fiction context and Astounding Science Fiction magazine editor John W. Campbell Jr., this article examines their shared sense of continuous urgency or impending crisis. This leads to authoritarian solutions and a recurrent focus on "Great Man" characters who manipulate the society toward a better future with their enlightened awareness of the workings of history. As this article argues, while the stories justify these manipulations by a sense of urgency, they also create tensions where the manipulations become only temporary solutions and lead to predetermined futures for all but the power elite.*

*Keywords: Isaac Asimov, Foundation, Robert A. Heinlein, Golden Age science fiction, future history, crisis, authoritarianism*

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*"... there is nothing in this world so permanent as a temporary emergency."  
Heinlein, *The Past Through Tomorrow*, 123*

This article examines the view of history conveyed in the early part of Isaac Asimov's Foundation series in comparison with "The Man Who Sold the Moon" (1949) from Robert Heinlein's Future History series. Both reflect also more generally the spirit of the so-called "Golden Age" of American science fiction in the 1940s, greatly influenced by editor John W. Campbell Jr. of *Astounding Science Fiction*, arguably the most influential pulp SF magazine of the time. Stories by both Asimov and Heinlein frequently involve enlightened engineers who actively shape history and bypass democratic processes, and as I argue, in this they repeatedly convey a sense of history as a state of perpetual urgency and crisis where great individuals must rise to the occasion and take active control of the course of events.

While history, especially in Asimov's larger work, also connects with themes such as frontier and guardianship, the present article will focus on the early parts of Asimov's and

Heinlein's series, only briefly pointing out the further and diverging examples of the authors' other connected works.<sup>1</sup>

Authoritarianism is a commonly acknowledged strain in Campbellian science fiction (see e.g. Easterbrook, Kilgore, Abbott), frequently seen to be based in social Darwinism and reliance on meritocracy (Smith, Tucker, McGiveron, and Berger). It seems that these ideas are activated and justified through an Enlightenment-inspired necessity of contemplating history and societal dynamics. But as that contemplation often seems to result in a sense of impending crises, I argue that these stories share an unspoken assumption of a state of urgency which justifies emergency measures, and as such already postpones any serious consideration of more democratic, and slower, options in building societies and reaching solutions that would lead to the survival of humankind as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

Although both Asimov's and Heinlein's larger story sequences take a consciously historical approach, Asimov's work is based on idealization of a rather somber Enlightenment spirit, while Heinlein's stories are more pluralistic and satirical. Regardless, especially the stories set at the early stages of both future histories seem to be rooted in a view of history which requires leadership by the select few at moments of great urgency, even if they also view history as a series of larger developments which most individuals cannot affect – unless they are among the few who possess a superior understanding of those historical forces.

## Campbellian Science Fiction and History

The future histories of Asimov and Heinlein were both first published as serials in *Astounding Science Fiction* magazine during the time when John W. Campbell Jr. had assumed its editorship and was consciously seeking to raise the "respectability" of the genre by trying to harness its speculative potential (Chapledaine *et al.*). In his editorials and critical writing Campbell also emphasized the predictive aspirations of science fiction as a field for thought experiments that were highly relevant to his contemporary society (Campbell, "Place of SF" 20), fostering a sense of literature that addressed audiences "who felt they had an immediate stake in the technosocial disruptions that were remaking a world" (Csicsery-Ronay 81). As Csicsery-Ronay notes, "[d]oing so it jettisoned many of the aesthetic and historical axioms of the Western culture" (*ibid.*), which in part led to more conscious attention on the role of history in the stories, and to the "social science fiction" that considered the impact of science on human culture in general (Asimov, "Social Science Fiction" 157–196).

The characters in these works of Golden Age science fiction use their knowledge of history to more effectively manipulate and maneuver the present towards their desired future. This results in a very pragmatic and utilitarian conception of history and societal dynamics where history is knowledge, and knowledge is power – bringing about a direct need to learn from the past to build the future. The idea of actively steering the course of the future is apparent also in Campbell's editorials where he claims for SF authors a role in shaping the future. It is a deliberate message of technological optimism, characteristic of Campbell's desire to see science fiction as a kind of continuation of the Renaissance. Campbell's introduction to the 1953 *Astounding Science Fiction*

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1 In this article I present a part of the argument in my forthcoming dissertation *The Cowboy Politics of an Enlightened Future: History, Expansionism and Guardianship in Asimov's Science Fiction*, which will deal with Asimov's series on the whole, including the interconnected Robot and Foundation stories. Here I focus on *Foundation* (1951), the first part of the book-form publication of the series which originally appeared in *Astounding* in 1942–1950. I have discussed Asimov's frontier themes also for example in Käkälä (2008).

2 Berger (discussed below) comes close to this crisis-bound idea. Hassler talks about Asimov's Enlightenment resonances more generally and Miller looks at Asimov's work as attempts to solve the utilitarian calculation problems of maximizing the well-being of the masses.

*Anthology* sums up many of the arguments from his editorials. He views SF as a literature which can help to conceptualize and develop further the early 20th-century “Technological Revolution” because it is

the literature of the technological era. It, unlike other literatures, assumes that change is the natural order of things, that there are goals ahead larger than those we know. That the motto of the technical civilization is true: “There must be a better way of doing this!” (Campbell, “Introduction” xiii)

In Campbell’s vision, this extends into something that would have an impact on the “method of living together; a method of government, a method of thinking, or a method of human relations” (ibid.). This is all a staple of the technological optimism that the “new literature” would address, studying history in order to extrapolate on new ways to build on the past. Campbell’s ideas of the “Technological Era” reflect an almost Comtean positivism where knowledge of history has an integral role in the transition from the Enlightenment, or what Comte called “metaphysical” stage, to the truly scientific, positive stage.

In his promotion of science fiction, Campbell sees the “old” literature in the dawning Technological Era as “bitter, confused, disillusioned and angry . . . stories of neurotic, confused and essentially homeless-ghost people; people who are trying to live by conventions that have been shattered and haven’t been able to build new ones” (xiv). In contrast to this, he posits the “new literature” of science fiction as more able to effectively take up large themes, and to acknowledge and deal with change as a permanent part of human life and the world. It will “tell of goals and directions and solid hope,” providing for a “stability of a compass needle that points always to the pole it never attains, but knows surely is there” (ibid.). In this rhetoric of optimism and constant progress, Campbell argues for “dynamic stability that lies in going instead of in being” (ibid.).

The sense of science fiction as first and foremost an ongoing dialogue of ideas has carried to the present for example in the discussions of hard-SF-oriented authors David Brin, Gregory Benford and Greg Bear who added to Asimov’s series with their “Second Foundation Trilogy.”<sup>3</sup> They see this as a process where they “revisit” the assumptions of the older works and add to the discussion, even if it is, in their view, often misunderstood in criticism as “sharecropping” on each other’s ideas (Bear 22, 30–31). This is what also Csicsery-Ronay refers to with his concept of the SF “megatext” which emphasizes the communal aspect of the genre and the “shared subcultural thesaurus” created by all of its texts (Csicsery-Ronay 77n4, 82–84). In his view “SF texts are not autonomous; they depend on each other for comparison, dialogue, the grounding and elaboration of ideas” (84). This view approaches the works expressly from within the genre and the fandom, and emphasizes the role of the readers’ (and authors’) competence in the genre at the same time as it slightly paradoxically praises the universality of the genre’s approach. All in all, the key point here is the consideration of science fiction as thought experiments where new theories are built in dialogue with the old. From the readers’ letter columns in Campbell’s *Astounding* to the present criticism, this discussion seeks to view the thought experiments of science fiction as something like a simulation of using the scientific method in actual science.<sup>4</sup>

In conjunction with these ideas, Delany places the Campbellian Golden Age in context with the discoveries of Einstein and others who showed that extensive scientific revolutions were

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3 Rather than further conceptualize the series, Brin, Benford and Bear update some of Asimov’s ideas with more recent science and fill in gaps in the already existing narrative. They do not venture beyond the events in *Foundation and Earth*, the novel set in the latest events of Asimov’s fictional world, nor do they consider what the completed collective consciousness of Galaxia would look like.

4 This emphasis on the ability of science fiction to provide a vehicle for the ideas sometimes leads to seeing more mainstream literary criticism as merely something that gets in the way of the thought experiments, which are often perceived as the genre’s most important aspect. This is apparent already in Campbell’s ideas on the “new literature,” as he effectively aims for an active and integral role for science fiction in the sphere of societal and political discourse, but not in the sphere of art.

possible. According to Delany, this “theoretical plurality” inspired a critique of the popular conception of science, and the resulting constant “fictive theoretical revision” challenged what modern science at the time considered impossible (Delany 221). As a result, investigating various views of history became one more thought experiment, leading to “historical plurality” in Campbellian science fiction as it brought history and societal development into the realm of theories potentially to be revolutionized by new discoveries (226).

There are, however, also much more pessimistic interpretations: for example Berger sees the works of Campbellian science fiction to exhibit a world-view centered on desperately opposing the decay implied by the Second Law of Thermodynamics which dictates a descent into entropy. In his view, much of Campbellian science fiction becomes an (often frustrated) attempt to fight against this impending chaos by recurrently authoritarian methods, and the works do not look as hopeful as presented in Campbell’s own rhetoric (Berger 14–15).<sup>5</sup> Still, at the same time as Berger makes an important point in criticizing the works of Campbellian Golden Age for the simplification of scientific and historical processes and for the resulting authoritarianism, he also rather heavy-handedly concludes that “the ultimate inevitability of entropy made Campbell a determinist about human history” (17). As a result, Berger’s own analysis largely downplays the curious tension between these gloomy prospects and the “problem-solving, activism, optimism; hope . . . in the right kind of people to master their physical environment,” which Berger sees as mere denial of the losing battle (ibid.). After all, even if the solutions posited by Campbellian SF are at times meritocratic, authoritarian and brutally utilitarian, they still represent the continued survival of humankind – and while they betray distrust in the intelligence of the masses and at times see democracy as a hindrance to progress, they nevertheless also exhibit a certain optimism and belief in the human ability to come up with new answers in the future.

Heinlein and Asimov both highlight the spirit of the Campbell era, as well as make use of a specific frontier ethos. Heinlein based the outline of his Future History series on the history of American expansion and projected the frontier past rather directly onto the near future (see also Samuelson 32–63), often exaggerating certain aspects of the American frontier mythos (and ethos) to satirical proportions. His future history outline progresses from “The Crazy Years” of the 1940s European collapse and “considerable technical advance” in the US to space exploration consciously modelled on American frontier expansion in “opening of new frontiers and a return to nineteenth-century economy” (*The Past Through Tomorrow* 660–661). This then turns into “Imperial Exploitation” and develops through “revolutions,” “extreme puritanism,” and “religious dictatorship” into the “[r]e-establishment of civil liberty” and “[r]enascence of scientific research” which enables yet another move toward the stars (ibid.). Populating this timeline with stories that are only loosely connected, Heinlein created a fairly pluralist mosaic view of the future history of human advance into space.

In contrast, Asimov’s series offered a view of encompassing sweeps of future history which unfolded as a unified story, and transmitted a sense of a mythical grand narrative of all humanity, employing an encyclopedic flavor akin to Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–1789) which was the initial inspiration behind the desire to write, as Asimov himself describes it, “a science fiction story that *read* like a historical novel” (*I, Asimov* 116–117, original emphasis). This historical approach opened vast conceptual possibilities, and also turned from the analogies of Roman history into analogies of the American history of expansionism and theorizations on the significance of the frontier in the American development, as I have argued elsewhere (“Asimov’s Foundation”).

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<sup>5</sup> Berger criticizes Campbellian SF as “increasingly misanthropic and elitist” with a deeply rooted distrust in the human faculty which leads to authoritarianism because “the masses cannot be trusted to govern themselves” (32). This leads to “the forceful oppression of certain kinds of change, at least for all but an elite.” Berger sees this as a frustration arising from the attempt to reduce problems to their essentials in the spirit of the scientific method, when history or society cannot be so reduced (31).

Heinlein's stories concentrate on individuals and local concerns, and connect to his own present through detailed references to American frontier history, as well as satirical exaggerations of *laissez-faire* capitalism (Tucker 189–190) and political manipulation. Although Asimov's work, too, includes political manipulation and plutocratic plotting, in his series they are represented more simply as societal trends, and the stories are inhabited by characters who take an active role as they not only try to understand the past but also seek to transform that understanding into action. Despite the fact that Asimov's series focuses on mostly one character per story, it manages to create a feel of a panoramic view of the history of a society as it changes. While Heinlein focuses on individual characters at crucial points in his future history, Asimov's work builds a grand narrative that covers the future history of the whole of the human species.

As I discuss in the following, the conceptions of history in the works of Asimov and Heinlein become apparent through the motifs of urgency and the "Great Men" of history who rise to the task of managing that situation, and succeed through their ability to view history in a way that enables them to base their manipulations on it.

## Worlds of Perpetual Urgency and Determinism for the Masses

Many of the Golden Age writers were infatuated with the idea of the Enlightenment and presented streamlined versions of it in their stories under Campbell's editorship, reflecting his positivism and faith in the power of science and technology. However, this faith is often shadowed by cynicism in terms of politics and the importance of individual rights, veering in its ideals toward enlightened despotism. The early 20th-century context was one of the sources for the desire in American SF, inspired by the new scientific discoveries, to fight against the seemingly impending chaos brought about by the social upheavals, depression, war and fascism of the 1930s (Berger 14–15). In this, much of the Campbellian science optimism can be seen as attempts to navigate through the societal entropy and to maintain a precarious balance on the brink of chaos. Even as Asimov's series progresses rather optimistically from one crisis to another, it also exhibits a nervous urgency of fighting off that impending chaos<sup>6</sup> (in a very concrete manner as psychohistory is trying to shorten the coming "Dark Age" of the galaxy), and a certain awareness that things can very easily slip into this nearly irredeemable state. All of this creates the need for authoritarian control, which will enable the corrective action. All in all, Asimov and Heinlein both explore various aspects of the motif of conspiracy or elite control (Clareson 30, Abbott 108, Palumbo 49–64), justified by the urgency of the historical situation.

In the Foundation series the character of Hari Seldon becomes a purveyor of the perpetual urgency under which the Foundationers constantly work. In his recorded appearance at the Foundation "Time Vault" fifty years after its establishment in exile from the Galactic Empire, Seldon sets the stage for the crises to come:

From now on, and into the centuries, the path you must take is inevitable. You will be faced with a series of crises. . . .

But whatever devious course your future history may take, impress it always upon your descendants that the path has been marked out, and that at its end is [a] new and greater Empire! (*Foundation* 80–81)

Seldon's message casts the Foundationers as "the seeds of Renaissance and the future founders of the Second Galactic Empire" (*ibid.*) whose destiny it is to save the whole of human civilization. As

6 Palumbo (2002) focuses on the idea of chaos and fractal symmetry as self-similarity in Asimov's plot structure. On this basis he conducts an insightful, but still rather conventional reading of the recurring themes in the series, ordered according to his findings on the plot structure.

Seldon repeatedly engages in these crisis-bound conceptualizations of history and future, for the Foundationers his recorded appearances make him a godlike entity behind their national destiny. The Foundationers are thus immersed in ideas of an urgent duty to expand and redeem the rest of the galaxy, and this will become the ultimate justification for manipulations when the characters of the politician Salvor Hardin and businessman Hober Mallow rise to the challenge. When they do, they are frequently portrayed as the only ones who realize the state of urgency and see the larger patterns of history.

While Asimov's heroes assume power at states of emergency, Heinlein's heroes remain more ambivalent. Still, also Heinlein's very openly manipulative protagonist, D.D. Harriman in "The Man Who Sold the Moon," argues that he needs to be in control of the moon flights because only he can be the moral guardian of the possibilities that they produce:

Handled right, it can mean a new and braver world. Handle it wrong and it's a one-way ticket to Armageddon. . . . I plan to be the Man in the Moon myself—and give it my personal attention to see that it's handled right. (Heinlein 146)

Both Asimov's and Heinlein's characters repeatedly assume a position of guardianship over society as they take responsibility and guide all of humanity despite their personal interests. As Harriman puts it early on in Heinlein's story: "there is nothing in this world so permanent as a temporary emergency" (123). It is this urgency that calls for the "Great Men" of history to step up, and the narratives of both Asimov and Heinlein build on a conception of history which focuses on these figures.

In this, the masses are often left in the background. The fact that "the path has been marked out" raises the discussion of determinism in Asimov's series. While for example Elkins sees Asimov's psychohistory as essentially distorting ideas of historical materialism to a cyclical conception of history (96–110), Freedman more recently views psychohistory as reducing Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis to nineteenth-century positivism which assumes the masses to be completely passive. This leads to "investing of all meaningful agency in an elite and aloof clerisy" (Freedman, "Remembering the Future" 133–134). Indeed, Asimov's "necessary assumption[s]" of psychohistory do demand this, as the human reaction stimuli must be kept constant for the whole theory to work (*Foundation* 20). On the other hand, the problems of this reduction are acknowledged already in Asimov's series as it continues: as human history cannot be simplified in such a mechanistic way, this sends Asimov on an infinite course of trying to patch up the problems created by his previous solutions. Along these lines, Delany has noted that the series in fact comes close to the spirit of the scientific method when it seeks to address these problems in later stories, thus engaging in a dialogue with ideas presented in the earlier stories (see Delany 223–227). In his view, the latter half of Asimov's original trilogy – the stories with the Seldon-Plan-disrupting character of "Mule," and the scientific community of the Second Foundation who try to fix the Plan after him – questions this determinism and positivism, in effect delivering a two-part message that "history is intellectually negotiable but not deterministically predictable" (Delany 223–225).

However, it seems to me that all of this overlooks the point that history in Asimov's series is never really deterministic in the first place. Psychohistory is a statistical tool that will reveal tendencies and probable developments, but that information is always used by someone to initiate some action. These initiating agents – nearly always a power elite, comprised of however few people – retain their freedom of action and the direction chosen becomes a matter of their reasoning. Their actions may effectively result in determinism for the masses, but in this curious mixture of looking at the masses through the power elite, the masses fade into the background. In psychohistory, the social sciences are extrapolated into the realm of hard sciences, and history itself becomes a set of data that can be treated through the methods of the natural sciences. Therefore, it

becomes a utilitarian method of taking guardianship over the human future history, to minimize strife and to try to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people (see also Miller 189–206). As Asimov's fictional world is ultimately dictated by rationality, there seems to be no effective need for a discussion on the morality of this guarding elite – their benevolence is as if automated by their reliance on science and reason. Furthermore, this same power structure is present in Asimov's series even in the stories where the current power elite operate without knowledge of psychohistory. Even there similar layers of hidden elite control are present, and rather than positing that there is no way to affect the course of the future, this possibility can be accessed only by the very few of a highly select elite, and even they have to struggle to succeed.

Thus these works exhibit a tension between the two conceptualizations of history which Shippey sees in much of science fiction: the “Malthusian” idea that society is bound by technical and economic forces invisible to the individual, and the “mythopoeic, hero-making” idea that history progresses purposefully and with definite agency by individuals toward the present which is superior to the past (Shippey 6–8). While this develops into a more pluralistic view as the narratives of Asimov and Heinlein progress, *Foundation* implicitly and “Man Who Sold The Moon” more obviously emphasize individual actors who are able to take advantage of the Malthusian forces of society with their own rational ability.<sup>7</sup>

## Freedom and Responsibility of the Great Men

Especially the early part of the *Foundation* series becomes a sort of a hagiography of the frontier filibuster, robber baron and merchant prince characters who begin building the nation on the frontier. In Asimov's series, the actions of such characters are easily justified through the urgency set by Hari Seldon's speech, and even though they do not possess the same knowledge of the future to come as Seldon, they earn their place among the heroes of *Foundation* history. Their impetus seems to be Thomas Carlyle's “Great Man Theory” according to which “the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here” (Carlyle 4). This idea was popularized in Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1840), and it becomes one of the leading conceptions of history behind Asimov's series, and the same is apparent also in several of Heinlein's works. In fact, a couple of minor characters in “The Man Who Sold the Moon” even refer to Carlyle explicitly.

In addition to this, the pulp context of Asimov and Heinlein brings in the idea of heroic individuals who shape the course of history in a way that resonates with the convention of the “universal hero,” as analyzed by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949). The three stages of what he calls a monomyth are “a separation from the world, a penetration to some source of power, and a life-enhancing return” (35). Just as there is a universal mythic structure of quest in the specifically American cultural myths of “settling the West” and “manifest destiny” (Mackey-Kallis 17), the Great Man heroes of Asimov and Heinlein become the realizers of a mythical quest as they transform not themselves but the world around them through the *escape – initiation – return* formula.

In the *Foundation* series, Hari Seldon is the ultimate Great Man figure as the developer of psychohistory. The chapter “The Psychohistorians” in *Foundation*, opening the book-form publication of the series, adds to building the myth as it shows Seldon prophetically mapping out

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<sup>7</sup> The two larger series also contain stories like Heinlein's “Logic of Empire” and Asimov's “The General” in *Foundation and Empire* (originally published as “Dead Hand” in May 1945 *Astounding*) which demonstrate the helplessness of the individual in the grip of the historical forces. This is in contrast with the maneuverings of the traders and mayors in the early parts of Asimov's series where the characters do steer the society, but much in the way of Heinlein's heroes do not attempt to go against the flow of history and societal developments. Instead, they harness these forces for their personal advantage at the same time as they work for the common good.

the course of the First Galactic Empire's decline with the certainty of a man with a vision and plans calculated by the scientific accuracy of "the developed mathematics of over eighteen years" (*Foundation* 27). When Seldon is taken to a trial where he has to answer accusations of rousing rebellion against the Empire with his predictions, he is "unperturbed. . . the only spot of stability remaining in the world" (28). He is the purveyor of "scientific truth [which] is beyond loyalty and disloyalty" (29) and not a puppet of the crumbling empire that challenges him. Through psychohistory Seldon is more "aware of both the present status and the past history of the Empire" (33) than anyone else, and at the same time he becomes a founding father figure and a Great Man of historical importance to all Foundationers.

However, while Seldon's messages may inspire the masses by casting them as the protagonists of a magnificent future, they provide no actual guidance. Rather, they enforce a split between those few who understand and control the science and the many who to whom it becomes a matter of predestination, as discussed above. Only a select few, protagonists like Salvor Hardin and Hober Mallow, are able to use their intellect to distance themselves from what seems pure magic and predestination to others, in order to go beyond the shock and awe of the sublime vision and start actively forwarding the Foundation's expansionist mission. Repeatedly in Asimov's series, the Great Men are found among those who are not mesmerized by the seemingly sublime scope of history laid before them, but are instead able to place it in the world of reason and take action (see Käkälä, "Enlightened Sense of Wonder?").

Similar noble aspirations can be found in Heinlein's characters as well, but equally strong is the sense of the capable individual's right to take also personal advantage of the situation. Smith (137–171) and Tucker (172–193) among others have discussed the social Darwinism apparent in many of Heinlein's works, and it seems evident that while Heinlein's stories provide an optimistic view of the possibility of human development, they also open the door to meritocracy and justification of authoritarian control by the "fittest" (Cf. McGiveron 53–54<sup>8</sup>). The adoration for Machiavellian heroes who become significant historical figures through their courage to act upon their vision is clearly present in the character of Harriman. At first he seems like a purely capitalist robber baron on "the greatest real estate venture since the Pope carved up the New World," ready to strike a deal that is "like having Manhattan Island offered to you for twenty-four dollars and a case of whiskey" (Heinlein 132), and operating with a *savoir-faire* where "the use of bribe money is a homeopathic art" (140). Initially Harriman is the fabled American entrepreneur-turned-tycoon with a "Midas touch" (134) who makes use of the virgin land rhetoric and frontier parallels only to further his business interests. However, as he reveals his larger nation-building vision in direct comparisons between the history of American independence and the notion of establishing a free state on the Moon, his plan is shown to be more than a mere plutocratic daydream. Thus Harriman becomes the lone hero who understands the situation and now his greater goal justifies all of his manipulations:

The Moon was not meant to be owned by a single country, even the United States.  
(145–146)

I'm going to see this thing developed, not milked. The human race is heading out to stars—and this adventure is going to present new problems compared with which atomic power was a kid's toy. The race is about as prepared for it as an innocent virgin is prepared for sex. Unless the whole matter isn't handled carefully, it will be bitched up. (203)

8 McGiveron contests that Heinlein's Social Darwinism is "not a celebration of mindless expansionism, but, consistently, a call to arms to those who would remain free; he espouses justifiable defense rather than rapacious offense." In his view, Heinlein's "idealism and pragmatism temper each other" and produce solutions of mutually tolerated existence instead of purely socially Darwinistic "mindless predatory organisms" (54). All in all, McGiveron gives Heinlein much more of a benefit of doubt than the numerous critics' allegations of elitist libertarianism bordering on fascism.



Harriman himself is somehow the only one who is not as innocent: as a self-appointed guardian, he will ease the virgin humanity safely into this adulthood that it will find in transforming the untouched land of the space frontier into an established society. In his vision and conviction that he must nurture humanity in the right direction, Harriman is rather like Asimov's heroes.

As Heinlein's story is filled with conscious and direct contemplation on the historical analogies, Harriman's business partners debate his status as that frontier entrepreneur-cum-Carlylean hero. Comparing him to "the last of the Robber Barons [who] opened up the American West," they see him as "the first of the new Robber Barons" and make a conscious reference to Carlyle and "the 'Hero' theory" (185). These minor characters function to highlight considerations of the historical significance of both the situation of opening the space frontier and the role of individual Great Men in it. Still, because Harriman's business partners are themselves not adept enough to become the historically significant rulers of Carlyle's hero theory, they stay on the "merry-go-round" set in motion by Harriman's manipulations and rather easily get past their concerns of him "setting up new imperialism" (186). Even this much concern for the side-effects of manipulation is something of an exception in these stories, as they frequently idolize the robber baron figures as the new Western entrepreneurs. The ethos of the stories is that even if the scheming is devious as such, the characters turn into heroes when they contribute to the development of the frontier nation.

Harriman operates in a knowable present with all the possible resources of information and wealth at his disposal, but the Foundation mayor Salvor Hardin has to rely entirely on his own rational ability. His story is set in a moment of utmost urgency as the Foundation's existence is threatened by the surrounding kingdoms, and in this situation Hardin becomes the first of the Foundation Great Men to begin establishing it as a nation of its own. Hardin is empowered by his own ability and vision as he starts working toward Seldon's goal by piecing together information about psychohistory and Seldon's objectives. While the Foundation Encyclopedists passively wait for a "*deus ex machina*" (*Foundation* 73) of the Old Empire or Seldon's calculations to resolve their problems, in the spirit of Enlightenment, Hardin takes an active role, realizing that "we must work it out ourselves" (75). At this point he seems to be the only one with at least a suspicion that there may be a greater whole towards which they should be heading. With his sense of self-reliance, he is able to reproach the Foundation scientists for passively only relying on "authority or the past – never on [them]selves" (74). Hardin's pragmatic self-reliance simply brushes aside any paralyzing awe that his own vague knowledge of Seldon's plan may evoke, and he gets to work.

The relatively static nature of Asimov's characters in the Foundation series produces this contradiction: as they correspond at least metaphorically with Joseph Campbell's monomyth, they go through motions which should cause some change. However, as they are the Great Men who possess a strong sense of mission to begin with, they need no transformations like the reluctant acceptance of responsibility, which would be typical for pulp heroes. As often in Asimov, the characters whose actions change the world remain themselves representations of the societal forces, rather than show any individual development – even if, paradoxically, individualism is one of the forces that they represent.<sup>9</sup>

In his analysis on the body of Heinlein's work as "incessant focus on the single individual and his world" (99), Slusser points out a factor which seems the key to the difference between Heinlein and Asimov. Heinlein's focus on individuals can be seen to rise from a different concern: while Asimov uses individual heroes as emblems of forces that move the society onwards and create the future history, with Heinlein the actual individual and his preservation are much more significant. As Slusser points out, Heinlein's work exhibits a "preoccupation with endlessly

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9 Later on, Asimov's series does feature also characters whose inherent sense of mission works to show the futility of individual action, as in the case of Lathan Devers in *Foundation and Empire*.

extending the material line of a single existence” (108n), as in his Lazarus Long stories. Although Asimov’s future history is often criticized for the stylized and interchangeable characters, it is precisely this emblematic nature of the characters which contributes to creating the sweeping narration of the large historical movements and societal dynamics. To add to this, Asimov’s heroes are distinguished from Heinlein’s by the way they more easily accept the limitations of their personal existence, and also step down from the seat of power.<sup>10</sup>

With both Asimov and Heinlein, however, the actual justification for why these specific individuals should be in control does not seem to be much more than the fact that they happen to rise to the challenge, and be responsible enough to see to it that in addition to accumulating their own wealth, they benefit society (or the ‘right side’ of it anyway) as a whole. As De Witt Douglas Kilgore notes in *Astrofuturism*: “[i]n Heinlein’s narratives, the right to control new lands and wealth is conferred according to one’s standing in a meritocratic hierarchy” (95; see also Elkins 105). The same is true of Asimov’s characters whose actions are justified by their awareness of the workings of history, and their ability to take advantage of them. This position is authorized through the language of Puritan election (Slusser 96–98; Kilgore 94) even if it is election by capitalistic prowess, not divine election or salvation. Hence, also Heinlein’s Harriman becomes the lone hero who directs humanity. In the words of Kilgore: “[t]he wonderful dream of new frontiers and American renewal . . . is authoritarian even as it professes a rhetoric of egalitarian individualism” (95). This tension between individual freedom and authoritarianism and between self-serving exploitation and enlightened guardianship is ever present in Asimov and Heinlein.

## Historical Awareness and Manipulation

One of the central faculties of Asimov’s and Heinlein’s Great Men seems to be this ability to turn the understanding of their historical context into practical action (see also Berger 19). As noted above, this consciousness of history leads to deliberately applying frontier imagery as a means of rejuvenating the culture. This comes across as the necessity of expansion to retain cultural vitality, and links it with Frederick Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis” in Asimov’s case (Käkälä, “Asimov’s Foundation”), while in Heinlein’s “The Man Who Sold the Moon” it appears as a promotion of space travel in a readily familiar package with easily exploitable connotations of national mission and virility.<sup>11</sup>

Asimov’s Hardin becomes a Great Man through his ability to self-reliantly deduce the Foundation’s point in history and to take advantage of it, but also through his more general ability to form a comprehensive view of the Galaxy’s history. Passages that merge Hardin’s voice with the narrator’s provide glimpses of historical movement reminiscent of history textbook rhetoric:

And now that the Empire had lost control over the farther reaches of the Galaxy, these little splinter groups of planets became kingdoms – with comic-opera kings and nobles, and petty, meaningless wars, and a life that went on pathetically among the ruins. (*Foundation* 86)

Hardin’s thoughts combine here with the narrator’s voice to give an encompassing account of history. This description of the declining Galactic Empire has evident affinities to Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*, and as Hardin’s character is here given an omniscient perspective, he is set clearly above the details of individual historical events. The Foundation leaders are on a mission that is much

<sup>10</sup> An exception of sorts is the robot character R. Daneel who first appears in Asimov’s 1950s novels *The Caves of Steel* and *The Naked Sun*, and is brought back in his 1980s additions to the series as a godlike entity with his 20 000 years of existence and guardianship over the galactic history. Being an Asimovian robot, he will never consider himself more important than the humanity which he guards, but he is also a representation of the ultimate ability: a self-evolved guardian of all humanity.

<sup>11</sup> Frontier as a safety valve in Turnerian terms has been seen also in Heinlein’s work (Tucker 178).

more far-reaching, and for them history is more of a scientific problem which they observe and steer from afar on their way towards Seldon's promised land of the Second Galactic Empire. Hence, Hardin always seems to be something of an outside observer of the history unfolding before him, even when he steers its events himself.

Heinlein's Harriman, on the other hand, is in the thick of things as he is constantly arguing for space frontier expansion that mirrors the American expansion, and his success lies in maneuvering his way around the obstacles set up by government. The story gets much of its drive from following Harriman's increasingly more imaginative manipulations as he sets up his venture by bribing, lying and bending the letter of law. Key to all of this, however, is the portrayal of Harriman as a character so aware of history that he consciously repeats the frontier myth of American history on the Moon. In a sense, the *novum* of the story is Harriman's ability to reiterate the American frontier myth as a marketing tool for space exploration, but also to implement unrestricted power capitalism in its realization.

Asimov's characters are rather serious compared to Heinlein's merry pack of new frontier robber barons, perhaps with the exception of Hober Mallow in the *Foundation* chapter "The Merchant Princes." He embodies the same historical vision and awareness as Salvor Hardin, and his ability for management and manipulation are central in the latter half of the novel. After the first steps in frontier survival represented by Hardin, the Foundation turns to more active conquering through commerce. Mallow is a purely capitalist businessman with no pretensions ("Money is my religion" *Foundation* 184), and a readiness to guide a potential customer through "the workings of dummy corporations" (187) to seal a deal. Still, he becomes another Great Man in Foundation history by retaining his position as a "free agent" (210) and a lone hero, "the only man who knows how to fight the crisis" (222) – thus legitimizing the use of any means necessary. Indeed, Mallow's robber baron heroism is in its ambivalence close to Heinlein's Harriman: he is ultimately doing what advances the greater cause of the Foundation, but he is also the one to make the biggest profit on the maneuverings that lead to it.

Even though the Foundation mayor's secretary, who becomes Mallow's adversary, criticizes the provincial-origin Mallow for not having the "sense of destiny" (232) of the Foundationers, by the end of the story it is clear that Mallow is the one with a greater and an active sense of the historical forces at play. He is able to turn the situation to the Foundation's favor through his vision which is much more than just a passive sense of destiny. However, in this case taking action ironically means doing nothing but letting the current crisis run its course, as will happen when the Foundation makes no offensive against the kingdom of Korell that threatens them with war. By his historical understanding, Mallow is able to understand what will happen when the Foundation cuts the trading connections with them:

The whole war is a battle between . . . The [old] Empire [which supports Korell] and the Foundation. . . . To seize control of a world, they bribe with immense ships that can make war, but lack economic significance. We, on the other hand, bribe with little things, useless in war, but vital to prosperity and profits. (231)

Knowing that "people endure a good deal in war," Mallow aims for a stalemate during which, instead of wartime "patriotic uplift of imminent danger," the Korellians will be met by accumulating everyday annoyances as the Foundation-sold technology will begin to fail, and the public dissatisfaction will lead to their eventual surrender (229).

By this capacity for encompassing vistas of social movement, much like those of Hardin's, Mallow solves the crisis, and this is the redeeming factor of all his brutal economic manipulation which in itself does not make him look like much of a hero. Paradoxically, but typically for the series, even though Mallow too knows that "Seldon crises are not solved by individuals but by

historic forces,” his manipulations to gain power so that he can make sure that historical forces are left to carry out their course, amount exactly to those “brilliant heroics” (228). The fact that in the larger scheme of things Mallow (just like Hardin) is very consciously working for the greater cause, gives a Campbellian moral justification to all the admiration of clever manipulation in the first part of the Foundation trilogy.

This exhibits the typically American active pragmatism and optimism in Campbellian SF which solves the problems and masters the environment once “the right kind of people” are given freedom to work, but it also betrays the view that someone needs to take over the masses for the sake of their own well-being (Berger 16–17). The theme of elite control develops as the general public is repeatedly shown to be, as Berger notes, “ill-informed, prejudiced, and more than willing to follow the manipulative leadership of nearly anyone egotistical enough and sufficiently skilled to step out in front of the crowd” (20). As these works often take this social dynamic as a given, authoritarianism becomes also the moral answer: if the masses blindly follow authority in any case, it would be irresponsible to let the less capable assume the authority (see also Easterbrook 53). Recurrently this amounts to a willing surrender to the idea that you cannot change the society against the flow of history and be personally successful, but you can maneuver your way through it and accumulate personal success.

The parts of Asimov’s and Heinlein’s series discussed here focus on the power elites as they maneuver the society through its first steps in frontier survival and set up expansionism. However, both series do feature also characters that are not part of the elite, at least not to begin with. For example in Asimov’s “Search by the Foundation” in *Second Foundation* (originally published in December 1949 and January 1950 *Astounding* under the title “–And Now You Don’t”) the teenage protagonist Arkady Darell helps to defeat the hidden power elite of the Second Foundation, even if the story ends with a revelation that the First Foundation’s seeming victory is only bluff designed to let the Second Foundation continue its hidden control. Heinlein’s Future History also features characters like the naïve would-be frontier hero in the story “Coventry,” or the unfortunate lawyer in “Logic of Empire” who ends up on the oppressed side of the expansionistic society. At first these stories do in fact seem somewhat critical of the division created by the authoritarian urgency of frontier management. However, the criticism is brushed aside as the protagonist of “Coventry” reaches a meritocratic redemption of sorts when he accepts responsibility and aspires to become a part of the power elite; and when the lawyer in “Logic of Empire” tries to turn attention to the horrors of the slavery that he managed to escape and is treated as a fool for refusing to see that slavery just happens to be a “necessary” part of building an empire. Also in those Heinlein’s Future History stories which focus on smaller-scale incidents, the society is built along authoritarian and meritocratic lines and the difficulty of emerging from the underside of society is an important part of validating the individual’s ability. This is evident for example in “Misfit” where an awkward and uneducated working class protagonist turns out to be a mathematical genius who saves the day on a military-run construction site of the space expansion. Even here it is the individual’s own extraordinary ability that distinguishes him from the masses and grants potential access to the elite.

## Conclusions

In his editorials for *Astounding* Campbell very consciously gives science fiction an active and integral role in affecting societal development. He echoes Auguste Comte’s aphorism that “from science comes prediction; from prediction comes action” (quoted in Pickering 566) and stresses the importance of science fiction in anticipating the goals towards which humanity should strive. This can be seen as a central idea behind many of the Golden Age works. Neither Campbell, Heinlein

nor Asimov is interested in history for the sake of knowing the past but for actively learning from it and contemplating possible future directions.

In these works, science and the understanding of history are combined into what is viewed as the best available way to scramble from one solution, which may well be the source of the next problem, on to the next. Berger sees in this the frustration of Campbellian SF authors when they “cannot deliver on their promises of utopia” (29). However, instead of grandiose visions of utopia, the works seem to exhibit faith in the power of science to come up with at least temporary solutions that are good enough for the time being, and faith in scientific advance to produce also new ones as they are needed. Even if it at times seems like a desperate process, it is presented as a well-meaning attempt to save or steer the world. Furthermore, I would contest that while a certain desire for utopia<sup>12</sup> exists in the background, rather than frustrated, it is moderated by pragmatism about what can really be done. This utopian desire is linked with the conviction that human history needs someone enlightened but strong enough to take the wheel because there is no time to arrive at the same results by democratic processes.

Although the leadership by Great Men in both authors’ works is supposedly a temporary state on the way towards a new stability, as the pattern of crisis management by any means necessary is repeated, it illustrates the view of history as a perpetual urgency where the ideals of democracy are indefinitely put on hold. As the frontier society of Asimov’s Foundation is built and managed through the crises and toward the new Galactic Empire, the characters seek justification in the greater good for all humanity. Heinlein’s representation, on the other hand, is more ambivalent and provides more of a satirical commentary on his contemporary world that extends into future by repeating the patterns of past events. Heinlein is at times uneasily walking the line between satire and libertarian jingoism, and much more than in Asimov, in his work the sense of urgency is created through one character’s vision of what is good for all humanity – often indistinguishable from their profit-seeking actions in a caricatured world of *laissez-faire* market economy. Nevertheless, also there the ability to understand and make use of history at a moment of urgency becomes a key component of the story.

Especially in Asimov’s Foundation series, the idea of enlightened engineers leads to contradictions at every turn. His grand narrative of humanity in the future results in tension between several elements, complicating the all-encompassing vista which it seeks to build. This is repeatedly seen through dichotomies that exist between the concept of history that Asimov’s works seem to imply, and the Enlightenment idea of progress. Finally, Asimov’s work points toward a tension between the Enlightenment freedom and the increasingly overpowering idea that society needs a mechanism to keep it on the right course – something that surpasses democracy, autocracy, or any ‘regular’ forms of governing.<sup>13</sup> Still, the point remains essentially the same: forces of history are too haphazard to be left to carry out their course on their own: humanity as a whole needs some kind of guardianship to guide it through the ever-present crises.

As I have argued, the Carlylean conception of Great Man history leads to narratives that focus on the management skills and ingenious ways of manipulation devised by robber barons and merchant princes, and projects worlds where history is made in backroom deals by power elites that claim to work for the benefit of the masses. In the end, it seems that the ideas of authoritarianism and determinism in Campbellian science fiction are a mixture of Enlightenment ideals, positivism and optimism with regard to possibilities of scientific advance, all tempered with cynicism about the nature of human government and history. The crisis-centered and authoritarian-steered conception of history and societal dynamics enables the Great Men to take control, but it also forces

12 Jameson (2007) and Freedman (2000) talk about the unattainable nature of the utopia which critical utopias have to acknowledge, and while Asimov’s work is rather far from this, it nevertheless circles around similar issues and in its own pragmatic way problematizes the whole idea of building utopias.

13 This is something that Asimov begins exploring in *Foundation’s Edge* and *Foundation and Earth* with the idea of a galaxy-wide collective consciousness, Galaxia.

them to work tirelessly to find the most immediately effective ways of managing the course of humanity. This dynamic may carry implications of deterministic conceptions of history, but although it has sometimes been viewed as a sign of mere pessimism and cynicism about history and government, the Campbellian heroes, as I have argued here, nevertheless take this dynamic as an exhortation to actively do all they can to assume guardianship over society and to make the best of the situation.

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