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A Popular Front, a Popular Future: The Emergence of a Radical Science Fiction

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A Popular Front, a Popular Future: The Emergence of a Radical Science Fiction

by

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Report

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Dedication

To every Michelist out there, whether of the past, present or future.

Acknowledgements

There are times when graduate school is utterly frustrating. Thankfully, writing this report was not among those times, and that is largely due to the support I have found from friends, family, colleagues, and faculty members who expressed their interest and enthusiasm in this project. I began studying this particular union of science fiction and radical politics nearly a year ago, and the number of people deserving of my thanks is far too long to list here. Any omissions are, of course, my fault.

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Abstract

A Popular Front, a Popular Future: The Emergence of a Radical Science Fiction

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2010

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With the rise of the Popular Front during the 1930s, the American Left came together under the symbols of the "people" and "America," and as its ranks swelled with modernity's disenfranchised, radicals utilized the structures and discourses of modernity in the name of political struggle against exploitive American capitalism and fascism abroad. Science fiction and its devoted fan community were among these structures and discourses. Though both were largely conservative, entwined with American corporate capitalism, one group of fans embraced Communism and hoped to politicize science fiction and its fandom. The Michelists, as they called themselves, worked through the established channels of science fiction and fandom advocating a unique Marxist understanding of science fiction. This report situates them within the Popular Front, particularly its discourses of science and popular culture, and highlights how the particularities of the genre and its fandom shaped their political beliefs and actions.

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Introduction

On October 31, 1937, science fiction writers, editors, and readers gathered at the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention in Philadelphia to discuss their shared love of the genre. The word "readers" is an understatement. Those attending were first and foremost "science fiction fans," a small, but dedicated community of science fiction producers and consumers. Although there were various competing definitions of "science fiction" among fans and professionals, their devotion to the genre and the fantastic worlds it suggested was never in doubt. After a series of presentations by fans and professional editors in praise of the often ignored literary genre, twenty-three year old Donald A. Wollheim took the podium with something different in mind. His friend, twenty year old John B. Michel, was scheduled to appear, but Wollheim informed the audience that because of Michel's mild speech impairment he would read Michel's speech. Nobody objected, and when Wollheim began talking, he denounced the state of science fiction and its fandom, citing their mutual apathy towards domestic economic depression and the rise of fascism abroad. He argued that if fans did nothing, they faced ruin; if science fiction did not change – or in fan slang, "mutate" – the genre faced certain death. Michel would later title the speech *Mutation or Death.*

Their friend, nineteen year old Frederik Pohl, was in the audience, and he approved of the speech whole-heartedly. Wollheim, Michel, and Pohl were prominent in the fan community, having gained some renown through their amateur publishing endeavors and their participation in various science fiction fan clubs in the New York City area over the past three years. They loved science fiction and would spend the rest of their lives dedicated to the genre, but the political and economic crises of the 1930s disrupted the promises they felt the genre had made. They found an alternative in the Left, and aligned themselves with the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA) as either official party members or as members of the Young Communist League (YCL). The speech ended with a radical call-to-arms:

> Be it moved that this, the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention, shall place itself on record as opposing all forces leading to barbarism, the advancement of pseudo-sciences and militaristic ideologies, and shall further resolve that science fiction should by nature stand for all forces working for a more unified world, a more Utopian existence, the application of science to human happiness, and a saner outlook on life.[1]

Met with applause from some, confusion by others, and rejection by more, *Mutation or Death* quickly became the center of convention debate, one that would spill over into the pages of fan publications, letters, and meetings for the next several years. The speech became the basis of what they called Michelism, a political and aesthetic philosophy named in reference to its originator, who penned its first precepts when he was barely out of his teens. A "theory of science fiction action" that combined Marxist ideologies of science and popular culture, Michelism redefined science fiction as a politically progressive genre, and envisioned its fans as Leftist intellectuals. Along with friend and comrade Robert W. Lowndes, they hoped to politicize science fiction and its fandom, realizing the utopias featured in the pages of their beloved science fiction stories.

In many ways, the reading of *Mutation or Death* was an overdetermined event, a moment when various modern discourses collided with one another. As scholars such as

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[1] John B. Michel, *Mutation or Death* (1937), in *A Sense of FAPA: Selections from the Mailings of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association*, ed. R. H. Eney (Los Angeles: Fantasy Amateur Press, 1962), http://www.fanac.org/fanzines/Sense_of_FAPA/Mutation_or_Death.html (accessed March 21, 2009).

Marshall Berman, Alan Trachtenberg, and Terry Smith have argued, the development of modern industrial capitalism had forever altered the real and imagined American landscape.[2] Over the first half of the twentieth century, Taylorist and later Fordist modes of production reorganized the nation's social, economic, and political terrain, establishing new modes of representing and understanding these new terrains. As fields newly enlisted in the regime of mass production, science and popular culture are central to this history. By the 1920s, science and its practitioners occupied privileged cultural positions, heralded as indelible agents of progress responsible for the modernity's perceived successes. At the same time, popular culture assumed a central place in the daily lives of millions, and new forms of mass entertainment provided these audiences with the raw material of modern social identities. Science fiction emerged from these processes, combining adventurous narratives and imagery of scientific utopianism in a mass produced cultural object: the science fiction pulp magazine. By the 1930s, an intensely devoted fan community that stretched across the globe developed around the pulp genre. These fans communicated across great distances, published their own magazines, formed clubs, and held conventions to meet liked-minded individuals. Most attending the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention were enamored with the historical possibilities hinted at in the genre's narratives of profound scientific development, and were driven to engage the industry and the community around it.

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[2] See Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1988); Terry Smith, *Making the Modern: Industry, Art, and Design in America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

As *Mutation or Death* suggests, such optimism was by no means universal, and the Michelists' dissatisfaction with science fiction fandom was illustrative of modernity's greatest failures: with the onset of the Great Depression, the utopian ideologies of modern progress often excluded the working-classes, men and women of color, recent immigrants, and many others. It is no coincidence that during the 1930s the American Left was at its most visible and active. With the near collapse of American capitalism, the failures of modern industrial society became abundantly clear, leading the disenfranchised and the marginalized, whether science fiction fan or not, to the growing Leftist movement in search of viable alternatives. The Communist Party would play a large role in the organization of radicals across the country, but many became radical independently as well. This politicization around Leftist ideology increased as the decade progressed amidst war overseas, domestic capitalist crisis, and recurrent racial conflict, culminating in 1935's Popular Front. Aptly summarized by Michael Denning, it was "a radical historical bloc uniting industrial unionists, independent socialists, community activists, and émigré antifascists around laborist social democracy, antifascism, and anti-lynching," ultimately coming together under Roosevelt's New Deal until the end of the Second World War[3] New political and cultural formations emerged as individuals turned Left within the political and economic structures developed over the past fifty years. In his polemical 1935 essay, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," Kenneth Burke provided the key account of these new new political and cultural logics of unity: he argued that the middle and working classes united under the symbols of "the

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[3] Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), 4.

People" and "America," mobilizing them as redemptive figures against social, economic, and political threats.[4] As the CPUSA declared, "Communism is twentieth century Americanism."

Political activists worked through the various lenses modernity afforded them, a broad space of political participation Denning describes as the "Cultural Front" that includes popular culture and science, and in the Michelist's case, science fiction. The various spaces of political participation speak to the Popular Front's regional, situational, and cultural diversity. Individuals, collectives, and institutions politicized themselves and spread the word in their communities in their own languages and forms. Scientists sought a better society through Marxist scientific paradigms, cultural workers translated radical content into popular forms via participation with the culture industries at large, and Michel, Wollheim, Pohl and Lowndes struggled to politicize science fiction and its fandom.

Alan Wald calls this space the "force field" of Leftist literary production, the organizational assemblage through which cultural producers "embodied institutions founded and led by the Communist movement in ways that were sometimes paradoxical and discrepant."[5] Wald's theoretical framework allows for a diversity of belief and practice, creating space for ideological discrepancies between specific political actors and the institutions they identify with, granting context and individual agency necessary weight. Activists followed broader movements and institutions, such as the CPUSA, but they were not beholden to them, and they crafted political and artistic projects from their distinct subject position within the modern social terrain. Political beliefs and cultural practices are largely dependent on the idiosyncrasies of specific individuals, their cultural and intellectual traditions, and the contexts in which they work, all of which culminate in unique modes of political and cultural praxis. These contexts were innumerable, and while scholars have paid extensive attention to the era's varying modes of Leftist political participation and cultural expression, much remains unexplored. Radicals worked in all parts of the culture industry, and if they did not work in them, they were certainly audience members.[6] It is precisely in these often critically ignored spaces where the creative and intellectual diversity of American Leftist political engagement comes into view. Their histories reveal the intricacies of the Left's "force field," and the processes by which radicals created political and cultural projects unique to their traditions, beliefs, practices, and historical conditions.

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[4] Kenneth Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America," in *American Writer's Congress*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 87-94.

[5] Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 72.

Mutation or Death initiated a project within Denning's "Cultural Front" and Wald's "force field," and was the beginning of a unique variant of Popular Front politics that was firmly rooted in the Michelists' understandings of themselves and the world. The tools they used to position themselves within modernity shaped their understanding of the Popular Front and their modes of political and cultural activity within it. As science fiction fans, Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes understood themselves and modernity through science fiction. When its promises never came to fruition, they turned to the Left and sought to politicize their community and the branch of the culture industry they were closest to, reimagining them according to prevailing Marxist attitudes. Working in and through science fiction (as a genre and an industry), and its fandom, they allied with other fans, formed clubs of their own, and waged campaigns against other fans and literary industrial figures. The particularities of each – the ways fans saw the genre, each other, and the world – were central to the development of Michelism as a political and aesthetic ideology. While, collectively, the Popular Front sought a new American culture, these particular activists sought a new fan culture, a political science fiction and science fiction fandom.

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[6] As Denning writes on the entanglement of political activists and the mass culture industries in the 1930s, "the young radicals and communists were themselves the mass audience of the culture industries, having grown up with the movies, jazz, and the cheap amusements of the modernist metropolis." Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 50.

In seeking such a culture, the Michelists changed the stakes of the Popular Front's politics. The Popular Front emphasized the American nation as the ultimate horizon of political mobility, lending credence to longstanding ideologies of American exceptionalism.[7] The Michelists, however, saw fandom itself as a vanguard political community, conjuring it in the same way the larger movement did with "the People" and "America." In doing so, they forged a conceptual space potentially more expansive than the broader social movement's nationalist rhetoric allowed: fandom was not confined to any single nation, but was a transnational community, one actively imagined in global terms. That is not to say that Michelism's reality matched its rhetoric. The movement reproduced many of the underlying exclusivities within the fan community and the American Left, particularly those of the CPUSA, in privileging masculine political agency, and the role of elites in liberating the masses.

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[7] For an account of the Popular Front's contribution to American exceptionalism, see George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 45-56.

It is to say, however, that the ideas developed and actions taken by Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes reveal the diversity of the Popular Front's political and cultural imagination, and thereby challenge scholarly understandings of radical cultural workers in the United State at the time, as well as understandings of fans and fandom. While critical attention to science fiction's political implications is abundant in literary and cultural studies, its earliest pulp incarnations remain almost uniformly denounced as politically conservative, if not reactionary.[8] Scholars of the American Left have not approached the genre as a historically grounded cultural field of political organization and action, especially in the 1930s.[9] Similarly, fan and fandom studies are numerous, and the work of scholars such as Henry Jenkins and John Fiske has explored fandom's political implications, but such critical attention does not consider how fan communities have functioned as explicitly political organizations. Although Michelism's history occupies important positions in histories of science fiction and its fandom, especially in those written by science fiction writers and fans, their place within Leftist literary history has been understated.[10] Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes's shared history fills such gaps, and refreshes the memory of an exciting and tumultuous political moment.

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[8] For an overview of dominant readings of early science fictions' political implications, see Andrew Milner and Robert Savage, "Pulped Dreams: Utopia and American Pulp Science Fiction," *Science Fiction Studies* 35, no. 1 (March 2008): 31-47.

[9] The Futurians, one of the Michelists' fan clubs, briefly appears in Denning's account of the Popular Front. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 225-226. Andrew Ross provides another brief account. He describes the Michelists as a political formation in relation to critical discourses of science such as technocracy, but does not elaborate upon their connections to American Leftist institutions. See Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* (London: Verso, 1991), 114-117.

[10] Both Denning and Ross draw from the numerous histories written by early science fiction fans, specifically Frederick Pohl's autobiography, Sam Moskowitz's history of 1930s fandom, and Damon Knight's account of the Futurians. While rich with historical detail about fan activities, these works are largely personal histories, and consider Michelist political affiliations in limited terms. See Damon Knight, *The Futurians: The Story of the Science Fiction "Family" of the 30's that Produced Today's Top SF*

Of course, this moment was fleeting, and like the Popular Front it was a part of, the Michelist could be dismissed as a failure: the fantastic world they envisioned on the other side of the Depression never came about, and American capitalism survived to colonize other aspects of modern and later postmodern life. However, the Popular Front marked American society and culture in interesting ways, opening spheres of political engagement that have not and will not close. The Michelists eventually entered the professional publishing world, and while their radicalism softened, their political take on science fiction (or perhaps, their science fictional take on politics) remained. As Wald notes, if scholars pay critical attention to "the work of radicals who produced popular fiction, science fiction, historical fiction, biography, and children's literature, the impact of the Left will be seen as far more substantial and central to our culture."[11] Herein lays my interest in the Michelists. If, as Wald suggests, the political upheavals of the 1930s left a mark on American culture, then the history of the Michelist's Marxist science fiction can enrich that legacy, refreshing contemporary political imaginations by demonstrating their diversely creative origins, even if that means finding politics in outer space or "mutants." Cultural resistance takes many forms, especially in the creative world of 1930s literature, where the most interesting phenomena often occurred off the pages, in the tumultuous lives of ordinary people, of fans.

Writers and Producers (New York: John Day, 1977); Sam Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm: A History of Science Fiction Fandom* (1954; repr., Westport, CT: Hyperion Press, 1974); and Frederik Pohl, *The Way the Future Was: A Memoir* (London: V. Gollancz, 1978). Other fan-written histories include: Jack Speer, *Up To Now: A History of Fandom as Jack Speer Sees It* (1939; repr., Lincolnshire, UK: Arcturus Press, 1994); and Harry Warner Jr., *All Our Yesterdays: An Informal History of Science Fiction Fandom in the Forties* (Chicago: Advent Publishers, 1969).

[11] Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London: Verso, 1994), 22.

Reading literature, being a fan, and participating in political struggle are all social activities often overlaid with each other. Their points of intersection produce distinct articulations of identity and community. Michelism hinged on these moments of ideological overlap, and their explication may shed light on the formation of contemporary political affiliations and identities. I can readily understand my own political beliefs as a product of such intersections, as a punk rock bricolage of Marxism and science fiction, drawing in equal parts from the work of Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delaney, Antonio Gramsci, and Walter Benjamin. In that sense, I sympathize with the Michelist project. This report might be considered a displaced attempt at understanding my own political identity, and an attempt to validate and problematize my cultural interests. At the same time, my beliefs are not exceptional: on a daily basis, individuals engage in unique, and often fragile political projects befitting the numerous ways they understand themselves and their community. The story of Michelism reveals how such political positions came to be, enriching the Leftist literary tradition by suggesting the numerous possibilities of political being.

Drawing on their extensive professional and fan publications, as well as their personal correspondence, I will illustrate the history of Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes' politicization. I will articulate their encounters with the Popular Front, demonstrating both their ties to it and the singularity of their political project within it. Chapter one will detail the inseparable histories of science fiction, its fans, and the interrelated ideologies of each, emphasizing the role and perspectives of Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes. The Michelists contributed extensively to the genre and its fan community's development, which laid the foundation for all their later activities.

Chapter two describes their politicization via their engagement with the American Left, particularly Marxist ideologies of science and popular culture. Working through these beliefs, they synthesized a distinct understanding of science fiction as a political literary genre that stood in opposition to prevailing understandings of the genre. Chapter three will explicate their specific activities within fandom, illustrating their attempts to disseminate their Marxist science fiction among fans in an attempt to politicize the global community. The story of the Michelist movement sets the stage for the investigation of the radical diversity of the era's political activity, making clear the need to seek it out in spaces oft-ignored by scholars.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Given the variously complex and often misunderstood political commitments and beliefs of radicals in the United States, I have adopted a terminological set and method of capitalization to distinguish and clarify relationships between identities, ideologies, specific groups, and movements.[12] I capitalize "Communist" and "Communism" in reference to a member or the beliefs of the Communist Party of the United States, or of the Soviet Union. I will use "communism" and "communist" to denote an individual or set of beliefs aligned with the Communist Party, but not officially affiliated with it. "Left" and variations thereof will indicate any individual or ideology more radical than New Deal liberalism. "Marxist" and "Marxism" will refer to any individual or ideology in said tradition, sometimes under the banner of Communism, but just as often not.

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[12] My system here draws heavily on that established by Wald in *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left*.

The language of science fiction and its fandom can be equally complex, especially in its early years. Though science fiction is an easily recognizable genre today, in the 1920s and early 1930s, various terms existed among professionals and fans, including “scientifiction,” “stf,” and “science fiction.” For the sake of clarity, I will use “science fiction” to describe each, except in quotations where the writer’s original language will remain. Furthermore, professionals and fans understood genres presently recognized as distinct (fantasy, weird, and horror fiction) as variations of science fiction. Except when such distinctions are contextually necessary, I will use “science fiction” to identify such works.

Chapter 1: Living Through Science Fiction and Fandom

Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes were part of a generation born into modernity. They grew up in the urban northeast, and witnessed the rapid changes of the twentieth century's early decades, watching the technological development and industrialization of the modern landscape. Such transformations, as well as those imagined to come soon, were the subject of science fiction literature's infancy. Largely steered by the scientific and technological utopianism of early science fiction pioneer Hugo Gernsback, the genre responded enthusiastically to modernization, seizing it as evidence of science's privileged role in the modern world as an unstoppable engine of social progress. Such utopian longings were the constitutive feature of early science fiction and its fandom, and these four fans embraced them. Science fiction had a sizable and influential fan community. Emerging shortly after Gernsback published the first science fiction pulp magazine in 1926, this "obsessional amateur subculture," as Andrew Ross has described them, played an uncharacteristically large role in the genre's development.[13] Fans were agents within its "field of cultural production," actively shaping the genre's form and content, and with the support of publishers, they collectively laid claim to modernity through the genre's celebratory account of modern science.[14] This utopian claim united readers and writers across the globe – science fiction was a transnational phenomenon and its fans imagined themselves to be citizens of a global science fiction fan community. These producers and consumers used the genre to engage global modernity, but also to take refuge from its sometimes harsh reality. Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes were central figures in these processes, witnesses to the genre's consolidation, and key participants in early fandom.

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[13] See Ross, 105-106.

Their history as Michelists is knowable only through that of early science fiction, and when they later worked to change it, their understandings of themselves as fans, and their relationships within the fan community and with the publishing industry shaped their rhetoric and politics. In this chapter, I want to explicate Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes's understandings of science fiction and its fandom, in terms of their shared histories. I will situate science fiction, its fandom, and the Michelists' involvement in both within the political and economic terrain of modern industrial society in America, and demonstrate how science fiction's earliest creators and fans optimistically responded to its sweeping changes by celebrating science as the engine of modern progress. Before doing so, however, allow me to briefly describe their biographies, where such optimism was less apparent, and where history weighted down their dreams of "progress."

All share personal histories of economic hardship and physical disability in modern urban America.[15] Donald Allen Wollheim was born in 1914 in Manhattan to German-Jewish parents. When a polio epidemic swept across New York several years later, Wollheim contracted it, leaving him paralyzed and under quarantine for several months. His father was a doctor, and afforded his family a comfortable life, but

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[14] See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed" (1983), in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29-73.

[15] The multiple fan written histories detail Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes's biographical history in great detail. Only biographical information pertinent to their social, political, and fan identities will be included here. For more, see Knight; Lowndes, *Orchids for Doc*; Moskowitz; and Pohl*, Where the Future Was*.

Wollheim was the only one among his friends to live a middle-class life. In 1917, John Blyth Michel was born in the predominantly Jewish neighborhood of Flatbush in Brooklyn, New York. Like Wollheim's father, Michel's was German-Jewish, but he converted when he married Michel's Irish Catholic mother. Neither, however, were particularly religious. Michel's father worked in the Art Department at the local Woolworth's Department Store. His mother died of tuberculosis in 1926. Like Wollheim, he had a sickly youth, catching diphtheria the same year his mother died, leaving his right arm and left leg paralyzed until he was eleven. He developed osteomyelitis a year later, and it kept him in and out of hospitals until he was cured as an adult. Frederik Georg Pohl, Jr. was born in 1919 and had similar experiences. His father was an itinerant worker, and moved the family around the country until 1926, when they settled in Flatbush. Even then, housing was unstable, and they moved around the city for several years. Pohl caught whooping cough and later scarlet fever, slowing his education until his mother decided to educate him herself. Robert Wilson Lowndes was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1916. His mother died in the influenza epidemic of 1918, and his father left him in the care of relatives, who shuffled him about until his father remarried. Like the others, his youth was physically difficult: he was born with a clubbed foot, and after surgery, walked in a brace for much of his childhood.

I believe their celebrations of science emerged in response to economic subjugation and social exclusion, and their activity within fandom expressed a desire to partake in modernity's perceived successes. Science, after all, did not exist in some pure form, but was inseparable from contemporary modes of political-economy. Gernsback's account of science simultaneously celebrated a moment of corporate success that was not to last. He nevertheless established the genre's initial boundaries, and thereby any account of its take on modernity, or that of its fans, describes their mutual pro-capitalist origins. Michelism emerged in response to this literary and ideological terrain, for when capitalism failed in America, it failed in science fiction as well. The Michelists would later single out the attitudes and identities of this corporate science fiction and its fandom as dangerous and destructive, specifically targeting Gernsback and the science fiction he represented as their number one political enemy once it was apparent his science fictional world would remain utterly fictive.

PULPING UTOPIA

While science fiction's literary origins stretch back centuries, its modern and most recognizable form first appeared in America during the late nineteenth century, when adventure stories with heavy doses of science and technology appeared in various all-story magazines produced for working-class audiences. Writers such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells published novels later accepted as "science fiction," but the genre did not exist as a distinct entity until 1926, when Hugo Gernsback founded *Amazing Stories*, the first magazine dedicated to the genre. Originally from Luxembourg, he came to the United States in 1904 hoping to work in science and technology, which he believed offered infinite possibilities for social betterment. He published several magazines featuring fictional and non-fictional celebrations of science with the express goal of popularizing it.[16] His fiction was considerably more popular, and he stuck with the format. Having found a way to cultivate scientific interest among readers, he founded

Amazing Stories, where he established science fiction's early generic boundaries, and sowed the seeds of fandom. Most importantly, he was an active participant in conversations regarding the possibilities of science and popular culture, linking them with visions of Modern American social and economic success.

Most critics denounced the pulps as moral and intellectual threats, but like middle-class reformers of the nineteenth century who saw in popular fiction a chance to educate working-class readers, Gernsback saw popular pulp fiction as an opportunity to introduce young readers to modern discourses of science and technology.[17] He believed that science lay at the root of all modern progress, arguing in *Amazing*'s introductory editorial that through science "many fantastic situations – impossible 100 years ago – are brought about today."[18] Hoping to provoke new "fantastic situations," he envisioned his publications as didactic exercises in scientific thought, and as legitimate sources of technical knowledge. They were always interesting, but more importantly, they were "always instructive":

> They supply knowledge that we might not otherwise obtain – and they supply it in a very palatable form. For the best of these modern writers of scientifiction have the knack of imparting knowledge and even inspiration without once making us aware that we are being taught.[19]

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[16] His early magazines included *Modern Electronics* (1908), *The Electrical Experimenter* (1913, later renamed *Science and Invention*), and *Radio News* (1919). See Hugo Gernsback, *Evolution of Modern Science Fiction* (New York, 1952).

[17] Critics relegated pulp writers to the bottom of American literary and cultural hierarchies. As Erin A. Smith notes, critics of the era considered pulp writers "less artists than manufacturers, paid for making a product much as factory workers were," thus incapable of creating works of any redeeming moral, or aesthetic value. For more on pulp publishing, and contemporary critical accounts of it, see Smith, *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), 18-74. For an account of American cultural hierarchies, see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). For more on nineteenth century popular fiction and moral reform, see Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), 47-61.

[18] Gernsback, "A New Sort of Magazine," *Amazing Stories* 1, no. 1 (April 1926): 3.

[19] Ibid.

The narrative properties of science fiction guaranteed the accessibility of scientific instruction. For Gernsback, this instruction was necessary if progress was to continue. His understanding of science, however, was relatively narrow. He privileged empirical detail, technical specificity, and barred anything deemed anti-science, such as literary inventiveness, and "irrational" emotionalism. He encouraged his writers to research their material, and he consulted with experts from universities and museums to ensure the scientific plausibility, if not legitimacy, of every published story.[20]

Gernsback's editorial policies oscillated between science's privileged position and his publication's accessibility, effectively de-privileging science for his readers, whom he always assumed to be intelligent adolescents. He wrote, "If we can make the youngsters think, we feel that we are accomplishing our mission, and that the future of the magazine, and, to a degree, the future of progress through the young generation, is in good hands."[21] Gernsback became a teacher, and his readers became students, would-be scientists ushered into modernity's exceptional discourse through his publication, becoming exceptional themselves. *Amazing* was a training ground for the scientific leaders of tomorrow. As Ross and Justine Larbalestier have argued, Gernsback's imagined leaders were almost-always white and male, and he consistently masculinized what he held to be science fiction's discursive objects: science, technology, and intellectual faculties.[22] Gernsback knew women read his magazines but assumed they never did so with the intention of becoming scientists as male readers did. He assumed female readers were primarily attracted to his literature's narrative properties and associated female reading practices with "anti-scientific" romanticism, and emotionalism.[23] Gernsback's ostensibly populist approach to science was in fact an exclusive affair, "tailored to a rather narrow, white-male constituency," an "elite" community of masculine intellectuals.[24]

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[20] See Ross, 108-109.

[21] Quoted in Justine Larbalestier, *The Battle of the Sexes in Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 31.

Other science fiction magazines quickly emerged, but the Gernsbackian paradigm was dominant. The so-called "Big Three" professional magazines – *Amazing Stories*, *Wonder Stories*, and *Astounding Stories* – traded on the presumed awesomeness of modern science.[25] While each magazine was slightly different, their editors assumed male readers bought their magazines for their dramatization of scientific content. Charles D. Hornig (editor of *Wonder Stories*), and John W. Campbell (editor of *Astounding Stories*) consistently rejected stories that lacked accurate science, assuming readers would turn away in its absence.[26] This common focus stemmed from shared utopian beliefs in the possibilities of modern science, a relatively common sensibility at the time, as popular attitudes linked modern prosperity with scientific and technological advances.[27]

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[22] See Ross, 110-113; Larbalestier, 15-38.

[23] Ross, 104-143.

[24] Ibid., 111.

[25] For a comprehensive history of early science fiction publishing, see Mike Ashley, *The Time Machines: The Story of the Science-Fiction Pulp Magazines from the Beginning to 1950* (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2000).

[26] In rejection letters mailed to writers, Hornig included "No scientific background, science is illogical and incorrect…insufficient science" and "too much love interest" as justifications for a story's rejection. Charles D. Hornig to Donald A. Wollheim, December 1, 1933, MS 250, Donald A. Wollheim Collection, Department of Special Collections, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries (hereafter cited as Donald A. Wollheim Collection); Campbell argued that science fiction "serves…to arouse more interest in science" for young readers. John W. Campbell to Jack Rubinson, May 10, 1938, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[27] David Nye and Howard P. Segal alternately identify this sensibility as the "American technological sublime" and "technological utopianism." See David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime*

Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were popular celebrities, while the engineer, the inventor, and the scientist became generic heroes of modernity, and their work was strikingly visible across the American landscape. Arriving in 1905, Gernsback moved to the United States in a period of rapid technological and industrial developments, after the introduction of the first skyscrapers, the electric cityscape, and fully ordered and mechanized modes of economic production, processes David Nye identifies as not only awe-inspiring, but also reaffirming of human reason and of scientific possibility.[28] Scientists saw themselves in the same light, denouncing conventional efforts of social reform while celebrating "the translation of scientific knowledge into automobiles, telephones, transatlantic flight, radio, increased longevity, or expanded food production."[29]

Yoked to such faith in scientific progress was the consolidation of American industrial capitalism, which enlisted science under new industrial research and development projects to mechanize modern production processes. Expanding corporations funded the primary spheres of scientific activity, most notably the private industrial sector and academia.[30] Gernsback sought legitimacy from both, and the affirmation of reason contained within his utopianism was not a neutral endorsement of the status quo. Rather, it was the affirmation of American corporate and industrial

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(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) and Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

[28] Nye, 126.

[29] Peter J. Kuznick, *Beyond the Laboratory: Scientists as Political Activists in 1930s America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 44-45.

[30] Ross writes, "In harnessing the myth of scientific progress through technological innovation, the control of science itself had become an industrial monopoly, confined to the new corporate research laboratories, or to university locations where research worked hand in hand with corporate interests, and where technical education was shaped by industrial needs." Ross, 124.

success. His pedagogy served to introduce readers to science as a discourse, but such a discourse was increasingly a field of labor connected to larger economic processes: its affirmation of corporate success was a positive response to the new primacy of mental labor in American society. That is not to say he hoped his magazine would literally enlist his readers in industrial enterprise, but that the genre he helped create responded to modernity with an enthusiastic "yes" by offering readers a distinct way to imagine it, and participate in it as an elite class.

FANS AND EARLY FANDOM

Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes encountered science fiction in these early years, and initially, they readily consumed Gernsback's take on modernity. Pohl described his first encounter with *Wonder Stories Quarterly* in 1930 as "an irremediable virus" that entered his veins.[31] Wollheim claimed to have read science fiction since its emergence, and to have been an avid collector since 1928.[32] He and Michel attempted to publish in the professional magazines beginning in the early 1930s, and while neither became teenage science fiction authors, they were successful and were considered "professionals" by their fan brethren. Wollheim's "The Man from Ariel," the story of a boy's encounter with a dying alien, appeared in the January 1934 issue of *Wonder Stories*.[33] Michel won a contest in the same magazine two years earlier, supplying the plot for writer Raymond Z. Gallun's "The Menace from Mercury."[34] Their interest in science fiction was not unique, as readers across the world embraced Gernsback's mode of imagining and embracing the modern world.

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[31] Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 1.

[32] Wollheim, Handwritten Biographical Notes, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[33] Everett F. Bleiler and Richard J. Bleiler, *Science-Fiction: The Gernsback Years* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1998), 514.

[34] Ibid., 293.

Most of their activity occurred within fandom, and prior to formulating Michelism, their activities within it were typical of most fans of the era. Fandom emerged after Gernsback introduced a letter section in *Amazing* in 1929, encouraging readers to detail their own scientific endeavors. Letters poured in, but since Gernsback printed the address of each letter writer, fans could correspond outside the pages of the pulps. They did so extensively, leading to the creation of correspondence clubs, and by 1933, physical clubs with regular meetings.[35] Fans often belonged to multiple clubs at once. They appeared across the United States, in California, New Jersey, Minnesota, Texas, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, and Washington D.C., but they also developed in England, Germany, Austria, New Zealand, and Australia.[36] By 1935, Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes were members of the International Scientific Association (ISA) in New York City, a correspondence club that also held regular meetings for area fans.[37] These clubs guaranteed access to science fiction for often disenfranchised youth. Members traded magazines among each other, and many clubs maintained open libraries of science fiction literature.[38] Club membership was not always free, but small membership dues guaranteed access to a wide variety of science fiction materials.

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[35] Wollheim was briefly a member of the first science fiction club, New York City's Scienceers. See Allen Glasser to Donald A. Wollheim, December 1, 1933, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[36] For a detailed account of the rise of early science fiction clubs, see Moskowitz, *The Immortal Storm*.

[37] Mailing List for Vol. 2, No. 7 of *The International Observer*, undated [1937], Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[38] The International Science Correspondence Society in New York City – a precursor to the ISA – maintained a library at a member's house that was open to all. Members had open access, but the group charged non-members fifty cents to borrow materials. It included pulp magazines, science fiction novels,

Fans communicated directly through personal correspondence, or indirectly through magazine letter columns. They also traded fan magazines, later known as fanzines, which served as forums for fan critical, literary, and artistic productions. Typewritten and copied via hectograph or mimeograph, fans distributed them at club meetings, or through the mail, sometimes for a small subscription fee, but often for free. Wollheim published the monthly, nationally distributed *The Phantagraph* with Michel, and Pohl published a similar magazine called *Mind of Man*. In 1937, Wollheim, Michel, and other New York fans founded the Fantasy Amateur Press Association (FAPA). Modeled after amateur press associations, they used FAPA to facilitate the circulation of fanzines and to bring together fans over long distances.[39] Such attempts to establish community continued, leading to regional, national, and international conventions, all held so that fans could meet others fans in person after having communicated with them through the mail. The first convention, held in the living room of Philadelphia fan Milton Rothman on October 22, 1936, was Michel and Wollheim's idea.[40]

Realizing the value of fandom, Gernsback began cultivating relationships between the fan community and the science fiction publishing industry, establishing close relationships between fans and professionals. For Gernsback, this served several purposes: it provided an easy opportunity to disseminate his ideas and sell his magazines, but it also allowed him to opportunity to develop creative talent. In 1935, he

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and science textbooks and pamphlets. They would mail copies to members for free if they could not come to the library in person. See "Rules for the ISCS Library," [1934?], Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[39] FAPA's constitution declares, "Its purpose shall be to write in fraternity the writers, artists, and editors of amateur publications pertaining to fantasy; to promote such publishing; to better the abilities of the members in their fields; ad to provide an appreciative audience for the amateur fantasy," Fantasy Amateur Press Association, "Constitution of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association," April 1940, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

founded a national fan organization that was similar to the many independent clubs already existent, the Science Fiction League (SFL), and chapters developed across the United States and England. Michel and Wollheim met Pohl at a meeting of the Brooklyn SFL that year, and convinced him to join the ISA as well. Lowndes founded a chapter in Stamford, Connecticut around the same time. Many fans became professionals based on their fan credentials. Wollheim and Michel's professional experience was not unique. For instance, Gernsback hired the seventeen year old Charles D. Hornig as editor of *Wonder Stories* after Hornig sent him a copy of his fanzine, *The Fantasy Fan*.[41] Professionals often used fan letters to gauge reader tastes, as writer and publisher Lester Del Rey would later note: "the comments on other stories often show what type of fiction gets the best reaction and can help writers to determine their choice of later ideas or way of presenting them."[42] In this sense, fans possessed a certain degree of literary and commercial authority within the pulp publishing industry, acting as mediators of public taste. In most scholarly accounts, fans reside on the margins of "official" cultural production, either ignored or distrusted by those in power.[43] Science fiction fans were institutionally marginal figures, but the industry welcomed their travel between its periphery and center, affording them an important place within its field of cultural production as tastemakers and potential employees.

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[40] Moskowitz, 82.

[41] It should be noted that Gernsback paid him less than a third of what he paid his previous editor. See Ashley, 79.

[42] Lester Del Rey, *The World of Science Fiction, 1926-1976* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1980), 72.

[43] In reference to contemporary media fandoms Henry Jenkins notes that "network executives and producers are often indifferent, if not overtly hostile, to fan opinion and distrustful of their input into the production process" because "fan response is assumed to be unrepresentative of general public sentiment." Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 279.

Fans embraced their proximity to the professional sphere, and largely adopted Gernsback's attitude towards science fiction. As evidenced by dominant fan practices, most fans identified the genre as a window into scientific discourses, as both a field of labor and as a privileged mode of interpreting the natural world. For instance, most published letters discussed a given story's scientific accuracy and plausibility, and fans always took care to point out scientific errors. The ISA provides a useful example here. President William Sykora claimed the club appealed to the "true stf fan or amateur scientist," and its official slogan declared, "For the study of science as an avocation." [44] Official rosters identified members by their scientific interests, and the club's fanzine, *The International Observer*, featured science fiction stories and non-fiction articles about science.[45] The amateur chemist Sykora even had a small laboratory in his home that was open to club members, a training ground for one of the possible outcomes of their fan activities: their ascendance to the professional scientific field, where they might find a position in the corporate sphere of scientific labor. This was by no means totalizing, as the possibility of working for the professional pulp magazines as a writer or editor always loomed in the distance. As seen in their early publishing success, both Wollheim and Michel were successful in this regard. Pohl, while interested in science, was primarily interested in science fiction's narrative properties.[46] Lowndes had similar interests, and no articles about science appear in any of Wollheim or Pohl's fanzines. That does not mean they were anti-science. Rather, it reflects a qualification of the Gernsbackian paradigm, but one still within the realms of his particular ideology of science and science fiction. As intimated in Gernsback's editorial policy, science fiction's narrative properties were premised on the utopian promises of corporate science. To engage in it was to engage with a narrative of capitalist success. They were enraptured by the possibilities such science opened up for the modern world, but they did not necessarily associate this with scientific labor. It might be said that they hoped to live in a society created by this scientific labor, the type of corporate science endorsed by Gernsback and the editors of the various pulp magazines. In that sense, they were popularizers just like Gernsback, spreading the gospel of science's utopian possibility.

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[44] William Sykora to International Science Association, June 12, 1934, Donald A. Wollheim Collection, Pohl to Sykora, [1937?], Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[45] The annual election sheet lists Michel's interest as sociology, Wollheim's as astronomy, and Lowndes as psychology, and anthropology. See "The International Scientific Association. Annual Election," December 31, 1936, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[46] Pohl to Edward Carnell, [1936?], Frederik Pohl Papers. Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library (hereafter cited as Frederik Pohl Papers).

BEING A "FAN" IN "FANDOM"

The minor ideological discrepancies within the ISA reflect the fact that fans, even Gernsbackian proselytizers, were not empty vessels passively filled with his utopian beliefs. In a manner typical of their fan community, Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes consciously embraced the attitudes manifested within Gernsback's science fiction for a variety of personal and historical reasons. As many scholars of fandom have argued, fan identities emerge through shared cultural activities and interests, forming the bases of fan communities.[47] From Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes's perspective, to be a fan was a distinct identity performed through, with, and around science fiction, and fandom was an equally distinct community. The identities they embraced alongside other fans had their origins in autonomous practices that explicitly denoted the boundaries of who could and could not be a "fan." Though some fans might have identified Gernsback as a leader within the fan community, most did not: fandom lacked any identifiable leader. Gernsback merely provided the raw materials for the conscious construction of their fan identities: he established the conditions of their possibility. The relationship between him and the fan community was dialogical, sometimes concordant and sometimes discrepant.

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[47] Jenkins argues that a person becomes a fan "not by being a regular viewer of a particular program but by translating that viewing into some type of cultural activity, by sharing feelings and thoughts about the program content with friends, by joining a community of other fans who share common interests." See Jenkins "Star Trek" Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching (1988), in *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, ed. Constance Penley et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 175. Lawrence Grossberg has similarly argued that fans share an "affective sensibility" that produces a "structure of 'affective alliances'" that organize social and cultural life around specific cultural forms within specific contexts, ultimately producing a unique mode of viewing the world.

It follows that reading science fiction was a necessary requirement in processes of fan identity formation, but it was by no means sufficient in itself: to be a "fan," one had to engage in "fan activity" outside the pages of science fiction magazines. After conducting a series of polls through one of his nationally distributed fanzines the late 1930s, Jack Speer defined the ideal fan:

> He buys and reads most of the professional fantasy magazines…collects them, and writes the editors. He subscribers [sic] to at least one fan magazine. He corresponds with other fans. S-f fandom is his ruling passion. He has probably tried his hand at writing, either for fan or pro magazines or both.[48]

Speer's definition describes fans, not as Gernsback's students, but as producers and consumers of a particular form of popular culture. Such activity ensured one's inclusion within the community, and the degree to which one engaged in "fan activity" defined

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See Lawrence Grossberg, "Is there a Fan in the House?: The Affective Sensibility of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 59.

[48] Quoted in John Bristol Speer, "Fan Activity." *Fancyclopedia*, comp. Joe Siclari (Los Angeles: Forrest J. Ackerman for the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society, 1944), http://www.fanac.org/Fannish_Reference_Works/Fancyclopedia/Fancyclopedia_I/ (accessed March 23, 2009).

one's position within fandom. For example, Lowndes was well-known for his frequent appearances in the letter sections of professional magazines, and Wollheim's nationally distributed fanzine made him somewhat of a celebrity within the community. In retrospect, fans could be considered amateur cultural workers.

In this sense, being a fan was performative – it was always something you did – but fans held these practices as evidence of essential fan characteristics that reiterated Gernsback's scientific exceptionalism. If science was an exceptional discourse, and science fiction a means by which young readers could attain positions of social and intellectual privilege, then science fiction fans saw themselves as exceptional and privileged.[49] They saw science fiction as a superior form of literature, and their interest in it as evidence of their own superior intellect. Hornig, writing as a fan in 1934, separated devoted science fiction readers from the general public:

> The lovers of fantasy have a higher type of intellect, and are therefore very few in number. I doubt that there are 150,000 people in this country of 125,000,000 who can really appreciate the science and weird fiction that is published in contemporary magazines. They are what you call "class" publications.[50]

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[49] Fiske's argument about the relationship between "fans" and "official culture" is certainly applicable and inspires my reading here. For Fiske, fans (in this case, these science fiction fans) might position themselves as autonomous in relation to the "official culture" (the science fiction publishing industry), but they nevertheless reproduce its practices and beliefs. He writes, "The shadow economy of fan culture in many ways parallels the workings of the official culture, but it adapts them to the habitus of the subordinate. A habitus involves not only the cultural dimensions of taste, discrimination, and attitude towards cultural objects or events, but also the social dimensions of economics (and education) upon which those tastes are mapped." See John Fiske, "The Cultural Economy of Fandom," in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa A. Lewis (London: Routledge, 1992), 45.

[50] Hornig, "A Sad, Sad Story," *The Fantasy Fan: The Fan's Own Magazine* 2, no. 3 (1934): 33, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection, Cushing Memorial Library and Archives, Texas A&M University Libraries (hereafter cited as Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.)

Given that critics at the time relegated pulp magazines to the lowest tiers of the cultural hierarchy, his description inverts and mock these hierarchies.[51] Science fiction pulp magazines assume the highest position, one only accessible to a minority of readers in possession of "class" and "intellect." Fandom then comprised an elite cadre of science fiction literati with unique social authority and power, for as Michel would later argue, "true" science fiction, the sort only this elite class could appreciate, was "working to produce a certain state of mind which is destined sooner or later to take a large hand in shaping the destinies of the world."[52] When Michel wrote that statement, he had his specific friends in mind, but it was a relatively common sensibility within fandom at the time, specifically recalling Gernsback's beliefs in the world shaping possibilities of science fiction. When considered alongside prevailing beliefs about "fan activity," the fan community's mythos emerges: early fans saw fandom as an elite community of cultural workers, as an insider culture with access to privileged modern knowledge. It was a popular response to the increasing visibility of science and mental labor, an identity related to the celebration of engineers and scientists, marking fans as agents of progress.

These fan affirmations of Gernsbackian exceptionalism (Michel's included) reproduced exclusivities buried within his social project. Fans assumed others fans were males, and like Gernsback, these male fans prized rationality, science, and technology as masculine spaces, and men authored the majority of fan cultural productions.[53] During the 1930s, fans publically patrolled the masculine borders of fandom in the letter columns, denouncing the presence of any "love interest" (read: women) in science fiction stories.[54] Male fans often considered women "secondary fans, part of fandom only as sweetheart, wife, daughter, and so forth of some male fan."[55] In the latter years of the decade and the early 1940s, women became increasingly more visible, as Doris Baumgardt, Leslie Perri, and Judith Merril becoming well-known in New York City fan clubs.[56]

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[51] Such politics of distinction and inversions of dominant aesthetic taste are common within fan communities, especially those surrounding particularly derided and devalued cultural objects. For a brief synopsis of such practices, see Fiske, 34-37. Since science fiction was the only pulp genre with a sizable fan community during the 1930s, they were the only organized (albeit loosely) community to systematically invert dominant understandings of the pulps, but it is entirely likely that individual readers of other pulp genre's engaged in similar critical judgments.

[52] Michel, "What is Science Fiction Doing for You?" *The Science Fiction Fan* 3, no. 6 (January-February 1939):7, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

The Gernsbackian dimensions of fan identity were more complicated in terms of race. Most fans considered science fiction to be a racially transcendent phenomenon, but in practice, the "fan" was assumed to be white, a product of discursive and physical exclusion. Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes, however, maintained an antiracist position within fandom, and further developed it after initiating the Michelist project. Fan Jack Speer identified the "average fan" to be of European ancestry, noting "German blood held a plurality, with Italian, Jewish, and Russian far down the line."[57] His account, one of the few descriptions of early fandom's racial/ethnic composition written in the 1930s, is suspect given his very public racial prejudices.[58] Other histories reiterate his perspective. For instance, fan historian Sam Moskowitz considered African American fans strictly anomalous, though others claimed there were African American fans across the United States at the time.[59] Other fans were overtly racist: convention organizers at the Newark Fourth Eastern Science Fiction Convention in 1938 barred presentations that supported unity with "African Bush Savages, Chinese, Japs, Indians, [and] men from Venus."[60] Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes attended this convention and rebuked its organizers for their racist attitudes, later verbally attacked Jack Speer for his views, and introduced an amendment to FAPA that made racial slurs grounds for immediate expulsion.[61] Warner would later write that though fandom was predominantly white, such disputes were common.[62]

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[53] This was not absolute, as there were prominent female fans, most notably Myrtle Douglas and Patti Gray. Known amongst fans by gender-neutral nicknames, Morojo and Pogo, both were members of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society and were fixtures in fanzines and conventions, but they were the exception rather than the rule.

[54] Larbalestier, 117.

[55] Ibid., 106.

[56] For an excellent account of gender and early science fiction, see Larbalestier.

[57] Speer, *Up To Now: A History of Fandom as Jack Speer Sees It* (1939; repr., Brooklyn: Arcturus Press, 1994), 17-18.

[58] Speer often peppered fanzine articles with racial slurs. In an article about the impossibility of world unity, Speer writes, "Tariff barriers have been necessary in the past because otherwise the little yellow men

Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes's antiracism was likely rooted in their particular experience in fandom as a community distinct from that of dominant culture. For instance, Wollheim was a member of The Scienceers (the first science fiction fan club) whose president, James Fitzgerald, was African American. Given a shared interest in science fiction, fans could form relationships with other marginalized individuals.

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and other (half-brained) races could underlive the whites, reduce them to their low standard of living or exterminate them, if free trade were allowed." See Jack Speer, "World-State," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (July-August 1938): 16, Coslet Collection, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (hereafter citied as Coslet Collection).

[59] For instance, Moskowitz identifies only one African American fan during the 1930s, despite stating the "established fact that colored science fiction readers number in the thousands." See Moskowitz, 10. His account is not accurate, as fan Harry Warner claims there were African American fans across the United States at the time, though not many. See Warner, 26-27. I should add that, unfortunately, race, early science fiction, and early science fiction fandom have been radically understudied. Writer and critics Samuel R. Delaney provides a good summary in his short piece, "Racism and Science Fiction," *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, August 1998, http://www.nyrsf.com/ racism-and-science-fiction-.html (accessed February 17, 2010).

[60] Quoted in Wollheim and Michel, foreword to *"Rejected -- Convention Committee": The Speeches by Donald A. Wollheim and John B. Michel Suppressed by the Committee of the Newark Convention* (New York: CPASF, 1938), 1,Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[61] Knight, 152.

According to scholars John Fiske, Lawrence Grossberg, and Henry Jenkins fan communities emerge in response to exclusion and subordination by dominant culture, offering a source of cultural capital, community, and empowerment.[63] Fandom offered all in response to the exclusionary realities of modern America. While fans formed intimate intellectual relationships with science á la Gernsback, the most important relationships were formed with each other. It is important to remember that fandom developed in the midst of economic instability. Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes certainly occupied subordinated socio-economic and cultural positions, lacking control over their lives as sometimes disabled, working-class young adults. Wollheim would later state, "It was an endless futility – you knew what you wanted to do, but there wasn't a chance in the world."[64] The Depression hit Lowndes particularly hard. He worked for the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corp, and spent a portion of the decade homeless, migrating between friends' homes, his local chapter of the Young Men's Christian Association, and the New York City subway.[65] Pohl had to drop out of school when he was fourteen to work. Through science fiction fandom, fans found "a chance in the world" by embracing the promises of Gernsback and establishing social ties made possible by the rise of popular culture. Recalling Fiske, Grossberg, and Jenkins, historian Lizabeth Cohen has argued that the emergence of recreational leisure activities engendered relationships between "workers of different races, ethnicities, and ages" in

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[62] See Warner, 26-27

[63] See Fiske; Grossberg; and Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 280-284.

[64] Quoted in Knight, 10.

[65] Lowndes to Pohl, March 3, 1937, Frederik Pohl Papers.

Chicago during the New Deal, ultimately creating a "culture of unity."[66] Science fiction fandom functioned similarly, as a specific mode of shared recreation that could bind together people of diverse backgrounds (whether of race, ethnicity, gender, or religion) given their embodiment of what might be called fan performativity.

After all, most fan activity took place over long distances: Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes only directly interacted with fans in and around New York City. When Michel and Wollheim proposed holding the first science fiction convention, they did so with the express intention of bringing together fans who knew each other only through the mail. Fandom was largely an imaginary community, and while also ideologically limited (in terms of race and gender), its imaginariness afforded a degree of mutability. Benedict Anderson's understanding of "imagined communities" is immediately relevant here. Fandom was not a nation per se, but fans conceived of it in similar terms, as an imagined community revolving around science fiction. Though he uses it in reference to nationalism, it is equally applicable here given the geographic distance that separated early fans, a characteristic he attributes to any nation.[67] While most never met each other, fans did communicate, and if they did not, they were aware of their existence. In their awareness of these individuals and groups, fans found what he terms "a deep, horizontal comradeship" characteristic of any national community, the shared appreciation and devotion to science fiction.[68] For Anderson, "finite, if elastic bonds" limit all national communities.[69] In fan terms, the literary genre, and the rules policing fan identities define these limits: only those performing according to the ideology masculinized scientific intellectual and cultural workers could enter their space.

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[66] Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*, 2nd ed. (1990; repr., Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 341.
[67] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (1983; repr., London: Verso, 1991), 6.
[68] Ibid., 7.

Both Gernsback and fans envisioned science fiction in global terms: in their minds, science would not just rebuild the American nation, but the entire world. The Michelists, like most fans, actively imagined fandom as a similarly global phenomenon. A stanza from a 1937 poem by Pohl entitled "Science Fiction Fans, Too, Are Human," aptly summarizes this fan internationalism:

> From the four corners of the earth,
> From countries of the southlands,
> From England, from Africa, from Canada,
> From America, from South America,
> From every corner of the four corners of the earth
> The readers of the form of literature called science fiction stand up on their hind legs and raise their voices.[70]

Following Pohl, fandom traverses all national and geographic boundaries, and thus for the Michelists, to write of fandom was to write of a global imaginary. However, its "culture of unity" was legitimately transnational, rooted in material practices that traversed national boundaries. Pohl continues, noting that events in the professional science fiction sphere compel action in the fan community. For example, he writes, "Does ASTOUNDING print a story? They write a letter."[71] In his view, such correspondence connects fans across the world:

> From England they write to Africa,
> From Africa they write to Canada,

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[69] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

[70] Pohl, "Science Fiction Fans, Too, Are Human," *Science Fiction Fan* 4, no. 1 (November 1939): 19, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[71] Ibid.

From Canada they write to America,
From America they write to England, to Africa, to Canada, to South
America with interstate correspondence at a saving in postage.[72]

His poem describes common fan practices. As noted earlier, clubs existed all over the world, and fans actively corresponded with fans in other countries. One of the first fanzines, *The Fantasy Fan*, had subscribers in New Zealand by 1934.[73] Both Wollheim and Pohl were in contact with Edward J. Carnell in the United Kingdom, writing letters, trading fanzines, and supplying him and his club with American magazines by 1936.[74] The International Scientific Association lived up to its name: it had members in nine states, England, Peru, Canada, and South Africa.[75] In 1944, Warner writes, "If any organizations exist in other foreign lands, discovery of them will be one of the first tasks of postwar fandom."[76] Through fandom's transnational communication networks, Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes engaged the modern *world* through science fiction.

TOWARDS THE "GERNSBACK DELUSION"

Like their all of their fan compatriots, Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes grappled with the structures and beliefs of modernity through science fiction. In embracing Gernsbackian utopianism, they affirmed and celebrated dominate modes of American capitalism, staking a claim to a realm of social, cultural, and economic privilege that they were denied. Through fandom, they created a real and imaginary space wherein the disenfranchised and disempowered could position themselves at the center of modernity, and align themselves with likeminded individuals over vast distances, separating themselves from a mundane world of hardship. Here, even if only in an imaginary sense, the historical possibilities suggested by the rise of modern science were momentarily their own. Gernsback made this possible, but fans were not beholden to his ideology of science and science fiction.

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[72] Pohl, "Science Fiction Fans, Too, Are Human," 19

[73] Hornig and S. M. White, "Our Readers Say," *The Fantasy Fan: The Fan's Own Magazine* 1, no. 5 (January 1934): 76, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[74] In 1936, Pohl wrote to Edward J. Carnell of the Leeds Science Fiction League, telling him that the ISA was interested in establishing magazine exchanges with clubs in the United Kingdom. Pohl to Carnell, July 16, 1936, Frederik Pohl Papers.

[75] Mailing List for Volume 2, Issue 7 of The International Observer, [1937?], Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[76] Warner, "Present-Day Organizations," in *What is Science Fiction Fandom?* (National Fantasy Fan Federation, [1944?]), 19.

Science fiction, when considered as both a literary genre and a social activity, laid the kindling for the rebellion against it, and almost ironically, Gernsback sparked the Michelist revolt. Wollheim's brief foray into the professional world immediately soured him on the publishing industry: Gernsback did not pay him, and when he vocally protested, Gernsback expelled him from the SFL.[77] This was a catalyst for his critical stance within fandom, but such opposition was perhaps inevitable for intellectual reasons as well. Though dreamers and utopians, Wollheim, Michel, Pohl and Lowndes were not "dupes," and the impossibility of realizing the Gernsback's hopes was always apparent: while science fiction offered refuge, it did not offer reform. In their view and experience, Gernsback failed: neither science nor science fiction readers had brought utopia, let alone supplied direct answers for their immediate conditions, nor the broader social, economic, and political problems they were related to. As Lowndes would later write,

> Instead of the new golden era which politicians, scientists, and professionals of all natures, with the exception of a few who were looked upon as crackpot alarmists were predicting, a new era of which the science-fictionists secretly believed themselves the vanguard, there ensued a period of crisis and ruin unbelievable.[78]

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[77] Knight, 5; Moskowitz, 29.

[78] Lowndes, "The Michelist Movement in Fandom," *Science Fiction Fan* 4, no. 12 (July 1940): 7, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

Increasing disillusioned with the utopian promises of science and science fiction based in capitalist production, they believed that prior understandings and uses of popular culture were unsuccessful, and anyone who still accepted such promises was a victim of the "Gernsback Delusion."[79] The world-as-it-was did not reflect the world depicted in science fiction magazines, nor did its readers successfully bring about such a world. This was not a complete denouncement of Gernsback's position, as Lowndes' language expresses a certain hope that such progress might still be possible, but the belief that readers would become scientists, heroes of modernity, was at best inadequate and needed to be reconceptualized. If the partnership of science fiction and capitalism had failed, then these young men were ready to promote a new union, one that could revitalize the promises of science fiction as much as the real worlds of its ardent fans.

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[79] Jack Speer and Richard H. Eney, *Fancyclopedia II* (Los Angeles: D. Eney, 1959), 77.

Chapter 2: Developing Radical Science Fiction in the Depression

Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes were not dissatisfied with science or science fiction per se, but with Gernsback's particular variant of it. His implicitly pro-capitalist posturing was the problem and in that sense, the "Gernsback Delusion" was emblematic of the anti-capitalist sentiment that had been developing across America since the economic collapse of 1929, and manifest in the labor upheavals of the next five years, a brief period historian Paul Buhle describes as an experience of "insurrectionary fever."[80] As Buhle notes, in these early Depression years, the CPUSA was "transformed from a persecuted pariah into a semi-legitimate left-of-center force within national politics," eventually reaching its peak membership of 85,000 in 1942.[81] Nearly half of CPUSA membership was in New York City, and it was particularly active in Michel, Wollheim, and Pohl's Brooklyn neighborhood, regularly leading area rent strikes and demands for employment.[82] Their turn away from Gernsbackianism coincided with their turn toward the Left, ultimately embracing Marxism as espoused by the Communist

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[80] Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States*, revised second ed. (1987; repr., London: Verso, 1991), 144; Wald, *Exiles From a Future Time*, 328.

[81] Ibid., 145.

[82] On Brooklyn's political activity in the 1930s, see Wendell Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews, and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 33-93. A possible connection exists between Wollheim and Michel's ties to the Jewish American community, particularly in their largely Jewish neighborhood, and their Communist turn. (Pohl and Lowndes were raised as Protestant Christians). Wald notes that there was an "inordinately large number of Jews in the intellectual apparatus of the Party as well as the panoply of cultural networks that appeared" during the 1930s, a connection largely deriving from the fact that the "Communist movement in the United States had a solid foundation in Eastern European Jewish immigrant families." For an account of the ties between Jewish Americans, the Communist Party, and the literary left during the 1930s and 1940s, see Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 176-209. However, I have found no evidence to support such a connection on theological grounds, as Michel and Wollheim identified as Atheists, as did the protestant Pohl and Lowndes, during the 1930s. This was common during within the CPUSA at the time. I suspect existing Jewish cultural networks and affiliations in Flatbush facilitated their interest Communism. See Wollheim, "Science Fiction and Religion," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 1 (April-May 1938): 7, 14.

Party. Michel was the first to do so, and joined the Brooklyn Flatbush chapter of Young Communist League (YCL) in 1935. A year later, Wollheim and Pohl joined the same branch, while Lowndes joined a branch in Stamford, Connecticut. Pohl would later summarize his reasons for joining:

> The Communists were the chief defenses of the liberty-loving peoples of the world against the fascist imperialists, Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. The Communists supported the right of workers to organize in trade unions. The Communists were against race discrimination and in favor of civil rights, and the first thing the Communists had to do…was to reelect Franklin Delano Roosevelt President of the United States.[83]

His description accurately describes CPUSA policy after it adopted Popular Front politics in 1935, when it subordinated its revolutionary anti-capitalism in pursuit of anti-fascist unity under the New Deal. YCL publications after 1935 all speak to the same issues, while emphasizing the need for unity amongst American youth of all races and classes against the rising tide of fascism in the United States and abroad.[84] Pohl and Michel were particularly active YCL members, and both actively recruited neighborhood youth into the branch, as well as edited its weekly newspaper, *The Flatbush YC Yell*. Pohl eventually became President of the branch, and in 1938, would found another in the neighborhood. Through their YCL activities, they encountered prominent and popular

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[83] Pohl, *The Way the Future Was*, 50.

[84] While the 1934 account of the Seventh National Convention of the YCL aggressively denounces Roosevelt and the New Deal, accounts of subsequent conventions and later publications urge cooperation with existent democratic institutions so as to build alliances with middle class youth, reflecting the turn to Popular Front politics. See Young Communist League of the U.S.A, *A Program for American Youth: Manifesto and Resolutions of Seventh National Convention, Young Communist League of U.S.A. (June 22-27, 1934)* (New York: Youth Publishers, 1934); Gil Green, *Young Communists and Unity of Youth* (New York: Youth Publishers, 1935); Green, *Make Your Dreams Come True: Report to the Eighth National Convention of the Young Communist League* (New York: Worker's Library Publishers, 1937); John Little, *Wake Up and Live* (New York: New York State Committee Young Communist League, 1937); Leonard J. Mason, *We Want to Live!* (New York: National Committee, Young Communist League, 1938); and Joseph Clark, *Life With a Purpose: Why You Should Join the Young Communist League* (New York: National Committee of the Young Communist League, [1940?]).

Leftist works, such as Vladimir Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, John Strachey's *The Theory and Practice of Socialism* and *The Coming Struggle for Power*, as well as the *Daily Worker*, *New Masses*, and the *Young Communist Review*.[85]

In Marxism, Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes found a means to change the world that was compatible with science fiction fandom. In their view, its "tremendous scope and project of planning for world-rebuilding" and "for infinite development of mankind in co-operative unity in world fellowship" were the goals of fandom, particularly its internationally focused, social narrative of progress.[86] These similarities hinged on the broader Popular Front movement, specifically the politicization of fields they already identified with: science and popular culture. Their turn to radical politics did not occur in a vacuum, but was a distinct formulation of larger social processes. The "Gernsback Delusion" was representative of conversations within the professional scientific community and the various wings of the culture industry. As historian Peter J. Kuznick has noted, the Depression struck a blow against science and scientists. Condemnations of science were increasingly common, as it was now associated with the abuses of modern industrial capitalism, a means of removing human workers from the production process for the express purpose of increasing profit.[87] The rapid expansion of the 1920s halted, and as universities and corporations slashed budgets, they let scientists and engineers know that they too were expendable, and left many unemployed.[88] News of the abuses of science and scientists by fascist governments abroad, particularly the German expulsion of Jewish university scientists, reached American scientists, revealing a worst-case-scenario for already worried scientists. Unemployment and pay cuts struck cultural workers as well, and publishers, editors, writers, and artists sought relief and federal support, leading many to turn to state sponsored art projects and other means of getting by.[89]

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[85] Warren I. Sussman, though arguing that the Popular Front had no core ideological text, identifies Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power* as "the only work that seems to stand out as read by 'everyone' and regarded as a 'powerful instrument'" within the Popular Front. In other words, the Michelists' ideological bases were common within the movement. Warren I. Sussman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 152.

[86] Wollheim, "Retreat," *Science Fiction Fan* 3, no. 5 (December 1938): 4, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[87] As Kuznick writes, "When representatives of government, finance, labor, and academia enumerated the causes of unemployment, technology commonly topped their lists." See Kuznick, 18-25

Like Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes, some scientists and cultural workers embraced Leftist politics, and organized as political activists, using their respective positions and practices to further Popular Front political goals. In formulating Michelism, they drew inspiration from such practices and beliefs, poaching elements from prominent Marxist understandings of science, literature, and popular culture to redefine the social and political functions of science fiction as a literary genre. The remainder of this chapter will focus on how these four fans encountered Leftist science and literary theory through their participation in the YCL to produce a radical, anti-Gernsbackian science fiction. It is important to note that each of these discourses and communities – science, the culture industries, science fiction, and its fandom – were predominately apolitical, if not conservative. The Michelists were moving against the grain, but they were also entrenched within these conservative spaces, and the literary and political break the Michelists hoped to initiate was not total. They retained many of these discourses' implicit exclusivities, specifically exceptionalist ideologies, Marxist-

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[88] See Kuznick, 25-32.

[89] See Denning, 83-96.

Leninist elitism, and unrepentant masculinism, much of which translated quite easily to their previous understandings of science fiction.

ENCOUNTERS WITH RADICAL SCIENCE

The Soviet Union's Communist Party celebrated science as a progressive discipline just as many in the United States did, but the world's sole communist state avoided the havoc modernization wrought on the American shore through its dedication to strict political-economic planning, a fact that did not escape disillusioned fans and scientists. Wollheim attributed the "economic break down of society" to America's "planless and mad system" that left "no place for any further development of knowledge."[90] Michel argued similarly, writing that "science is being hamstrung, diverted from its true course and turned to the case of greed, war, and the Almighty Profit.[91] Its "true course" was "to benefit humanity," an increasingly common view among professional scientists, who saw the absence of economic planning to be at the root of the Depression, steering science toward profit and not people.[92]

For scientists and these fans, the Soviet example offered an alternative course of action. If unrestricted American capitalism had fully co-opted scientific research, rendering it subservient to profit accumulation, then the Soviet Union's dedication to science offered a model wherein science and society would not stand in conflict.[93] In this case, Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes adopted official CPUSA policy, and collectively argued that "the socialist economic system is the only one under which science can progress further and under which science is most fully applied to the common good."[94] *Culture and the Crisis*, a pamphlet aimed at "intellectual workers" similarly declares, "Under Socialism science and technology are freed from their dependence on private profit; their scope and social application are enormously increased."[95] For each, socialist political-economy becomes the necessary precondition for scientific development, and consequently, social development. Scientists, freed from capitalist demands would be "liberated to perform freely and creatively their particular craft function."[96] Under Communism, scientists could directly apply science to economic and social recovery. This retains the utopian dimensions of scientific practice and the celebratory account of scientific labor that had been so appealing to fans: the narrative of inevitable social progress remains, but reframed within Leftist discourse. In other words, for the Michelists, the embrace of Communist science allowed them to position themselves as the vanguard of social development as per the Gernsback's science fiction.

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[90] Wollheim, "Science Fiction and Science" in *'Rejected -- Convention Committee'*," 4, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[91] Michel, "The Position of Science, Correlative to Science Fiction and the Present and Developing International Economic, Political, and Cultural Crisis," in *"Rejected -- Convention Committee"*, 8, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[92] Ibid.

[93] As David C. Engerman writes, "The Soviet aim of simultaneously constructing economic and cultural modernity through conscious planning, they hoped, would save the USSR from the consequences of an accidental and haphazard modernization left to market forces – consequences recently thrust upon the

This cannot be severed from a sense of scientific exceptionalism that easily translated to Communist beliefs. Conventional Marxist thought held that their political philosophy was a form of science in itself, a rational way of examining and schematizing interrelated social processes for the purposes of political action. As Marxist historian and philosopher Francis Franklin wrote in 1938, Marxism was "the collective outgrowth of

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United States," Engerman, *Modernization from the Other Shore: American Intellectuals and the Romance of Russian Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 256.

[94] "What is Michelism?" *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (July-August 1938): 2, Coslet Collection.

the entire history of science and philosophy."[97] Dialectical materialism was seen as a set of general principles and laws that could be applied across all spheres of social life and the natural world:

> [Marxism] discovers within all the sciences similar laws of movement and development, which express themselves in such diverse phenomena as the movement of the stars, the ebb and flow of the tides, the evolution of life, and the rise and fall of empires.[98]

British Marxist geneticist J. B. S. Haldane argued similarly:

> Marxism claims to apply scientific method in the field of politics and economics, and to predict and to enable us to control the transformation of the world still further. Because it extends scientific method into the human field it throws a new light on science, as a human activity depending both on contemporary social and economic conditions and also on certain very general laws of human thought.[99]

These formulations position Marxism as a socially critical subjectivity always aligned with human emancipation and liberation. Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes adopted this perspective, abandoning Gernsback's science for that of Franklin, and Haldane.[100] It was an easy transition, as these Marxist descriptions maintain the elite understanding of science that prevailed in professional science fiction magazines.

Politically inclined scientists took up the Leftist cause and organized, coming together within the Popular Front as political activists. American writers and social scientists allied with British natural scientists to publish *Science and Society*, a journal

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[95] League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, *Culture and the Crisis* (New York: Workers Publishers Library, 1932), 18.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Francis Franklin, "Marxism: A Scientific Philosophy of Life," *The Scientific Thinker* 1, no. 1 (August 1938): 3.
[98] Ibid.
[99] J. B. S. Haldane, *The Marxist Philosophy of the Sciences* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1938), 14.

"dedicated to the growth of Marxian scholarship" that Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes eagerly read.[101] Scientists formed political organizations, including the radical American Association of Scientific Workers (1938), a scientist's "union" dedicated to the progressive science, antifascism, and antiracism, and the exposé of "pseudo-scientific theories, particularly where such are used as justification for anti-social, anti-democratic, anti-labor, or pro-war policies."[102] Anthropologist Franz Boas formed the American Committee for Democracy and Intellectual Freedom (1939), a group dedicated to the "fervent defense of democracy and intellectual freedom," and the collective condemnation of "Nazi racism and persecution of science and teachings."[103]

Fans were well aware of these developments through popular discourse on the subject and personal connections.[104] In threatening science, capitalism and fascism threatened the foundations of science fiction as these fans had come to understand it. However, the burgeoning political consciousness among scientists opened an alternative intellectual space that reaffirmed and refreshed science fiction's assumptions about science and society. As YCL members, Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes witnessed the discipline's encounters with the Left, and in these intersections identified a means by which science could remain a progressive force. They still turned to science as an

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[100] Jack Rubinson, another member of the ISA, and later Michelist, reprinted articles by Franklin in his fanzine, *The Scientific Thinker*. See Franklin, "Marxism: A Scientific Philosophy of Life," *The Scientific Thinker*, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[101] Quoted in Kuznick, 69.

[102] Quoted in Ibid., 229. For more on the American Association of Scientific Workers, see Kuznick, 227-252. The Michelists would later advertise *Science and Society* in their fanzine, *Science Fiction Advance*.

[103] Kuznick, 184. For more on Boas's political efforts see, Kuznick, 171-226.

[104] In 1937, a "member of an Association of Chemists, Technicians, and Engineers" attended an ISA meeting and discussed his activity in a "union [that] may fight for higher wages for the Industrial chemist in the near future." See International Scientific Association, "Minutes of the New York Branch International Scientific Association as of April 18, 1937," April 18, 1937, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

authoritative discipline and body of knowledge, retaining the exceptionalist paradigm Gernsback initiated in science fiction. In switching Gernsback's failed narrative with another that promised success, they allied themselves with established intellectuals and professional scientists who embraced Leftism for similar reasons.

ENCOUNTERS WITH RADICAL FICTION

While the Marxist intellectual tradition always had close ties with science as a discipline, the relationship between Communist institutions and science as a field of labor were relatively new, largely a consequence of its previous focus on manual, rather than mental, labor.[105] In contrast, Communism, and the arts had longer standing ties, and many within the CPUSA saw art as an important weapon in class struggle. This, however, did not include popular cultural forms (such as science fiction), which Leftist critics commonly denounced as products of a culture industry that rendered "the masses" passive victims to the capitalist order.[106] Communist writer and editor Michael Gold is representative of such attitudes, and the Michelists encountered his beliefs in the pages of *New Masses*, where he regularly railed against popular culture as a bourgeois indulgence divorced from the everyday experience of working people.[107]

For Gold, a politically committed literature could cultivate revolutionary political consciousness within its readers, hence his famous declaration, "Go Left, Young

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[105] Denning identifies the inclusion of immaterial ("mental") labor within the American Marxist tradition as one of the constitutive, and novel elements of the Cultural Front. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 96-104

[106] For a complete history of leftist attitudes towards popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century, see Paul R. Gorman, *Left Intellectuals and Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[107] Gorman, 113.

Writers!" in the pages of his journal, *New Masses*.[108] When they did, they were to embrace Gold's proletarian realism, a literature about, by and for workers that was simple in style and direct in purpose: to unite the working-class, assault the bourgeoisie, and act as guides for revolutionary proletarian action.[109] Dominant among CPUSA members and "fellow travelers" before the ascendency of the Popular Front, proletarian realism embodied a host of styles each attuned to the particularities of its many producers across the United States, but the masculine worker typically stood as the central agent of political change against a feminized (and feminizing) petite-bourgeoisie.[110] CPUSA organizations promoted the literature, including the YCL, where Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes were among the genre's appreciative audiences, celebrating its politics and style. Pohl was particularly fond of Gold's 1935 anthology, *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, and shared it with friends and fellow fans.[111] Michel praised proletarian writers as the sole artists to have "descended into the depths and felt the great human heart of the race beating in its ceaseless throb of pain, joy and frustration, triumph and the will to live."[112] Like Gold, they felt proletarian realism represented social life as the working-class physically experienced it under capitalism, reflecting its writers' proletarian solidarity, while offering readers an opportunity to similarly identify, stirring them to action. In this sense, it offered something science fiction did not: an accurate representation of the world through which readers could position themselves within the modern historical world. In another sense, it offered them a chance to identify with harbingers of change within the modern historical world, not a corporate scientist or engineer found in the pages of science fiction, but the revolutionary proletariat.

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[108] Quoted in Denning, 205.

[109] For a comprehensive study of proletarian literature, see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

[110] See Denning, 200-230. On the masculinization of proletarian literature, and literary response by female writers, see Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[111] Pohl writes to Lowndes, who was only mildly appreciative of the volume, "You mention that you read the poetry in Proletlit, and enjoyed only Fearing and Bodenheim. My god, no. They're good of course, but you don't honestly mean to say that you found no merit in Kreymbourg's "America, America"? Or in Langston Hughes? Or – Doc has my copy, so I can't look up the author – "Joe Hill Listens to the Praying"? Or the one about the broadcast (illegal) in Germany? Or the one about the burning of the Reichstag? Please Doc, they're poetry." Emphasis in source, Pohl to Lowndes, July 18, 1939, Frederik Pohl Papers.

However, their encounters with proletarian realism occurred at the same time Party intellectuals and "fellow travelers" were critically reevaluating the genre. Michel's praise essentially reiterated previous accounts of it, but by 1935, it had not provoked the revolutionary consciousness its supporters hoped for, and its writers struggled with the realities of the marketplace. The League of American Writers, an organization of Communist cultural workers and independent radicals held the first American Writer's Congress in 1935 to, in Malcolm Cowley's words, to discover "the best means of mobilizing public sentiment against war and fascism."[113] This meant confronting the difficulty in producing and distributing literature in a marketplace hostile to revolutionary expression. Most presentations grappled with exiting political and aesthetic paradigms, speaking in terms of Gold's proletarian realism, but leading Leftist writer and critic Kenneth Burke directly critiqued it, questioning its efficiency entirely. [114] His

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[112] Michel, "'The Iron Heel' by Jack London," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (July-August 1938): 9, Coslet Collection.

[113] Malcolm Cowley, "A Note on Marxian Criticism" (1935), in *Think Back on Us: A Contemporary Chronicle of the 1930s by Malcolm Cowley* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967), 81.

[114] For instance, Henry Hart's "Contemporary Publishing and the Revolutionary Writer" addressed the financial difficulty in establishing revolutionary publishing firms, while publisher Alexander Trachtenberg detailed the absence of effective distribution channels, their high cost, and the practical trouble in getting people excited about the political possibilities of literature in his "Publishing Revolutionary Literature." See Henry Hart, "Contemporary Publishing and the Revolutionary Writer," in *American Writer's Congress*,

"Revolutionary Symbolism in America" mapped an alternative course for Marxist political aesthetics that would later characterize Popular Front aesthetics. Burke's work offers a concrete explication of Popular Front aesthetics, a useful point of comparison when discussing Michelist political aesthetics, and is thus worth briefly explicating.

In Burke's view, proletarian realism's rigid dedication to class politics hindered its universal literary appeal, disrupting what he took to be the shared goal of Communism and art: the representation and experience of classlessness. Only by considering "the problems of *man*, not *classes of men*" could Communists form the broad political allegiances necessary to overthrow capitalism. [115] But how were they to faithfully represent a world of classes while imagining classlessness? He proposed a turn to lower-middle and middle class values, shifting rhetorical emphasis from Gold's "worker" to the "people," finding the latter a more unifying symbol, possessing "the *ideal*, the ultimate *classless* feature" that would enable the production of inclusive and accessible propaganda.[116] Material social conditions do not define "the people." Rather, "the people" is a symbol defined by a series of relationships to "America," as an idea and place. Phrased differently, "the people" is an ideological concept produced from individual and collective relationships to the American nation-state, a real community in

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ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 159-162; Alexander Trachtenberg, "Publishing Revolutionary Literature," in *American Writer's Congress* (New York: International Publishers, 1935), 162-164. Burke's political beliefs during this period are notoriously hard to pin down. While numerous scholars (such as Frederic Jameson) have associated him with New Deal liberalism, Denning notes that during the 1930s, though he was not a Party member, he was closely affiliated with the CPUSA, and his major works of the decade, *Permanence and Change* (1935) and *Attitudes Toward History* (1937), featured critiques of capitalism, direct statements of his Marxist political positions, and explicit endorsements of Communism, all of which were excised from editions printed in the postwar era. Following Denning, I will consider him as a quintessentially Popular Front thinker, an American incarnation of the Western Marxist tradition. See Denning, *The Cultural Front,* 434-445.

[115] Emphasis in source, Burke, 92

[116] Emphasis in source, Ibid, 90.

that people actually live within it, but also imaginary in that its inhabitants must establish ties to it and each other that are not readily existent.

Burke's proposal extends revolutionary political agency to immaterial labor, acknowledging middle-class alienation and exploitation under capitalism (such as that experienced by scientists and writers), and the necessity of its allegiance in the fight against fascism. In emphasizing "the people" as a collective political agent, political agency shifts from an economic class to specific national subjects, thereby incorporating immaterial labor in class struggle. This necessitates the use of artistic forms tied to popular practices within the nation, rather than specific types of labor. His "complete propagandist" would necessarily use the cultural forms of the working- and middle-class, speaking their language by "taking an interest in as many imaginative, aesthetic, and speculative fields as he can handle," interweaving "a general attitude of sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards our oppressive institutions."[117] The "imaginative writer" could associate political activity and broad cultural awareness, transforming formerly denounced popular culture into a political medium, thereby politicizing its producers and consumers across the nation. From such a perspective, pulp fiction, and thus science fiction, could be a revolutionary medium. In expanding political agency, any number of figures could embody and represent revolutionary political action, including the scientists, engineers, and space travelers featured in science fiction stories.

Burke's proposition was initially controversial among orthodox Communists like Michael Gold, but it was a relatively common position within the non-Marxist American Left. As Denning suggests, Burke's theories of political and communicative action laid the foundation for the Popular Front's cultural logic, and when the CPUSA adopted its Popular Front strategy a year later, his rhetoric of redemptive nationhood took center stage. The traditional iconography of America – the frontier, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, a "folk" aesthetic, to name only a few – populated the Leftist arts, a process Denning identifies as the social movement's attempt to forge a new people's culture oriented around the Popular Front's political goals.[118] As Cowley would later intimate when he claimed Burke was "a premature adherent of the People's Front," Burke was stating the obvious, only identifying a Cultural Front already in development.[119] This was almost inevitable, for as Cowley wrote in the first edition of *Exiles Return: A Narrative of Ideas* (1934), "The artists will and do take in [class struggle], because they are men before they are writers or painters, and because their human interests are involved."[120] The same political currents that swept up scientists affected those working in the culture industries, and they turned to their work as a mode of political expression. Popular Front beliefs inflected the popular arts. For instance, they appeared on stage in the proletarian dramas of Clifford Odets and the Group Theatre and Duke Ellington's 1941 musical revue *Jump for Joy*, in films such as King Vidor's somber *Our Daily Bread* (1934) and satirical *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), and in the pages of popular novels like John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940).

Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes took immediate advantage of the aesthetic possibilities afforded by the Cultural Front after having encountered them through the

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[117] Burke, 90.
[118] See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 123-136
[119] Cowley, *The Dream of the Golden Mountains: Remembering the 1930s* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 227.

YCL. After all, pulp publishing, specifically science fiction, was by no means exempt from these processes. Science fiction fans, as distinct elements within science fiction's field of cultural production, were a part of a larger industry turning Left to varying degrees, and their participation in the YCL was one example of a Leftist turn. Though interested in proletarian realism, the Michelists were first and foremost producers of science fiction – their praise of proletarian realism appeared in a science fiction fanzine. When they answered Gold's call to "Go Left," they turned to their chosen form to, in Burke's language, "interweave a general attitude of sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards our oppressive institutions," enacting Popular Front aesthetic ideologies by embracing science fiction as a political medium against the "oppressive institutions" of Gernsbackian science fiction and fandom.[121] However, since Gernsback's science was demonstrative of capitalism's failure, they redefined the "science" in science fiction in Marxist terms, and theorized a properly Marxist science fiction.

FORMULATING A RADICAL SCIENCE FICTION

Burke's "complete propagandist" acknowledges the affective dimensions of popular culture. While this could be pacifying as Gold believed, it could just as easily be emancipatory, and Leftists needed to seize the latter in the name of radical political change. Implicit in this position is the recognition that popular culture provides the raw materials through which individuals and groups position themselves in relation to the social world. For science fiction fans, however elite they purported to be, this was never

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[120] Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1934), 300.
[121] Burke, 90.

in dispute, and the community's devotion to a "debased" form like pulp fiction allowed them to partake in the peaks and pitfalls of American modernity.

Wollheim recognized this, and took "fan activity" as evidence of science fiction's positive a/effect on dedicated readers. He described the genre as a "force" that acted upon its fans, compelling them to act in turn. Describing a convention, he writes, "[Fans] would not have travelled miles to attend a gathering of fans had they not felt the stir of something in common with the rest of fandom."[122] This "force" cultivates community, but as the varying ideologies of fandom reveal, fandom maintained, if not depended on, Gernsback's scientific and technological utopianism, implicitly affirming the dominance and power of corporate capitalism. For Wollheim, however, its utopianism was rooted in its narrative properties, what he identified as the quintessential feature of the science fiction story: the creative representation of a possible future. Any "force" within the genre lay in its readers' encounters with such futures. He assumed that through the act of reading science fiction, immersing oneself within such future worlds, readers became idealists, invested not in technological science, but in the sort of utopian society it afforded. While Gernsback and other fans' singled out, if not fetishized, contemporary technological innovation in the name of social development, the Michelists severed this connection: science and technology do not by their very nature imply progress, and instead serve as rhetorical devices in the representation of utopia. For the Michelists, science fiction's force lay in these utopian speculations, not in its particular means of getting there.

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[122] Donald A. Wollheim, "Thoughts Upon the Defeat of a Resolution," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 1 (April-May 1938): 11, Coslet Collection.

Maintaining the science in "science fiction" was still important, but the corporate science fiction of Gernsback was clearly insufficient, necessitating their turn to Haldane and Franklin, whose Marxist science emphasized sociology, rather than technology. Their interest in proletarian realism influenced this turn: to expropriate Michel's praise of proletarian realism, science fiction could now "[descend] into the depths and [feel] the great human heart of the race beating in its ceaseless throb of pain, joy and frustration, triumph and the will to live." After all, a utopian future was all for naught if it could not actually happen, so any represented future had to have contemporary society as its starting point: science and technology serve as means of historical extrapolation. This marks science fiction as an always-already political genre because, as Lowndes would later write, "stories dealing with the future and with science must by their very nature reflect upon man and man's reactions."[123] They identified the work of H.G. Wells, whose work frequently appeared in science fiction magazines, as the best writer of such literature.[124] They saw Wells as an author who focused on "social science," rather than the technologically inclined science of Gernsback, thereby promoting the "study of human reactions toward various innovations, and towards suggestions of future courses."[125] Other exemplars included philosophically and politically inclined European works: Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932); Olaf Stapledon's *Last and First Men: A Story of the Near and Far Future* (1930), *Last Men in London* (1933), *Odd John: A*

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[123] CPASF, "Rebuttal by the Staff," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (July-August 1938): 2, Coslet Collection.

[124] Soviet science fiction writers addressed similar themes from a specifically Communist perspective, but I have found no evidence that speaks to any encounter with such works. Though they certainly read Soviet leftist literature, their immediate points of reference for all things science fictional were the pulps (which did not print any Soviet works), fanzines, and science fiction novels.

Story Between Jest and Earnest (1935), and *Star Maker* (1937); and Michael Arlen's *Man's Mortality* (1933).[126] Such works stood in contradistinction to the predominantly conservative pulp magazines that fans typically read, most of which remained dedicated to adventure stories in the Gernsbackian tradition.

Unlike previous condemnations of popular culture that understood it as a pacifying force, the Michelists did not believe such effects were inherent to its commercial nature: its formal existence, as a "debased" commodity did not determine its use. As Michel noted, science fiction's pulp existence was no different than most cultural objects in the world, "as everything else in this age has been exploited for profit."[127] From their perspective, its political and critical potential resided in its content, in the political character of its diegesis: it could reinforce the status quo, naturalizing contemporary political-economy or dominant beliefs by representing their future existence, or challenge them by representing alternative historical trajectories. Science fiction's future-worlds could be liberatory, or repressive; the genre could be emancipatory, or enslaving. The strengths of the previously mentioned works lay in theirs explorations of fictive societies rooted in the contemporary world, but they were not ideal for the Michelist project. Though writers such as Wells and Huxley veered Left, they were not Marxists. Given Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes's interest in Marxist science, and the CPUSA's commitment to science fiction's key ingredients –

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[125] Lowndes to Editor, Writer's Digest, February 4, 1940, Donald A. Wollheim Collection; Wollheim to Campbell, June 24, 1937, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[126] Wollheim listed these works in a letter to *Astounding Stories* editor Joseph Campbell, claiming that sociological science fiction has been written, and does have a sizable audience. Wollheim to Campbell, November 19, 1937, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[127] Michel, "The Position of Science, Correlative to Science Fiction and the Present and Developing International Economic, Political, and Cultural Crisis," 9.

science and society – a Marxist literary commitment needed to be developed among apolitical writers and fans. With its visions of an entirely restructured world, only Communism offered a liberatory perspective on the future, a goal Lowndes saw as a form of science fiction in it itself.[128] A properly Marxist science fiction would critique the capitalist social order through its representation of a Communist future. Since science and society could only flourish under Communism, to engage with any other mode of political-economy would be an exercise in false-consciousness, an escapist act rather than a politically enlightening reading experience. This retains Gernsback's pedagogical paradigm, but rather than instructing readers in science as a field of technological labor, the genre becomes a mode of political pedagogy, a means of cultivating a political consciousness.

A 1937 short story by Wollheim published in *The Phantagraph* entitled "Picture of a Young Man with a Vision" offers a concrete example of these beliefs in action. The story is of note because it stages the relationship between science fiction and its readers, and is one of the few works of fiction published by any of the Michelists in the late 1930s. It features one character, identified only as "the young man," looking out his apartment window, but ignoring the New York skyline, as his mind "was filled with the story he had just read, his heart was beating fast and his imagination stirred to heights by the tale, was still flaming on through the sky."[129] The story narrates his "stirred imagination."[130] The young man first imagines himself "shooting through the blackness and silences of outer space" as a space traveler heading towards "distant tiny worlds, worlds of great strangeness, yet spheres to which his soul felt a keen affinity."[131] Here, science fiction functions as a catalyst for imaginative production, a means by which its readers can imagine themselves within alternate realities: his earthly identity disappears, and he becomes "the space traveler" who prefers "distant tiny worlds" to planet Earth. The narrator continues,

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[128] In a fanzine article on the political imperative of Marxist politics, Lowndes writes, "Some of this may be hard sledding; it is not all as easy to peruse as the latest issue of Thrilling Wonder Stories. But you will find an added in these works that other students would miss. Because socialism is science-fiction. Not the scatter-brained science fiction of Buck Rogers or Tarzan, not the super-colossal productions of Skylark Smith (well-done as some of them are) but sober, yet by no means less grand science-fiction." Emphasis in source, Lowndes, "'Don't Let Them Scare You!'" *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (July-August 1938): 12, Coslet Collection.

> He was the space traveler. He the fearless voyager of the stars. And he was Man.
>
> Man. Man shorn of his bonds. Man freed of his ties to his little ball of sod. Man freed emotionally from his mental bonds of millennia past. Freed of the agonies and hatreds of histories gone past. Shattered at last the ties to aeons of misery and suffering, aeons of mad fighting and futile unceasing battles against the petty squabbles of a petty world. The wars, the sicknesses of body and spirit, the incredibly petty economies, the grinding monotony of work and sleep, of birth and death with naught between but drudgery. [132]

He describes Earth as a site of alienation from specific historical conditions, namely war and capitalism. Outer space becomes a utopian space, and the young man's ability to imagine himself within it provides brief reprieve from life's drudgery, and history itself. He adopts not just another occupation, but an entirely new subjectivity, ideally figured as "Man," free of all modifiers, whether socially or self-imposed. His invocation of a universal and ideal "Man" recalls that of the Marxist tradition, that invoked by Burke: he is classless. Outer space offers plenitude and possibility, an opportunity to "live the happiness and throbbing pleasure of untrammeled life" filled with "work for progress, work for enjoyment, work for further power and further benefits, work in cleanliness and vitality."[133] This utopian desire is at once political and social, individual and collective, and always rooted in the nature of science fiction: it enables the imaginative production of alternate social structures and relationships.

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[129] Wollheim, "Picture of a Young Man with a Vision," *The Phantagraph* 6, no. 4 (August 1937): 2, L.W. Currey Collection, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin (hereafter cited as L. W. Currey Collection).

[130] Ibid.

[131] Wollheim, "Picture of a Young Man with a Vision," 2

[132] Ibid, 2-3.

Reiterating Gernsback's scientific intellectual and Gold's idealized proletarian, Wollheim constructs the ideal science fiction reader in strictly masculine terms. Although science fiction frees its reader's subjectivity, it remains gendered. He also maintains a narrative of progress, emphasizing that science fiction compels positive social development via its instructive possibilities, but this instruction is imaginative, and critical, not technological. Wollheim's definition rests on the possibility of imagining alternate historical conditions: instruction and progress exist in the reader's ability to cognitively map utopian social conditions, imagining classlessness. However, Wollheim carefully notes that his take on science fiction is not wholly escapist. Immediately after the space-traveler smiles a "grim smile of victory and strong confident strength, of power and pride and unbounded joy of living," he returns to his former identity, unable to imagine any further:

> The youth strained forward. His eyes sought to tear the blue from the sky, sought to hasten the time, to shut out the beating of the clock and move forward to escape these grim weary days. He strained and suddenly in agony of spirit brought his fist down with a thunderous crash upon the reading-table.

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[133] Wollheim, "Picture of a Young Man with a Vision," 3.

> "What was that noise?" called a tired female voice from the kitchen.
>
> "Oh nothing," the youth spoke resignedly and got up and left the room.[134]

Though science fiction offers him an imaginative escape, the young man still exists in the historical world. This is a frustrating realization, compelling a violent outburst, but it is not necessarily defeatist. The young man does not return to his magazine or his imagination: he leaves the room and rejects the role of reader, and becomes a historical actor, albeit of an undefined character, ending the narrative. Yet, the story's end reinforces the exclusion of women from the political and intellectual sphere, as the diegesis seems to only have room for a disembodied female voice – a mother, wife, or girlfriend – calling from a domestic space.

In many ways, Wollheim's story is about the political artist's dilemma as raised by Burke, addressing the difficulty in representing a world of classes while imagining classlessness. The young man literally imagines classlessness whilst being subject to a society defined according to classes, and the juxtaposition of the two compels action in the name of the only system these fans saw as enabling classlessness, communism. In redefining science fiction as a political genre, they enacted Popular Front political and aesthetic practices through the medium they knew best, and remained devoted to. They did not abandon it for any other form of artistic and cultural production, as after all, they were science fiction fans before they were Communists. Implicit in Burke's argument is the need for Leftist artists to appropriate popular cultural forms, but Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes were already invested in a popular form, and entrenched within its culture. Leftist politics influenced their understandings of both, but did not replace them, nor did their Communist affiliations dominate their beliefs. In fact, Wollheim took pride in the fact that though they were Communists, the CPUSA and YCL knew nothing of their fan activities, responding to accusations that they were Communist stooges by stating that the Michelists, "collectively and individually, [do] not ask for or take orders from the Communist Party, the Young Communist League, or anyone else."[135] They conceptualized a radical science fiction independently, combining Marxist science and aesthetics on their own terms.

TOWARDS A MICHELIST WORLD

The 1929 collapse of American capitalism disrupted the fabric of American social life, and the beliefs, institutions, and relationships engendered by the development of modern industrial capitalism shifted accordingly. The disenfranchised found hope and new possibilities in Leftist politics, and when they did, they held onto the beliefs and practices made possible through the modern social terrain. When scientists, cultural workers, and these fans "went Left" in the late 1930s, they remained scientists, cultural workers, and fans, but existed as such within the political paradigms afforded by the Popular Front. The politicized their cultural terrains and reproduced Popular Front political goals within their particular communities. When Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes joined the YCL, they were not exceptional, but part of a national social movement. However, what they theorized through the Popular Front was unique. Their radical science fiction was something new, a twinned refusal of dominant ideologies of

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[134] Wollheim, "Picture of a Young Man with a Vision," 3-4.

[135] Wollheim to Peter Duncan, November 3, 1930, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

American science fiction and capitalism. However, in the 1930s, science fiction was far more than a literary genre, and to discuss it in the absence of fandom would be to provide only half the story. In redefining science fiction according to Marxism, the Michelists also reformulated ideologies of fandom because a political science fiction required politically conscious readers and writers. From the Michelists, there was none better suited to such a project than science fiction fans. They articulated a new ideal "fan" that embodied their ideologies of Marxist science fiction. After all, most fans were apolitical, committed either to the Gernsbackian paradigm, or the pleasures of fandom itself. It was in these four fans' attempts to change this, their belief that all of fandom should take part in the Popular Front, that they came to identify as Michelists.

Chapter 3: Developing a Radical Fan Consciousness

As described previously, William Sykora, president of the ISA, envisioned his club as a training ground for scientists, but conflict arose when its members became more interested in politics. Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes did not hide their political beliefs or affiliations from anyone, and they slowly introduced material unrelated to science into the club's fanzine, including vaguely political articles. For instance, in September, 1936, Michel published an article in *The International Observer* entitled, "Humanity Must Look to the Stars," an "awake-the-future-is-upon-us" piece described by Moskowitz as "reveal[ing] clearly Michel's leftist political beliefs."[136] Sykora, set on a scientific career, was no Leftist and the clashing perspectives eventually lead to the club's dissolution. Their conflict extended beyond differing understandings of science fiction. It revolved around a dispute about what constituted "proper" fan activity: what was the ideal mixture of science, literature, or politics? The Michelist's redefinition of science fiction entailed the rejection of existing understandings of fans and fandom as well, and they began formulating a new ideal fan, politicizing the identity as they did the genre.

As they saw science fiction as a fundamentally utopian literature, they saw fans as utopians themselves: Wollheim's "young man" read science fiction for the express purpose of escaping the existent world. His ultimate frustration hinged on the recognition that his escape was temporary, a belief they attributed to all fans. Lowndes writes, "Every true science-fiction fan has some inkling that the world and that this country is not in an exactly ideal position today."[137] At the same time, such recognition was only possible given their presumed elite intellectual abilities. While they rejected the fan-as-scientist argument, they readily accepted that fans were exceptional intellectuals. Even from their political perspective, such a belief was never in doubt, but they did redefine it in Marxist terms, adapting Marxist-Leninist vanguardism to science fiction fandom. Michel believed that the fan's intellectual prowess naturally lead to a critical subjectivity, for if science fiction was always-already a political genre, then the fan's extraordinary interest in it bore a kernel of an undefined political consciousness. As Michel argued, in engaging fictive worlds, fans could not help but "think socially, politically, and philosophically in stf terms, with a definite foundation of science underlying the entire structure of thought."[138] The possibility of total social renewal and change as manifested in science fiction stories conjured a political, if not revolutionary, sensibility among fans, opening an imaginative space for any number of political perspectives in so far as they were rooted in the utopian dimensions of science fiction. Michel writes,

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[136] Moskowitz, 55, 119.

> [Fans] may become socialists, communists, anarchists, fascists (though the latter seldom results except in cases of certain types of neuroses combined with peculiar and extremely complicated developments of misanthropy), technocrats, Wellsian Modern Staters, or any crystallization of thought which becomes their utopia.[139]

Fandom thus comprised an unrealized political force, but the correct political tendency and organizational form was necessary. Without direction, fans' political desires would inadvertently aid the rise of fascism.[140] They took it upon themselves to guide fans in the right direction, towards the only political philosophy that guaranteed the progressive development of science, science fiction, and society: Popular Front Communism.

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[137] Lowndes, "'Don't Let Them Scare You!'," 11.

[138] Michel, "What is Science Fiction Doing for You?" 7.

[139] Ibid.

As if responding directly to CPUSA President Earl Browder's 1937 declaration that a new political literature "permeated with faith in the creative powers of the masses" whose "greatest themes will be the dramatic change effected by mass creative power when it is organized, disciplined, and directed," the Michelists worked to politicize fandom and the publishing industry they were tied to, hoping to organize, discipline, and direct their "force."[141] They wrote and distributed various tracts and treatises on science fiction and its fandom, though interestingly enough, little fiction, hoping to push their particular variant of political literature to dominance. The remainder of this chapter will detail these attempts.

I use "attempt" quite deliberately, as their movement always lacked support from the majority of the science fiction publishing industry and most of fandom. When they spoke of radical politics, most fans and professionals refused to listen, and at times prevented them from speaking. In that sense, the Michelist project failed. It was a brief flash of radical insurgency in an otherwise conservative field. That does not mean they disappeared, or that their radicalism faded without an impact. Rather, they remained within science fiction and its fandom, finding new ways to express their political desires, finally entering the professional field where that flash's traces would light the path toward new science fictions.

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[140] Lowndes writes, "The majority of [fans], it is my belief, are entirely innocent as far as any desire of trying to aid the fascist cause goes; but the fact remains that everyone who, knowingly or unknowingly tries to tone down the truth, halt or minimize the search for knowledge, divert the attention of fans from realities to inconsequentialities is aiding and abetting the forces of fascism." Lowndes, "'Don't Let Them Scare You!'," 11.

[141] Earl Browder, "The Writer and Politics," in *The Writer in a Changing World*, ed. Henry Hart (New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1937), 55.

BECOMING "MUTANT"

Though most New York City fans knew of the four's Leftist beliefs and their dissatisfaction with science fiction, Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes had not disclosed the relationship between them, nor their relevance to fandom outside their immediate circle. This changed on October 31, 1937, at the Third Eastern Science Fiction Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After prominent fans Milton Rothman, Julius Schwartz, and *Astounding Stories* editor R.V. Happel delivered speeches on the status and future of science fiction, Wollheim took to the podium and delivered Michel's speech in what would become a pivotal moment in the history of fandom, science fiction's equivalent of Burke's speech at the 1935 American Writer's Congress. Michel wrote *Mutation or Death* with the intention of charting a new course for science fiction, fandom, and history itself: all must change, or in fan slang, "mutate."[142] In doing so, he theorized a mode of fan-based political praxis that drew on their reformulation of science fiction and the ideal fan identity.

In Michel's view, science fiction fandom had reached a moment of intellectual bankruptcy, a victim of a "deluge of obscure issues, meaningless phrases, stupid interpretations, and aimless goals."[143] He constructs a narrative of declension within fandom, citing noble origins in the collective appreciation of science fiction and the need for individual creative expression, but such actions were fruitless, ultimately a failure: the imaginative spaces created through science fiction remained unrealized. He states, "THE VERY FACT that no single science fiction organization has ever made any lasting impression on anything...speaks for itself."[144] He does not denounce this tendency, but labels it insufficient, as any literary genre cannot be an ends in and of itself. Fans were as much a failure as the originary beliefs behind the genre they loved. He asks, "What are you people looking for, anyway? Do you really intend to go on harping for more and better science fiction?"[145] "More and better science fiction" might be appealing, but for Michel it is only a beginning, as the appreciation of "clever phrases, well constructed paragraphs" or the "temporary exaltation on reading some powerful descriptive scene" does not translate into literary or social practice.[146]

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[142] The *Fancyclopedia*, a reference guide for fans by Jack Speer, defines "Mutant" as "A type of story or feature opening up an entire new field of stf stories &c. The idea of such a designation is closely related to the thought-variants and WS's New Policy; as it happens, it was little used except for some temponautical tales and innovations in illustrations. Campbell's later usage of the term is with reference to favorable mutations, freaks, which when enuf [sic] occur in one individual may be considered to constitute a new type, the superman, which is capable of perpetuation." See Speer, *Fancyclopedia.*

Michel finds this particularly distressing given science fiction's unique focus on humanity's future, especially since contemporary political and economic conditions placed this future in doubt. Summing up his historical moment, he states, "Today we are face to face, FACE TO FACE, I repeat: CIVILIZATION OR BARBARISM – *reason* or *ignorance*."[147] Echoing the concerns of Popular Front scientists like Franz Boas, he refers to "the sickening spectacle" of fascism and militarized science abroad and condemns scientists and artists who have turned "their backs on cold logic for the magic tinsel of colored military trappings" in support of "the Fascist dictator and general dirty rat, Benito Mussolini."[148] Capitalist economics had left life in the United States alienating and unbearable, creating a "dull, unsatisfying world" through its "stupid asininely organized system" that "demands that a man brutalize and cynicize himself for the possession of a few dollars in a savage, barbarous, and utterly boring struggle to exist."[149] From his Marxist perspective, human civilization had developed irrationally, a problem for a genre that prided itself on the presumed scientific rationality of "elite intellectuals." To read science fiction without taking these factors into account is delusional, a capitulation to an empty idealism and the status quo, a retreat to false-consciousness that renders the genre and its readers historically irrelevant. This leaves fandom with two options: either follow history into barbarism, or "Smash this status quo of ours by smashing the present existing forms of economic and social life!" [150] They could retreat to science fiction's imaginative spaces or make their imaginations a reality.

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[143] John B. Michel, *Mutation or Death.*
[144] Emphasis in source, Ibid.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.

Of course, Michel holds this no choice at all because fans are idealists and utopians, and thus inherently political, if not progressive, and thereby "cannot refuse to accept the challenge of the future."[151] Their idealism needs aggressive social and political direction, what he describes as "a fighting, practical idealism, an idealism based on action and not on words, on experience and achievements and not on bombastic and irrelevant swaggerings."[152] Fans must develop their genre's form in terms of praxis. As

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[147] Emphasis in source, Michel, *Mutation or Death.*
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

in Wollheim's "Picture of a Young Man with a Vision," Michel sees in the juxtaposition of its utopian impulses and the irrational state of the world a means to developing a political-consciousness. Appealing to fan elitism, he posits fans as uniquely capable of doing so, a product of their social position as intellectuals in the Gernsbackian tradition, but Michel reframes it within the Marxist vanguard tradition. He states,

> We have brains, technical brains, introspective brains, thoughts and ideals that would put the greatest minds to shame for scope and insight. Put these brains to work *before it is too late*! The planet is ready for work, for practical work to wipe clean the slate and start anew. We must start anew if we have to smash every old superstition and outworn idea to do it.[153]

In this sense, science fiction fans are in a privileged position when compared to the rest of the world, and once politicized, this position becomes that of a vanguard political intellectual and actor. The characteristics of fan "brains" allow for rational and critically scientific subjectivities that enable socialist progress, the rational development of the world toward the "amazing" and "astounding" worlds of science fiction. Fandom becomes the collective embodiment of science fiction's "force."

While the Michelists' theory of political science fiction enacted Popular Front aesthetic ideologies as mapped out by Burke, Michel's *Mutation or Death* recalls Burke in another fashion, by mapping out a Popular Front theory of political unity and action akin to that evoked by "Revolutionary Symbolism in America." While Burke spoke broadly of popular culture, Michel spoke of a specific form, and both sought their politicization, seeing popular culture as the best way of creating a united front against exploitive American capitalism and the rise of fascism abroad. More importantly, however, they share the same cultural logic of unity, articulating ties between specific groups and imagined communities in the name of forging a new culture around Popular Front political goals: Popular Front artists articulated a new national culture, while Michel articulates a new fan culture. Michel's "fan" functions in a manner akin to Burke's "people," as a symbol of unity denoting real, and imagined relationships within a specific community. Neither the "fan" nor the "people" exist as materially defined class-positions. Rather, individuals and collectives produce each symbol through a series of social and intellectual practices within their respective imagined communities. In terms of fandom, the performative dimensions of the ideal fan identity are paramount: through fan activity, individual fans identify with the imagined community of fandom. In this sense, neither exists except in idealized form, as both the "fan" and the "people" ideologically emerge through these practices, realized by Michel in his ideal political fan.

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[153] Emphasis in source, Michel, *Mutation or Death*.

However, Michel's "fan," and "fandom" are not direct translations of the Popular Front's national subject and the nation: the production of each is contingent on the particularities of each community. In this case, the specificities of "fan activity" and fandom accent the political identity Michel articulates: unlike the "people" who identify with a nation, in this case "Americans" and "America," the "fan" is a critically scientific intellectual, and a cultural worker who identifies with science fiction fandom. The Michelist becomes a "complete propagandist" within the science fiction subculture: a politicized fan, necessarily engaging in all aspects of fan activity, would ultimately politicize all of fandom. But again, the particularities of fandom changed the stakes of political participation. Fandom was a transnational community, a globally imagined community, and by consequence, the political fan becomes a global subject, transcending the limits of redemptive nationhood in the name of redemptive global popular cultural production and consumption. If fans were to "mutate," then their Popular Front would as well, changing according to their understandings of themselves and the world, redistributing its terms of engagement. Only those within the fan community could participate, and while fandom was certainly a "culture of unity," fandom's exclusionary, foundational, premises remained central. Michel's political project inherited the exceptionalist, masculinist scientific intellectual typical of both American Communism and Gernsbackian science fiction. Only men attended the convention, and throughout his speech, he refers only to "gentlemen."

The speech saw a mixed response: some fans denounced it, others ignored it, and several voiced their support. When he finished speaking, Wollheim called for a vote on the matter. Most attendees did not participate, but the vote turned out against *Mutation or Death* with eight in favor, and twelve opposed. Wollheim was particularly disappointed, writing shortly after, "Defeated. Defeated – seems hard to understand. Can it be that they do not understand the meaning of science fiction?"[154] The convention was not the end of it though, and Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes resolved to "mutate" fandom themselves, and quickly organized, using the practices and structures of fandom to spread their unique philosophy, which they now called Michelism in honor of Michel.

FORGING THE SCIENCE FICTION INTERNATIONAL

With its repeated references the dual threats of fascism and capitalism, Popular Front political beliefs clearly influenced "Mutation or Death," but nowhere in the speech did Michel refer to his or any of his friends' Communist affiliations. This political commitment was immediately clear in the following months, when the Michelists used their connections to British fan clubs to make it known. In January, 1938, Wollheim published an article in British fanzine *Novae Terrae*, a response to an article that appeared in the fanzine's November issue that critiqued war as a response to fascism's rise in Western Europe. Wollheim appreciated the sentiment, but argued that fascism would not disappear without an organized struggle against it. In light of the threat, global unity was of the utmost importance, though unlikely unless people around the world were "taught to think anew and live, not as British and Americans, not as Bosses or as Workers, but as Terrestrials and human beings."[155] In his view, only the Communist International offered such a program, and when it came to fandom, he and other New York fans found a way by which fans could use science fiction to join the movement:

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[154] Wollheim, "Thoughts Upon the Defeat of a Resolution," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 1 (April-May 1938): 11, Coslet Collection.

> MICHELISM is the belief that science-fiction fans should actively work for the realization of the scientific socialist world-state as the only justification for their activities and existence.
>
> MICHELISM believes that science fiction is a force; a force acting through the medium of speculative and prophetic fiction upon the minds of idealist youth; that logical science-fiction inevitably points to the necessity for socialism, the advance of science, and the world-state; and that these aims, created by science-fictional idealizing, can best be reached through adherence to the program of the Communist International.
>
> MICHELISM is the theory of science-fiction action.[156]

His summary combines their understandings of science fiction and fandom, and makes their political commitments abundantly clear. Most importantly, however, it demonstrates the legitimately transnational dimensions of Michelism, drawing specifically on established fan communicative modes and networks in order to argue for their variant of global politics. Other fans had similar connections and the January issue of *Novae Terrae* spread through fan distribution networks, leading Michelism to become a relative well-known concept within fandom over the next two years.

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[155] Wollheim, "Commentary on the November 'Novae Terrae,'" *Novae Terrae* 2, no. 8 (January 1938): 12, Coslet Collection.

[156] Ibid., 13-14.

At the same time, the Michelists joined with Harry Dockweiler, Jack Rubinson, and Walter Kublius, three New York City fans with similar political beliefs, and formed the Committee for the Political Advancement of Science Fiction (CPASF). Conceived as an extra-national organization (akin to the CPUSA) through which Popular Front Communist ideology could be shot through the lens of science fiction, they aligned themselves with global "forces of progress" in order to "rally, organize, and direct science-fiction fans" toward Leftist causes.[157] Apart from their individual YCL memberships, the club interacted with the Popular Front organizations they saw themselves acting in concert with, participating in the Second World Youth Congress, and marching in the 1938 May Day Parade alongside at least 50,000 others, including members of the CPUSA, members of six hundred different industrial unions, and representatives from the Lincoln Brigade.[158]

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[157] Wollheim writes, "Now we have a communist movement in science-fiction. We have aims. These aims as far as I can tell are more or less correct along Marxist logic. The aims we have brought up for stf, both immediate, under capitalism, or ultimate under communism, seen so far to be in full accord with Marxian communist laws and logics." Wollheim to Michel, July 20, 1938, Donald A. Wollheim Collection; CPASF, "Action," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (April-May 1938): 2, Coslet Collection.

[158] Pohl to Lowndes, March 1938, Frederik Pohl Papers; *New York Times*, "Divided Leftists in Quiet May Day," May 1, 1938, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2006) (accessed February 27, 2010).

The CPASF published and distributed political pamphlets, including Michel's *Mutation or Death*, an indictment of corporate-sponsored science by Lowndes called *The Case Against Science*, and the collectively authored *Michelism and Communism*."[159] Their flagship publication was *Science Fiction Advance*, a fanzine directly modeled after *New Masses* that served as a public forum and Michelist introductory text. Though it only lasted two issues, they filled its pages with works of theoretical articles on science, science fiction, and politics, envisioning each article as a guide to "science fiction action" that showed fans how to reorient the component practices of fan identity toward political ends. The complete absence of fiction within the magazine speaks to their very specific goals: the political reorientation of fans and fan practices. In its opening editorial, "Action," they asked fans to write to professional magazines and demand "science-fiction with sociological slants," and "articles on the social and economic sciences."[160]

Perhaps most importantly, they asked readers to "Contact every fan you know and propose a like plan to them," taking advantage of fandom's communication networks to establish a political front against the global rise of fascism. Fascism was as widespread as fandom was, and therefore a direct threat to their community, but this also put them in a privileged position to fight it. It was therefore necessary for fans to educate themselves so they could to recognize fascism in all its forms, even in science fiction. In a 1938 article entitled "'Don't Let Them Scare You'," Lowndes reiterates Communist views on the imminent domestic threat of fascism posed by "Hearst, the sixty families, the American Leigon [sic], the Ku Klux Klan, the Reactionaries, the so-called Progressives,

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[159] Wollheim, "Science Fiction Advancing," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (July-August 1938): 19, Coslet Collection.

[and] the 100% Americans."[161] After listing these threats within the United States, he singles out the culture industries as potential points of fascistic entry, grouping "the mass of writers, reporters and commentators whose mission it is to lull us all into peaceful slumber and security."[162] His description emphasizes their understanding of popular culture's political dimensions, and encapsulates their critique of Gernsbackian science fiction in Popular Front terms. Its ultimate delusion lay in the "peaceful slumber and security" offered by a discredited scientific utopianism, implying that such fiction was fascist at its core. Hence their orders to fans: through political fan activity, they could not only politicize fandom, but the science fiction culture industry.

The Michelists initiated this project after they identified fascism in the pages of pulp magazines, lending a sense of immediacy to their writings in *Science Fiction Advance*. Before they published the fanzine, Wollheim wrote to *Astounding Stories* editor John W. Campbell, and described the Michelist project. He asked him to publish works that emphasized the sociological and the literary, rather than the technological and scientific.[163] Campbell claimed to sympathize, but argued that politics did not belong in science fiction, especially if it were to be sociological, but nevertheless pledged to publish stories on the subject if he found any of quality.[164] The Michelists counted this as a success, but they turned against Campbell when he published a story they interpreted as fascist: Thomas Calvert McClary's serialized novel *Three Thousand Years* (1938). McClary's novel stages a conflict between the corporate capitalist Vincent Drega, and the

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[160] CPASF, "Action," 2.
[161] Lowndes, "'Don't Let Them Scare You!'," 12
[162] Ibid.
[163] Wollheim to Campbell, November 17, 1937, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

rational scientist Simon Gamble, each vying for control of Earth after the latter uses his scientific prowess to place Earth under three thousand years of suspended animation: Gamble constructs a "perfect" scientific state, while Drega establishes a capitalist society. Neither is wholly successful, but Gamble's dreamed utopia collapses, while Drega's slowly develops.[165]

Pohl and Wollheim argued that McClary's depiction of humanity was essentially fascist, that it celebrated authoritarian leaders amidst a world of people "incapable of deciding anything for itself," and "hopelessly susceptible to demagogy, ready to follow the first 'leader' that, Hitler-like, promises little so verbiously that it sounds like everything."[166] Wollheim noted that Drega clearly embodied the success of American capitalism, but Gamble's attempts to "throw humanity by force into perfection instantly" had no counterpart in the historical world and thus represented a "distorted and false theory."[167] Though Wollheim makes no reference to his own politics in his letter, it is clear that he read this "distorted and false theory" as a perversion of Leftist political ideology that threatened to "poison the minds of the readers against further scientific progress."[168] In reading *Three Thousand Years*, readers would engage a future divorced from contemporary politics and historical conditions. Campbell discounted their interpretation and rejected their understanding of science fiction, telling Wollheim, "that

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[164] Campbell to Wollheim, November 19, 1938, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[165] See Thomas C. McClary, "Three Thousand Years," *Astounding Stories* 21, no. 2 (April 1938): 6-22; *Astounding Stories* 21, no. 3 (May 1938): 70-94; *Astounding Stories* 21, no. 4 (July 1938): 110-134.

[166] Wollheim to Campbell, June 21, 1938, Donald A. Wollheim Collection; Pohl to Campbell, June 24, 1938, Frederik Pohl Papers.

[167] Wollheim to Campbell, June 21, 1938, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

[168] Ibid.

most science-fiction readers are not interested in political controversy."[169] He offered an alternative reading that universalized McClary's novel as a meditation on the fallibility of any governing system, and did not respond to later criticisms, leading the Michelists to abandon their campaign.

Though unsuccessful, their attempt to incorporate science fiction's professional sphere within the Michelist project was a significant step, and only possible given their existent relationships with the publishing industry. In writing to Campbell, they presented themselves as insiders, collapsing the distance between political activist and cultural worker as many did in others spheres of the culture industry. Furthermore, the episode speaks to their understanding of themselves within science fiction and fandom. As fans used their proximity to the publishing industry to wield literary authority over science fiction's content, serving as arbiters of taste, the Michelists asserted themselves as political authorities and acted as arbiters of the genre's politics. The letters they wrote were not unlike the hundreds of fan letters editors regularly received that described scientific errors within science fiction stories, the very same letters editors used to gauge audience tastes, and modify their products accordingly. In that sense, they acted as quintessential fans, as dedicated readers with specific ideas about science fiction's social function in the world, and standards they held professionals accountable to.

They found greater success among fans, but the total paradigm shift they imagined never came to pass. In addition to *Nova Terrae*, Michelist articles appeared in several other nationally distributed fanzines, most notably Olon F. Wiggin's Denver,

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[169] Campbell to Wollheim, June 24, 1938, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

Colorado-based *Science Fiction Fan*, which featured reprinted articles from *Science Fiction Advance*, a history of the movement, as well as brief biographies about Wollheim, Michel, and Pohl.[170] Through fanzine articles and private correspondence, they found support among individual fans across the country, but relatively few clubs specifically aligned themselves with the CPASF.[171] Most of their support came from fans in New York City they directly engaged at club meetings and conventions.[172] The Michelist experiments actually revealed the relatively conservative beliefs of fans, most of who retained conventional understandings of fan identity and practice, and regularly denounced the Michelists on political lines. Some fans were open red-baiters. For instance, Jack Speer wrote an article in his *Science Fiction Collector* entitled, "A Fairly Complete Case Against Michelism," arguing that fans should completely reject Michelism, citing "the unnecessity of the revolution; the destructive communist methods; [and] the unworthiness of Russian Communism itself."[173] Sam Moskowitz claimed they were "stooges," and declared that "they received orders from the heads of the Communist Party to convert fan magazines into a field of propaganda."[174] The Michelists faced similar accusations at the First National Science-Fiction Convention in Newark, New Jersey on May 29, 1938, where they distributed copies of *Science Fiction Advance*, and several other political pamphlets. Wollheim and Michel submitted presentations that reiterated the Michelist project, but the convention's organizers rejected them, declaring that fans were uninterested in politics and attending professionals (including Campbell) would take offense.[175] Disheartened, they collectively decided to reformulate their approach, and in late 1938 publicly announced in the pages of *Science Fiction Fan* their decision to halt Michelist fan activities.[176]

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[170] Wollheim, "Science Fiction Advancing," *Science Fiction Advance* 1, no. 2 (July-August 1938): 19, Coslet Collection. See Lowndes, "The Michelist Movement in Fandom," 5-32; Lowndes, "All About Pohl" *Science Fiction Fan* 3, no. 5 (December 1938): 7-10, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection; Lowndes, "A Glance at Michel" *Science Fiction Fan* 3, no. 10 (May 1939): 7-12, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection; Lowndes, "Wollheim: The Most Fan," *Science Fiction Fan* 3, no. 3 (October 1938): 5-10, 17, Science Fiction and Fantasy Research Collection.

[171] Forrest J. Ackerman and Myrtle Douglass (Morojo) of the Los Angeles Science Fiction Society, and Milton Rothman of the Philadelphia Science Fiction Society were among their most prominent supporters.

[172] In addition to Kublius, Rubinson, and Dockweiler, the CPASF included Chet Cohen, Cyril Kornbluth, David Kyle, Jack Gillespie, Richard Wilson Jr., and Isaac Asimov, all of whom were members of the ISA or New York City chapters of the SFL.

A BALLAD FOR FUTURIANS

Their public statement, entitled "Retreat," seemed to signify the CPASF's political resignation, but in actuality, their "retreat" was a moment of strategic recuperation. In a letter to Michel, Wollheim described the failure of their "Communist Science-Fiction movement," of their inability to politicize fans as a consequence of inadequate strategy, a problem faced by the Communists in the United States. As he writes, "We started off way to the left making the same mistakes the CP itself made," making them susceptible to frequent charges that they were Communist "stooges," or that the CPASF was an official "Communist Front" organization, charges they fervently resisted.[177] They needed an alternative means of disseminating Michelism. They dissolved the CPASF and formed a new organization, the Futurian Society of New York. Not a club in the traditional sense, it was, in their words, "an amorphous collection of individuals bound together by ties of varying magnitude of social, literary, artistic, or

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[173] Quoted in Moskowitz, 161

[174] Quoted in Moskowitz, 167

[175] Ibid., 144-152.

[176] Wollheim, "Retreat," 20.

[177] Wollheim to Michel, July 20, 1938, Donald A. Wollheim Collection

science-fiction and fantasy implications."[178] At its founding, it was still a resolutely political organization oriented toward global politics, and its core members agreed that its leadership should remain "100% Communist, if not indeed Bolshevik," but they also agreed that such ideological rigidity hampered their ability to win over fans to their cause. [179] Directly influenced by the CPUSA's Popular Front strategy, they deemphasized the Marxist underpinnings of their ideal fan identity, and foregrounded the political consciousness they saw endemic to all science fiction fans, opening membership to any Left-leaning fan that openly embraced politics and science fiction.[180] Members of the CPASF remained in the organization, and they welcomed Chet Cohen, Cyril Kornbluth, David Kyle, Jack Gillespie, Richard Wilson Jr., James Blish, Damon Knight, Larry Shaw, Hannes Bok, and Isaac Asimov as members.

Their fanzine production was prolific, publishing *Futuria*, *The Futurian Amateur*, *The Futurian Fan*, *the Futurian News*, and *Futurian Review*, as well as individually published fanzines such as Jack Rubinson's *The Vagrant*. The typical Futurian publication contained articles about Michelism and reportage of their activities, but the focus was always critical and creative, and less polemic. Popular Front rhetoric of American Democracy took center stage, and they emphasized the CPUSA's support of the New Deal as the embodiment of "the traditions of Jefferson, Paine, Jackson, and Lincoln, and of the Declaration of Independence."[181] CPASF publications make frequent reference to science as a field of labor, but no such references appear in publications printed under the Futurian banner, speaking to another reformulation of the genre and fandom. Science as they previously defined it dropped from their program. Instead, they saw themselves as a bohemian collective, and advertised the club as an opportunity to discuss "literature, art, science, progress, poetry, and the world at large."[182] *Futurart*, a pamphlet of experimental poetry and prose edited by Michel, contained no mention of science fiction at all.[183]

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[178] Futurian Society of New York, "Constitution of the Futurian Society of New York (As Amended by the Meeting of January 15, 1943)," *Futuria* 1, no. 2 (June 1944): 8, Coslet Collection.

[179] Pohl to Lowndes, August, 16, 1938, Frederik Pohl Papers.

[180] As Pohl writes, "If we restrict our membership to outright Communists, we limit far too much our field of influence," Ibid.

[181] Rubinson, "Item One: The National Progressive Party of the FAPA," *The Vagrant* 1, no. 2 (Spring 1939): 1, Coslet Collection.

In emphasizing the broader literary and political aspects of fan identities, they formulated a more inclusive understanding of fandom. Consequently, the elite, scientific masculinity that accompanied understandings of science fiction fandom softened, and women entered the club for the first time: Elsie Balter, Doris Baumgardt (also known by her penname Leslie Perri), Rosalind Cohen, Jessica Gould, and Judith Merril all became members in equal standing due to their political beliefs and interest in science fiction, literature, and art.[184] Though initially many retained the masculinist paradigm of orthodox Marxism and science fiction, such views were neither dominant, nor long lasting. Wollheim, for example, described the growing female presence as a "pernicious bourgeois influence," but later formed a personal and professional relationship with Elsie Balter, working together as writers and editors, and later marrying.[185] Pohl formed similar relationships with Baumgardt, and later Merril. In an article describing

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[182] Futurian Society of New York, "Who are the Futurians?" *Futurian News* 1, no. 3 (January 1939): 1, Coslet Collection.

[183] Michel, ed., *Futurart* (New York: Michel-Wollheim Publications, [1939?]), Coslet Collection.

[184] Judith Merril was at various times in her youth a social Zionist, a socialist, and a member of the Trotskyist Young People's Socialist League. See Knight, 146-147. Doris Baumgardt (known by her penname Leslie Perri) was interested in Communism in the late 1930s, and was likely a Stalinist. See Leslie Perri to Pohl, 1943, Frederik Pohl Papers.

Baumgardt's entrance into the Futurians, Michel notes that "swinish souls" within the club levied "unfair criticisms" against her, but their attitudes quickly changed when professional author Frank Belknap Long, Jr. read her work, and praised it. The female Futurians contributed extensively to Futurian publications as writers, and editors. These shifting politics of gender among the Michelists speak to their political moves beyond normative, "boy's club" attitudes common among fans and American Marxists, distancing themselves from the institutions and traditions from which they came.

Such distancing appeared in continued hostility on the part of other fans remained, again clearly demonstrated in their convention activity. On July 2-4, 1939, fans held the first World Convention to coincide with the New York World's Fair. Though only American fans attended, it was symbolically committed to fandom's global imaginary, and institutionalized the community's claims to internationalism. The Futurians had hoped to contribute, but the event's organizers – William Sykora, Sam Moskowitz, and James V. Taurasi – denied their participation, a consequence of already-existing feuds between them.[186] Kyle had published a political pamphlet entitled *A Warning!,* a tract that indicted the organizers for authoritarian activity and called for a "democratic convention," specifically citing the Michelists' exclusions from previous conventions.[187] On the first day of the convention, the organizers found out about the pamphlet, attributed it to the Futurians, and, as if to prove Kyle's point, denied

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[185] Quoted in Knight, 99.

[186] See Moskowitz, 206-224.

[187] David Kyle, *A Warning!* (New York, 1939), http://fanac.org/fanzines/Miscellaneous/A_Warning.html (accessed March 4, 2010).

admittance to Wollheim, Michel, Lowndes, Pohl, Kornbluth, and Gillespie.[188] Several Futurians had managed to enter, including Kyle, and in the middle of the convention, he and Baumgardt vocally protested their exclusion. Kyle reportedly reiterated Michelist beliefs, stating before the audience, "Science fiction…develops creative imagination…that thing which stimulates progress."[189] In response, the Futurians held a counter-convention at Pohl's branch of the YCL in Flatbush, Brooklyn, where they denounced the World Convention and made plans for future. This counter-convention was as a counter-formulation of fandom's international claims, an assertion of Michelist hopes for the community's political future as expressed in *Mutation or Death*, *Novae Terrae*, and *Science Fiction Advance*. They believed that the future belonged to Left, and that fandom should operate through the structures of Communism, a belief aptly reiterated in their choice of meeting spaces: their world convention literally happened in the spaces provided by Communism.

The "Exclusion Act," as fans later identified the event, divided fandom for the next several months, but it was the last significant political Futurian foray into fandom.[190] They continued publishing fanzines, but their literary interests pushed them towards the professional sphere. By 1940, most worked in some aspect of the science fiction publishing industry and they helped each other develop as professional writers and editors. In 1939, Pohl was acting as a literary agent for rising stars Asimov and Ray Bradbury, and would later publish his own professional magazine, *Super Science Stories*, which he filled with stories by other Futurian writers. Wollheim followed suit, publishing two short-lived professional magazines, *Stirring Science Stories* and *Cosmic Stories*, which likewise featured primarily Futurian authors. Most notably, he worked for Avon Publishing, a paperback publishing house, and edited *The Pocketbook of Science-Fiction* (1942), the first science fiction anthology, and the first time the genre appeared in paperback form. Lowndes, after initially working for Pohl, became an editor at various magazines, including *Future Fiction*, *Science Fiction*, and *Science Fiction Quarterly*. Michel supplied his friends' magazines with stories, and explored other pulp genres, publishing work in *Ten Detective Aces* and *Ten Story Detectives*.

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[188] The event has been covered extensively in fan-written histories. See Knight, 38-40; Dave Kyle, "Caravan to the Stars," *Mimosa*, no. 22 (1998): 4-8, http://jophan.org/mimosa/m22/kyle.htm (accessed March 4, 2010); Moskowitz, 213-228; and Pohl, *Where the Future Was*, 77-79.

[189] Quoted in Jack Robins, *The Fifth (World's Fair) Convention* (New York,1940), 8.

Their professional aspirations momentarily prevailed over their political desires, but not completely, and their core political beliefs remained unchanged. Pohl continued working with the YCL, and when he lobbied Asimov to let him be his agent, he offered to contribute all profits to the CPUSA, citing their financial need as far greater than his own.[191] By 1939, Michel, and Lowndes left the YCL and became official members of the CPUSA. Wollheim did not join, but remained interested in Leftist politics and causes. Collectively, they saw no conflict between their professional literary pursuits and their Leftist beliefs, a distinction already collapsed by Leftist cultural workers within the Popular Front, and the realization of many of the political goals they formulated as fans. Their beliefs about the political character and possibilities of the entirety of science fiction's field of cultural production – producers and consumers, fans and professionals – remained unchanged.

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[190] For an account of the fallout, see Moskowitz, 243-250.

[191] Pohl to Isaac Asimov, March 3, 1937, Frederik Pohl Papers.

The Pocketbook of Science-Fiction offers a useful example here. Though Wollheim edited it, he consulted Michel and Lowndes, and in a way, the collection serves as a Futurian text. The canon constructed therein dwells on sociological and philosophical themes, occasionally veering Left, and reorganizes the history of science fiction into an anti-Gernsbackian cultural tradition. For instance, it opens with Stephen Vincent Benét's antifascist account of post-apocalyptic America "By the Waters of Babylon" (1937). Other stories include: Ambrose Bierce's meditation on intelligence and human relationships with machines, "Moxon's Master" (1909); H.G. Wells's story of human encounter with undersea reptilians, "In the Abyss" (1896); and Theodore Sturgeon's narrative of creative and technological power in a too-often exploitive world, "Microcosmic God" (1941).[192] Wollheim's introduction to the anthology makes no reference to science and technology. Instead, he frames the collection in terms of science fiction's fantastic qualities, positioning each reader as "a young man with a vision," to borrow the title of his short story. He writes,

> So take these stories as you find them – as prophecy, as embroidery, as exaggeration, as possibility, as inconceivability, as romance, or as shadow on the wall. Remember, though, that the search for the unknown – the philosopher's stone, the fountain of youth, perpetual motion – has always intrigued mankind and always will. What a word "millennium" is, and always has been, to conjure with! And so with "Utopia."[193]

Such desires drive the modern world, not any misguided use of science, and readers can seize such desires in the name of productive social ends. Wollheim's introduction intimates that "utopia" is not necessarily a fiction, going further to remind readers that

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[192] See Wollheim, ed., *The Pocketbook of Science-Fiction* (New York: Pocketbooks, 1943), 1-28, 51-70, 247-283.

"strange things have come to pass in this world – and one of our hardest-working figures of speech is 'What on earth!'"[194] For the Futurians, science fiction still posed important political questions for its readers, and fans remained important political actors. In the professional sphere, they embodied a multilayered social identity that combined the authority, expertise, and political urgency of the fan, the professional, and committed political radical.

In this sense, they were in familiar terrain, but their new positions within science fiction's field of cultural production allowed for new modes of political and cultural activity. While fans were cultural nomads, migrating between the genre's periphery and center, the Futurians' professionalization insured personal stability and granted them a degree of public visibility that fans rarely achieved. It is perhaps for this reason that the Futurians appear more frequently than Michelism or the CPASF in the already brief scholarly accounts of the Left's encounters with science fiction in the 1930s, but such separations discount fandom as a legitimate sphere of political activity, and ignore its proximity to the "legitimate" professional sphere. Michelism, the CPASF, and the Futurians all speak to a singular political and cultural project – the remaking of science fiction, its fan community, and the forging of a new science fictional culture – that appeared on various fronts within science fiction's field of cultural production: the ideological, fandom, and the publishing industry. Michelism might then be read as the conceptual basis of their activities as members of the CPASF in the fan community, and

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[193] Wollheim, "Introduction," in *The Pocketbook of Science-Fiction*, ed. Donald A. Wollheim (New York: Pocketbooks, 1943), ix.
[194] Ibid., x.

the Futurians as their attempt to remake science fiction from within, a moment of Michelist infiltration wherein they could prove the Gernsbacks and the Campbells of the publishing industry wrong.

A LONG WAY FROM GERNSBACK

Taken together, these various science fiction fronts were a manifestation of the cultural and political struggles engendered by the near collapse of American capitalism and the rise of fascism abroad in the 1930s. Unique encounters between science fiction fandom and the American Left created this political space, but the Michelists' movement between social spaces did not produce a mere amalgamation of the two. The Michelists did not graft Popular Front Communism onto science fiction fandom, nor did they apply science fiction phrases to Communism. Rather, they understood each through the other, using Communism and fandom as lenses by which to refract, reflect, and examine each other and the world, producing a unique political project that could be considered a Marxian science fiction fandom, or a science fictional Marxism. The political project mapped out in *Mutation or Death* was by, for, and about fandom, but it specifically connected them to a changing world according to the political and aesthetic logic of the Popular Front. In developing a radical fan consciousness they worked through the particularities of their community – its understandings of fan identities, its transnational communication networks, and its material structures – to create a political project that was unique to fandom, but also connected to like-minded movements across the country. They hoped to politicize fans, seeing in their specific community to tools to engage the world, and the means to change it. The Michelists reiterated the Popular Front's commitment to global politics, but the transnational dimensions of science fiction fandom made this reiteration possible. Their anticapitalism and antifascism derived from global crises first encountered in science fiction. When Michel hailed fans as members of a political community, he was responding to the Popular Front, and reiterating a call made by unknown numbers of radicals across the country, if not the world. Each call embodied a hope for a better future through the various lenses of modernity. Thankfully for Michelists, the "future" was their specialty.

Conclusion: Science Fiction Advancing

The Futurian entrance into the professional world of science fiction around 1940 brought with it new pressures and conflicts, leading to personal discord among the group, particularly between Pohl and the rest of the original Michelists. Pohl left the group in 1942 after the club published what he perceived to be disparaging remarks in *Futuria*, leading Pohl to sue Wollheim and Michel for libel, though nothing ever came of the suit. Wollheim left the group under similar circumstances in 1945, at which point the group formally disbanded. At its peak, the club had twenty-one members, and despite personal enmity, most remained in contact, and loosely connected to each other through science fiction.[195] When the United States declared war on the Axis powers, Pohl enlisted in the U.S. Army eager to fight fascists, and though he had severed ties with them, the Futurians listed him as a "member in service" until he returned at the war's end.

As the group slowly dissolved, their politics shifted and sometimes softened. After the Soviet Union signed its non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany in 1939, Pohl felt abandoned by the Party, and refused to abandon his antifascist politics as the CPUSA had appeared to do when it denounced American involvement in the developing European war. He severed ties with the YCL in 1940, but did not abandon his radical beliefs, and remained firmly committed against fascism, militarism, and capitalist exploitation. Lowndes left the Party in 1945, similarly disillusioned with the increasingly dogmatic and disciplinary Party, and from there on self-identified as a progressive

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[195] Knight's personal history of the Futurians, written in the 1970s, lists each of the following as members: Donald A. Wollheim, John B. Michel, Frederik Pohl, Robert W. Lowndes, Cyril Kornbluth, Richard Wilson, Isaac Asimov, Doris Baumgardt, Rosalind Cohen, Elsie Balter, Chester Cohen, Jack Gillespie,

Liberal. His de-radicalization caused a rift with Wollheim, who, though not a member of the CPUSA, remained a committed Marxist throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. He did, however, keep his political beliefs relatively quiet, intimidated by the fervent anti-communism of the postwar years. Fearing for his professional reputation, he actively minimized his earlier radical political affiliations, particularly as they pertained to fandom.[196] Michel remained firmly committed to Marxism throughout the decade, and published articles about science in *New Masses* and *The Daily Worker* in the late 1940s. His recurrent bouts of osteomyelitis kept him from actively participating in CPUSA events, and even forced him to leave a picket line in 1949, an action that led the Party to ask for his immediate resignation.

Despite his expulsion from the Party, Michel remained dedicated to Marxism for the rest of his life. He was the only Michelist to do so. He abandoned science fiction, soured on the genre after the Michelists' failure to politicize it. He continued writing, first writing comic strips, and later producing an unpublished and now lost work of fiction, *God's Roost*, based on his experiences in fandom, but found little professional success, largely a factor of recurrent bouts with alcoholism over the course of the 1950s,

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David A. Kyle, Daniel Burford, Damon Knight, Jessica Gould, Virginia Kidd, Judith Grossman (Merril), James Blish, and Larry T. Shaw.

[196] After Jack Speer published his *Fancyclopedia,* a historical reference guide for fans that roughly covered the years between 1930 and the end of World War II, Wollheim wrote to Speer, asking him to rewrite the entries for "Committee for the Political Advancement of Science Fiction" and "Futurians," both of which described them as Communist front organizations. Wollheim argued fervently that they were not, and wanted all references to club members' YCL ties expunged. Speer accepted that they were not "front" organizations, but refused remove reference to their YCL memberships. See Jack Speer to Wollheim, May 25, 1948, Donald A. Wollheim Collection.

leading to ongoing mental instability, paranoia, and violent behavior. He died in 1968, after severing ties with most of his fan friends, including his fellow Michelists.[197]

The rest of his cohort, though less radical, remained politically, socially, science fictionally conscious throughout the remainder of their professional and personal lives. Their political engagements with fandom forever marked their perspectives, their work in science fiction, and the genre as a whole. Most of the Futurians became professional writers, most notably Judith Merril and Isaac Asimov, both of whom explored the social world through their science fictional creations. Lowndes continued writing and editing until his death in 1998. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, he published a series of science fiction and horror magazines, including *Startling Mystery Stories* (1966)*, Famous Science Fiction* (1966) *Weird Terror Tales* (1969) and *Bizarre Fantasy Fiction* (1970). Pohl continued working in the publishing industry as an editor, first at publishing firm Popular Publications, and later at Bantam Books. Throughout the 1960s, he edited science fiction magazines *Galaxy* and *If*, but also produced his own works of science fiction, and remained dedicated to the genre for the next fifty years. His novels and short stories reiterated and elaborated on the political concerns he first expressed as a member of the YCL and the CPASF: the absurdity of free-market capitalism, the threat posed by imperialist expansion, and the ever-present dangers of authoritarian politics. For instance, *The Space Merchants* (1953), co-authored with fellow Futurian Cyril Kornbluth, critiques American Cold War foreign policy by satirizing the advertising industry, and consumer capitalism, identifying each as tools of military expansion.[198] Wollheim continued writing, editing, and publishing as well, working at paperback publishing houses Avon Books, Ace Books, and eventually forming his own DAW Books, the first paperback publishing firm dedicated to science fiction. A shaping force in the publishing world, Wollheim opened a space wherein a Michelist or Futurian sensibility could take hold and flourish, developing now prominent political and experimental writers. At Ace Books, he pioneered the Ace Double series, where writers such as Philip K. Dick, Samuel Delaney, William S. Burroughs, and Ursula K. Le Guin debuted in novel form.

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[197] The most in depth account of Michel's later years appears in Knight's personal history of the Futurians. See Knight, 217-238.

In their postwar careers, Pohl and Wollheim contributed to the remaking of science fiction's literary terrain. Like members of science fiction's "New Wave" in the 1960s,, they transgressed traditional boundaries of literary and cultural possibility, demonstrating that a "debased" form like science fiction could say just as much about politics, philosophy, and above all, social life, as any form of "high" culture. Such transgressions would never have occurred had it not been for their experience with science fiction fandom and the American left in the 1930s. Though, in many ways, both fandom and the Left failed to immediately produce the future imagined by Wollheim, Michel, Pohl, and Lowndes, their Michelist fusion left an irrevocable mark on future culture, and their modes of science fictional modes of political critique resurfaced in the work of later writers, many of whom they directly collaborated with. Though society may not have "mutated," science fiction did. This was the realization of the science fiction and fan culture they first imagined in 1938, one always inflected with a strain of political desire, a utopian sensibility seized on by later scholars of science fiction such as Darko Suvin and Frederic Jameson.[199] The political turmoil of the 1930s forged such hopes for the future, and regardless of their immediate success, the Michelists themselves carried them through to their own futures, and thereby the futures of innumerable others.

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[198] See David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War: Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 1999), 82-93.

Historian Michael Denning identifies such processes as the "laboring of American culture," referring to the reshaping of American social and cultural life through the Cultural Front's various constitutive elements: the rhetoric of "labor" prevalent in the 1930s, the proletarianization of immaterial labor (such as scientists and cultural workers), the increasing visibility of industrial cultural production, and the sometimes radical, sometimes liberal politics of the Popular Front. Though the fantastic worlds imagined by groups such as the CPUSA never appeared, and the political repression of the Cold War quelled their dreams of revolutionary emancipation, Denning suggests that this "laboring" introduced untold numbers of workers, writers, artists, and activists to one another, and helped usher them into the postwar era where struggle, sometimes successful but often bitter, took new shapes and forms. Folk singer Bob Dylan turned to Woody Guthrie. Jazz musicians Charles Mingus and Max Roach turned to Duke Ellington. The New Left of the 1960s, though radical in a different sense than that of the Old, nevertheless invoked "the people" with clenched fists in air. The political arts and traditions of the 1930s stood as points of beginning for a new generation of workers, writers, artists and activists who challenged the political regimes of the latter half of the twentieth century.[200]

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[199] Both Jameson and Suvin argue that science fiction is intricately connected to utopian desire, identifying the genre as a privileged means of expressing political desire within the restricting confines of late capitalist society. For the most complete account of their views of science fiction, see Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2004); and Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). Their works are the most notable, but certainly not the only ones.

However, as the Michelists' history testifies to, these political and cultural trajectories are as diverse as the individuals that embodied and enacted them. To consider the legacy of the American Left in the 1930s in any monolithic sense is to do a grand disservice to the men and women who lived, worked, and struggled through it. The Cultural Front was a fluid political project, an assemblage irreducible to any of its singular component parts. Various fronts comprised the Popular Front and its cultural wing because the idiosyncrasies of participating individuals and groups factored into their interpretation of the Popular Front's political imagination. When Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes embraced the Popular Front, they did so through the language, forms, and ideologies of science fiction, and its dedicated fan community, their limits included. The Michelists might have produced political pamphlets like so many other Leftists, but in their eyes, they produced political fanzines. They did not form political organizations per se, they formed political fan clubs. When they adopted Popular Front political beliefs, they emphasized its treatment of science and popular culture, the two discourses most relevant to their lives. Their struggle within the Popular Front was against the

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For a brief account of other treatments of science fiction, utopian desires, and politics, see Milner and Savage, 31-35.

[200] For an excellent account of connections between the Old and New Left, see Andrew Hunt, "How New was the New Left?" in *The New Left Revisited*, ed. Paul Buhle and John McMillian (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 139-155. Alan Wald identifies the fluidity between the often separated literary radicalisms of the 1930s and 1960s in his "From Old Left to New in US Literary Radicalism" in *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London: Verso, 1994), 114-122. Denning makes similar connections in the closing moments of *The Cultural Front*. See Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 462-472.

institutions and figures of their immediate community, denouncing its founders and their supporters. They hoped to change the course of history, but in their view, such change was only possible by first changing science fiction and its fandom. A global vision, and equally global practice was thereby necessary, and the already existent transnational structures of fandom supplied the axes of political engagement, producing a political project entirely their own.

Michelism was a cultural front of science fiction fan's making, and it moved with the Left alongside innumerable others, each containing a narrative of self-politicization and action. Michel, Wollheim, Pohl, and Lowndes took fandom seriously as a political and cultural movement, and we – whether scholar, activist, writer, or fan – should as well. Their story gives cause to investigate not simply radicals' strategies to politicize popular forms and audiences, but the ways these audiences politicized themselves, enacting radical political projects in their own languages and forms, even if that took them to outer space. All were a part the American Left's "force field," and their inclusion within the tradition of radical arts and action should refresh that "force field" today, salvaging a past in the name of a new beginning towards that which the Michelists prized so highly: the future.

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