Introduction: A History of Social Science Fiction

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Introduction: A History of Social Science Fiction

In a special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* (26.2 [1999]) on the history, development, and current state of sf criticism, Veronica Hollinger emphasized the number of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities that are now using sf concepts and modalities. Cultural studies, race and gender studies, cyberstudies, and the various postmodemisms and poststructuralisms have all, Hollinger noted, borrowed from the imagery and intellectual repertory of science fiction. Addressing the implications, she asks: "What should we make of sf's incorporation into such a variety of disparate theoretical discourses? Are they a promise that sf studies will continue to develop and expand? Or are they threats that sf studies—as the specific study of a specific literary field—will disappear as it becomes dispersed over a variety of other academic sites?" (261-62). Hollinger's question invites readers to consider the value of disciplinary identity in a milieu often given to uncritical celebrations of interdisciplinarity for its own sake. What is gained and lost when sf comes to operate as a marker of interdisciplinary proliferation?

Any critical appropriation of sf involves its rewriting for new contexts and purposes. As Hollinger acknowledges:

> It is not difficult to feel a certain scholarly anxiety in the face of such apparent disarray. One might easily be tempted to work at delimiting the field according to very specific generic criteria, to place conceptual guards at the borders to control sf s "appropriation" by everyone from Jean Baudrillard to feminist critics of science. But resistance is probably futile, and it will be fascinating to follow the fortunes of sf and sf studies into the new millennium. (262)

As social scientists working in and with the sf imaginary, we admit to feeling complicit in the production of such anxieties. Yet we believe that sf's incorporation of and by other fields is worth examining in detail.

For there has been a fruitful and ongoing encounter among social science, science fiction, and science fiction criticism; and by *social science fiction,* we refer to each component in this three-part conversation. Indeed, the phenomenon of social sf, which dates back to the 1950s, was perhaps inevitable given the overlap of objectives and projects among its three constitutive domains of social science writing, sf writing, and sf criticism. In the brief intellectual history that follows, we review the development of social sf and offer a four-part typology to comprehend its various incarnations—although the categories in some cases overlap. First, we explore how the social sciences have employed science fiction; second, we examine how sf has addressed the social sciences; third, we consider how sf criticism has made use of social theory; and finally, we analyze how sf has itself emerged as a social science methodology. We conclude by suggesting that social science fiction is a productive institutional exchange,

cultural site, and evolving epistemology—a rich and flexible mode of thought for examining key issues of late modernity.

How have the social sciences employed science fiction? Given their domination by positivist methodologies, the social sciences in North America have generally under-employed sf as a resource for addressing contemporary social issues. This reluctance is unfortunate, since it ignores the representational project shared by sf and social science to construct and explore social worlds—a project that has been better recognized by sf writers themselves. As Andrew Ross suggests, "[s]cience fiction writers, more than those of any other pop genre, have been passionately concerned about their social responsibility to imagine better futures" (142). Despite general neglect, however, a few social science thinkers have answered C. Wright Mills's famous call to develop a "sociological imagination" by exploring sf writing as valuable source material for sociological thinking. One group has used sf as a pedagogical tool in the teaching of social theory; a second group has focused on the analysis of sf itself, and a third group has analyzed sf s broad social functions from a variety of disciplinary contexts.

The sustained use of sf within the social sciences began in the early 1970s, when anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists drew upon sf as a way of teaching social theory. As Martin Harry Greenberg and Patricia S. Warrick argue in *Political Science Fiction: An Introductory Reader* (1974):

> [b]oth science fiction writers and political scientists are interested in the nature of politics and the future of the political system. However, political scientists have been limited by their preoccupation with the past and the present. Science fiction can focus the attention of the student and teacher of political science on the future course of political life, enriching our awareness of the alternatives that may be available. (8)

It's imperative to envision a future beyond the limitations of present-day realities makes sf ideal for extrapolative social science theorizing.

One long-standing social-scientific use of sf, then, has been in the form of short-story anthologies geared for use in the social science classroom. The stories vary from book to book, with the social scientists often selecting "classics" or personal favorites[1] and with sf scholars often preferring more recent—and sometimes more expressly "literary"—writing, including New Wave authors such as Harlan Ellison, Brian W. Aldiss, and Samuel R. Delany. *Sociology through Science Fiction* (1974), edited by John W. Milstead et al., for example, contains no story published before 1952, while *Social Problems through Science Fiction* (1975), edited by Greenberg et al., is dominated by fiction of the 1960s.[2] Occasionally, such textbooks include assignments in which students are asked to produce original sf stories illustrating ideas from social theory.[3] This approach recognizes that sf offers a wealth of insight into diverse social structures, problems, and relationships, enabling students to visualize and explore possible social arrangements. And yet few such textbooks have been published in recent years.

A second approach to sf by the social sciences falls within the sociology of literature tradition: the sociological gaze is turned upon the production, circulation, and consumption of sf as a genre. The multiple facets of this approach were exemplified in a landmark 1977 special issue of *Science-Fiction Studies* on the "Sociology of Science Fiction," in which scholars considered such topics as the socioeconomic situation of sf fandom and the commercial circulation of sf commodities. In *The Sociology of Science Fiction* (1987), Brian Stableford contributed the most comprehensive sociological analysis to date, examining the evolution of sf as a publishing category and the social profile of its readership. (Stableford provides an addendum to this analysis in this issue's Notes and Correspondence section.) Applying similar sociological methods, other scholars have identified the ideological functions of sf at precise historical junctures—e.g., Albert Berger's analysis of how *Astounding* magazine modeled "social order" during the 1930s and 1940s *(SFS* 15.1 [1988]) or Martin Jordin's treatment of how science fiction of the 1970s and 1980s imagined "Contemporary Futures. " The study of fandom and other genre subcultures has been taken up by cultural-studies scholars including Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley, and Camille Bacon-Smith.

This second approach treats the genre itself as a social phenomenon. Sociological analysis, however, has been spotty, and again, there has been little of it in recent years. Much of this work has not been done by sociologists, and when sociologists *have* taken up these questions, they have tended to focus almost exclusively on fandom, ignoring other important institutional contexts, including changing corporate structures in publishing, the ongoing impact of the Internet, and the volatility of the sf magazine industry. Even within analyses of fandom, the focus has been on the audiences for a few television and film series—principally, the STAR TREK and STAR WARS franchises.

The third and most recent way in which the social sciences have drawn upon sf involves the analysis of sf as a broader phenomenon of and within the social. This approach focuses on sf as a force involved in the construction of the modern or postmodern world-view. In *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of,* for example, sf writer and critic Thomas M. Disch claims that sf has directly influenced scientific agendas and spawned cultural developments within the modem US; while in "An Approach to the Social Functions of Science Fiction and Fantasy," sociologist Charles Elkins argues that sf has worked historically to reinforce the social order created by modern technology and capitalism. In "Science Fiction and the Crisis of the Educated Middle Class," media critic Adrian Mellor sees sf as implicated in a "crisis" that is itself the outcome of social modernization, and in *Science Fiction After 1900,* sf scholar Brooks Landon argues that sf has ceased to be a purely literary or cinematic category and has become a generalized set of attitudes and expectations about the future.

As these examples suggest, this third approach turns away from considering sf as literature to map the broader social implications of the genre. Rather than tracing the impact of particular sf texts or institutions, this approach examines how science fiction (as a multimedia entity) interacts with broader social formations. In this third approach, science fiction has become increasingly

important as a set of cultural practices influencing our vision of the future; these critics proceed from an assumption that social science fiction has the potential to become a cultural epistemology.

These three approaches—science fiction as a tool of social science pedagogy, as an object of sociological inquiry, and as a social phenomenon—also mark out a historical trajectory. At first, sf was seen as a pedagogical resource to teach about social processes, but soon it became a social phenomenon worthy of research in its own right. And since the 1970s, sociologists and other social scientists have acknowledged the importance of sf within late modernity—first as a form of literary production and consumption with a substantial fan base, but more recently as an intellectual mode with a direct cultural impact on technoscientific practices and futurological thinking.

In the current issue, Samuel Collins provides a historical survey of the diverse ways in which anthropologists have engaged with sf, while Andrew Milner studies how sf came to inform—and transform—the social theories of Raymond Williams. Although this general area of research has not become a sustained subfield within the social sciences, the work that has been done has laid a foundation for new encounters between social theory and science fiction.

How has science **fiction dealt with the social?** Sf writers and critics have a rich tradition of exploring the interactions between sf and the social. Within literary studies, the question of the relationship between sf and social theories and practices takes two main forms. The first recognizes that sf has occasionally taken up social science as a topic or has drawn its extrapolations from social-scientific ideas. The second suggests that any truly accomplished and valuable sf engages in social critique.

Sf critic Donald F. Theall used the term "social-science fiction" in 1975 to describe sf that draws directly upon ideas from the social sciences. Examining Ursula K. Le Guin's extrapolations from what he called "the humane sciences," Theall noted that "[although concern with social and cultural questions has always been a central feature of the utopian tradition within SF, a conscious use of concepts from the social sciences has been considerably slower to develop in SF than that of concepts from the natural sciences" (256). This claim resonates with Brian Stableford's entry on "Sociology" in *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction,* which suggests that sf has failed to draw seriously upon social science theory in constructing future and alternative societies. Some critics have countered such blanket contentions by exploring links between specific works of fiction and social-scientific ideas: in "Nature's a Joker," Jules Wanderer, for example, reads Philip K. Dick's "The Electric Ant" (1969) as an illustration of themes from the sociological theories of Georg Simmel and Émile Durkheim. In this way, while the social sciences may not be invoked as frequently as Stableford and Theall might wish, it is nonetheless present in sf writing, a realization that grounds the second stage of thinking within this category.

This second—and much more prevalent—way that social science figures within sf involves the more or less explicit use by sf authors of the categories of critical social analysis, such as class stratification, racial oppression,

technical rationalization, and ideological critique. In "Is Gender Necessary?" Le Guin has acknowledged how her most ambitious fiction develops models shared with feminist social theory. The strong assertion of these social categories is often linked to admission into the sf canon: writers and texts are validated through their engagement in social critique. One example of this approach, Carl Freedman's recent *Critical Theory and Science Fiction,* argues that the work of Le Guin, Dick, Delany, Stanislaw Lem, and Joanna Russ constitutes the genre's aesthetic and political core, in large part because these writers share a set of assumptions with neo-Marxist social theory. In this approach, the "best" sf expresses social thematics directly—a claim repeated in Freedman's and Tom Moylan's contributions to the "Symposium on Social Science Fiction" in this issue.

This second approach emphasizes the socially critical capacities of sf and develops an analytic vocabulary to address them. Among the first critical works to attempt this was Kingsley Amis' *New Maps of Hell* (1960), which powerfully argued for the social-satirical vitality of die best sf writing. A year earlier, Advent Press's *The Science Fiction Novel: Imagination and Social Criticism* (1959) had offered debate on this topic by writers as stylistically different as Robert A. Heinlein, Alfred Bester, Cyril M. Kombluth, and Robert Bloch. Two decades later, this notion had become so entrenched that Marjorie Miller could claim, in an essay on Isaac Asimov, that sf that engages in sociological speculation is "the only branch of science fiction that is socially significant" (14).

Ever since Darko Suvin's pioneering essays began appearing during the early 1970s, analysts of sf have sought to develop a terminology to describe *how* sf engages with the social. In the process, they have tended to conflate sf s aesthetic modalities—its representational capacity to evoke alternative or future worlds—with its assumed political mission to critique existing social relations. Thus, in an essay on Robin Cook, Thomas Dunn has used the term "social science fiction" to mark off a brand of socially conscious and committed sf; while in an essay on *Blade Runner* (1982), Yves Chevrier has coined the term "sociology-fiction" to map the relationship between aesthetic and political modalities. More recently, Roger Burrows has gone so far as to argue that cyberpunk sf has *become* social theory, asserting that it more effectively describes and analyzes the emerging technosocial landscape than does traditional sociological writing.[4]

Feminist literary scholars have been vocal proponents of this approach, generally emphasizing feminist sfs critique of patriarchal social systems. Focusing on die work of Le Guin, Russ, James Tiptree, Jr. (Alice Sheldon), Suzy McKee Chamas, Marge Piercy, and Octavia Butler, critics such as Sarah Lefanu, Marleen Barr, and Jenny Wolmark have analyzed how feminist sf, in more or less explicit concert with feminist theory, has sought to explore the interrelationships of gender and power. In the words of Lefanu: "[f]eminism questions a given order in political terms, while science fiction questions it in imaginative terms" (100). Taken as a group, feminist scholars have argued that sfs thought-experiments trouble existing gender categories; as a result, feminist

sf writing has received sustained critical attention for its effectiveness as social critique.

As these examples show, sf, in its engagement with social reality and social-scientific concerns, not only addresses developments in science and technology, it also tackles major questions about the institutions and ideologies of technoscientific civilization. J.P. Telotte's essay in the current issue, for example, reads genre films of the 1930s as potent commentaries on the psycho-social pathologies of "Machine Age" culture. At a disciplinary level, this critical approach has worked to legitimize sf as a genre worthy of study by non-genre scholars of literature and film. Moreover, the literary-critical scholarship focusing on sf as a form of social-scientific imagination or critique has significant contributions to make outside literary studies, since it promises to broaden social scientists' understanding of the links between technoscience and social life.

How has science **fiction criticism addressed social theory?** The third category of encounter between sf and the social sciences considers how sf criticism, as opposed to sf literature, has addressed and used social theory. Scholarship in this area generally agrees that sf has a social-critical function; it analyzes this function, however, through resort to extradisciplinary resources—specifically, to theoretical language and concepts emanating from beyond the border of literary studies. We call this category *social science fiction criticism* and identify two major kinds of work within it. The first employs social theory to analyze sf texts and the second reads sf as a cultural phenomenon. Both approaches situate sf texts in larger sociocultural contexts, with the work of criticism itself becoming a form of social analysis. Feminist sf scholarship, as opposed to feminist sf literature, exemplifies these trends. Indeed, much of social sf criticism works with or builds upon forms of sf writing—such as those identified in the previous section—that directly or indirectly treat social-scientific materials and perspectives.

In many ways, *SFS* is the primary institutional site of this category of critical work. Increasingly, sf scholars, as evidenced in the pages of this journal, are turning to social theories drawn from sociology, feminist studies, postcolonial studies, anthropology, communication studies, political science, and media studies in order to offer complex analyses of sf stories, novels, and films. Two recent examples are Sherryl Vint's treatment of Gwyneth Jones's ALEUTIAN TRILOGY, which situates Jones's work in relation to structuralist-Marxist theories of ideology and subjectivity; and David Galef s analysis of Tiptree's work, which draws on such postcolonial theorists as Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Edward Said. The purpose of these various borrowings is generally to offer a more nuanced analysis of the sf text in its specificity as a literary work; as a result, this approach is still firmly situated within literary studies. Yet it does open the door to interdisciplinary conversation.

This critical enterprise not only adopts the perspectives of cross-disciplinary theorists such as Spivak, Bhabha, Althusser, Judith Butler, and others; it often also interrogates their animating assumptions, in this way offering commentary

on social-theoretical as well as science-fictional texts. Unlike previous encounters between social science and sf, in which the two domains intersected yet the boundaries remained clearly defined, this approach offers the potential for a meshing of disciplinary outlooks. While taking a sophisticated approach to sf, social sf criticism of this sort also legitimizes the extended use of intellectual resources emanating from outside literary studies. At its best, such an approach avoids passively accepting the interpretations of social theorists, instead using sf to engage and transform the theory, making the intellectual exchange reciprocal. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.'s essay in this issue, for example, initiates a provocative conversation between Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's influential book *Empire* (2000) and sf s global megatext.

The door to interdisciplinarity opens wider as cultural studies approaches enter into sf studies. Here the sf text becomes one among many cultural products that mark out a discourse, a historical context, or a cultural moment. Rather than seeking more theoretically complex readings of specific sf texts, the objective of cultural-studies criticism is to analyze a social framework within which sf narratives may be seen to circulate and interfuse with other forms of cultural production. In "Political Science Fictions," Walter Benn Michaels has examined recent sf novels by Octavia Butler and Neal Stephenson alongside current works of political theory, in order to trace a post-Cold War paradigm for the construction of social differences. In a similar vein, in "From Domestic Space to Outer Space," Lynn Spigel has argued that 1960s fantastic sitcoms such as *Lost in Space* and *My Favorite Martian* mark the domestication and overflow of narratives of outer space within representations of the postwar family. And Charles DePaolo, in a recent *SFS* article, has demonstrated, through a comparative analysis of sf and paleoanthropological texts, how conceptions of prehistory changed over the course of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most concerted cultural-studies encroachment within sf criticism has been mounted by the emerging interdisciplinary field of cyberculture studies, which has identified cyberpunk fiction as one among a number of key venues where the contours of contemporary information culture have been defined.[5]

In each of these examples, the sf text has functioned as evidence of a wider social discourse or context that includes other cultural sites and forms of production. Social sf criticism thus foregrounds interdisciplinarity over strictly literary analyses in a way that other intersections between social science and science fiction have not. It is this approach, therefore, that offers the most serious challenge to the independent status of sf studies as a field, and it is indeed possible that sf will come to operate within cultural-studies scholarship merely as a kind of pop-culture exotica, its generic specificity erased. Despite this danger, social sf criticism has contributed powerfully to the growing academic legitimacy of science fiction outside literary studies.

How has science fiction emerged as a social science methodology? Our fourth and final category in the encounter among social science, science fiction, and sf criticism recognizes that sf can be useful as a method of social science thinking. Scholars within sf studies and the social sciences have independently

suggested that there is something about science fiction—considered less as a literary genre than as a mode of speculation and reflection—that lends itself to the work of social analysis. In other words, sf is not merely a compendium of social representations or social criticisms; it is itself a methodology for grasping the social. In this final category, sf no longer functions as an object of analysis, whether as text, genre, or cultural formation; rather, it operates at an epistemological level.

In recent years, a number of critics have identified sf as a mode of thinking uniquely suited to comprehend the social conditions of late modernity: rapid technoscientific change, the increasing cultural focus on the future (and the consequent denial of history), and the emergence of posthumanist models of subjectivity. As early as 1970, Alvin Toffler in *Future Shock* encouraged the reading of sf in order to free the mind to deal with the accelerating pace of technosocial change; and since that time, sf has shifted from being something that one reads to something that one does. The scholarship in this area can be divided into three broad approaches. The first includes sf authors and critics who argue that sf is a way of thinking that defines a genre; the second involves scholars who claim that sf has become a significant way of thinking in (and about) society; and the third involves social theorists who apply sf perspectives to analyze specific social situations and contexts.

For decades, scholars have struggled to identify what makes sf unique as a form of literature; in the 1980s, this concern shifted from defining sf in terms of characteristic themes or images to defining it as a practice or habit of thought. Building on Darko Suvin's influential analysis of sf as a "literature of cognitive estrangement," sf author and critic Samuel Delany interpreted the genre as a "tool to help you think about the present" in a critical way, as it incessantly transforms into the future (34). Labeling sf as a "literature of change," Frederik Pohl has coined the phrase "science fiction method" to suggest a way of "looking at the world around us, dissecting it into its component parts, throwing some of these parts away, and replacing them with invented new ones—and then reassembling that new world and describing what might happen in it" (48). Sarah Lefanu, taking a page from Suvin (and Samuel Taylor Coleridge), argues that sf is a lens that "defamiliarize[s] the familiar and make[s] the familiar new and strange" (21). Generally speaking, these critics argue that sf, considered as a mode of apperception or thought experiment, has a critical social effect; but they do not pursue this notion of sf as methodology outside the domain of literary studies.

In the second approach, sf becomes a social science methodology by becoming a broader cultural epistemology, a way of thinking and knowing that resonates with our postmodern moment. Two key treatments of this notion are Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr.'s 1991 essay "The SF of Theory: Baudrillard and Haraway" and Brooks Landon's history of the genre, *Science Fiction After 1900: From the Steam Man to the Stars* (1997). Csicsery-Ronay argues that sf is characterized by "two linked forms of hesitation, a pair of gaps," the first "between the conceivability of future transformations and the possibility of their actualization" and the second between the factual possibility of "unforeseeable

innovations and their broader ethical and socio-cultural implications and resonances" (387). As a way of identifying and exploring these epistemological gaps, Csicsery-Ronay calls for the recognition of sf not as a particular body of literature, but as a "mode of awareness" operating across disparate domains of knowledge. For his part, Landon suggests the related idea of "science fiction thinking," a methodology that "has clearly overflowed the formal bounds of literary genre to sustain both an identifiable science fiction subculture and a broad complex of science fiction-shaped cultural assumptions about science, technology, and the future" (xiii). Like Csicsery-Ronay, Landon constructs sf as a dynamic cognitive principle capable of "bridg[ing] the gap between the givens of science and the goals of the imaginary marvelous" (6).

While both suggest that the discursive and imaginary space between present and future is integral to sf as an epistemology, neither applies this idea to social contexts outside sf media or theory. Csicsery-Ronay focuses his analysis on Donna Haraway and Jean Baudrillard, both of whom signal their science-fictional inclinations in their own writing by directly invoking the genre (with Haraway explicitly identifying her work as "social sf"). Landon's examples of sf s generic "overflow" are drawn from sf-influenced popular culture such as film, video games, and computer simulations: while his concept of "science fiction thinking" is broad enough to travel outside sf studies, the nature of its application has kept it within the discipline. Diane Nelson's essay in the current issue shows a similar pattern of extrapolation and containment: she argues for sf as a privileged mode for grasping die imperialist mechanisms of contemporary technoscience, yet she grounds her analysis in a particular sf work, Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996).

The third approach within the category of science fiction as social science methodology pursues more widespread applications of sf as a "mode of awareness." A prototypical version was the attempt to produce predictive sociology through fictionalizing social reality, but this work did not expressly recognize its debt to science fiction, and the focus on prediction as a method of knowing has fallen out of favor in both the social sciences and the analysis of sf.[6] In recent years, a few scholars have attempted to mobilize sf not as a narrowly predictive procedure but as a broader mode of social-critical analysis. In "Making Aliens," sociologist David Oldman, for example, has compared the methods of "estrangement" characteristic of sf with ethnographic and linguistic techniques. In a 1993 article in *Sociological Quarterly,* Michael Katovich and Patrick Kinkade located in certain sf films a methodology of "subversion" that highlights historical ruptures and discontinuities. Finally, our own essay in the November 2000 issue of *SFS* sees sf perspectives operating within the domain of business discourse. In a similar vein, Sheryl Hamilton's essay in the current issue examines how sf came to function as a mode of popular understanding in print-media coverage of biotechnologies during the 1990s. Given the relatively brief length of these various articles, none succeeds in fully developing the methodological implications of sf thinking for social theory.

Sociologist William Bogard is one of the few scholars to date to link methodological concerns in the social sciences with a sustained analysis of sf

thinking. His book *The Simulation of Surveillance: Hypercontrol in Telematic Societies* (1996) uses the term "social science fiction" to describe the hybrid entity; echoing Pohl, Bogard suggests that this form operates "like a future history. It is not 'true,' nor is it exactly a prediction. Instead, it chronicles how a fantastic machine might recount *its* past, a past that haunts *our own* technological present and, like some displaced recollection, precedes it" (7). He goes on to declare that the purpose of a social science fiction is "to describe the social or institutional 'effects' of an imaginary technology, not in a causal sense, but in the way a simulacrum is woven into the current technical practices of a society, as the virtual form of their development" (8). Using his own social-sf projection of information society, he extrapolates fresh concepts—"post-surveillance"; "hyperprivacy"—to speculate on the power effects of telematic technologies. Bogard's notion of social sf (evidenced also in his contribution to the Symposium in this issue) uses future thinking to critique the technosocial present. Originating outside literary studies, yet drawing upon sf as a powerful epistemological mode, Bogard's book gives evidence of social sf s potential to break down settled disciplinary boundaries.[7]

It is this final category of the encounter between social science and science fiction—in particular, this third approach—that we suggest offers a major challenge for science fiction studies. Sf provides intellectual tools appropriate to our current sociohistorical dilemmas; disciplinary boundaries are more permeable now than at any time in recent history. As a result, social science fiction as epistemology constitutes both an incredible opportunity and a risk for the sf field. The risk comes in the loss of generic specificity as sf is generalized and abstracted into an epistemology. The opportunity lies in the potential for developing powerful critical tools to analyze social reality, refining an optic through which we can view and explore our mutating, heterogeneous, and increasingly complex technoscientific world.

Echoing a number of sf authors from J.G. Ballard to Philip K. Dick, Neal Stephenson has recently stated in *The Washington Post* that "[r]eading science fiction used to be the only way to get to the future.... Now the pace of technological change is so continuous and so fast there's no longer any kind of clear barrier separating us from the future. We are living in the future. We are living in a science fiction" (Weeks and Schwartz). Stephenson here identifies the pervasiveness of the sf imagination in our current understanding of ourselves, our social world, and our history. What better method is there for grasping the defining features of late modernity than an interdisciplinary conversation that brings together the strengths of social science inquiry and sf literature and criticism? This special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* aims to provide just such a conversation, one that we hope will open up new areas for social scientists and sf scholars alike.

NOTES
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1. For a discussion of patterns of inclusion and exclusion in these sorts of volumes, consult Halstead.

2. Greenberg and Olander's essay "Teaching Political Science Fiction" reveals some of the editorial assumptions underlying this pattern of selection. See also Stover for a discussion of pedagogical concerns that explicitly deploys a concept of "social sf."

3. See Lackey for an analysis of this pedagogical technique.

4. For other recent examples of arguments that pursue a direct linkage between sf writing and social criticism, see Booker and Rose.

5. For cybercultural appropriations of sf, see Bukatman and Dery.

6. For a discussion of predictive sociology, see Allen et al.

7. A similar example of interdisciplinary social science fiction is De Landa's *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines,* which narrates the history of military technologies from the perspective of a futuristic "robot historian"; unlike Bogard, however, De Landa does not meditate on the science-fictional roots of his speculative methodology.

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ABSTRACT

The intellectual encounter between the social sciences and science fiction has been rich and varied. This Introduction examines how sf literature, sf criticism, and social science theory and practice have intersected and influenced each other. We suggest a four-part typology, analyzing how the social sciences have employed sf, how sf has dealt with the social, how sf criticism has addressed social theory, and how science fiction has itself emerged as a social science methodology. The interdisciplinary conversation between the social sciences and sf literature and criticism recognizes the deep imbrication of science fiction thinking in late modernity and offers valuable theoretical and methodological resources for opening up important social questions.