The Utopian Dimension of Starship Troopers*: Pedagogy, Militarism, and a Post-Democratic Society*

Robert Wood

Much of the early critical work on Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* focuses on militarism, responding to Heinlein's revisionist rereading of the novel in his *Extended Universe* that minimized that element. (Heinlein 324-325) Both Alexis Panshin and H Bruce Franklin refute that reading and insist on understanding the novel through that lens. As Franklin notes, "Militarism shapes the speech and sets the tone of all the characters, including the narrator-hero; militarism animates every page; militarism—together with imperialism—is the novel's explicit message". (Franklin 112) A close reading of the novel tends to reinforce that perspective. The almost exclusive focus is on the virtues of military service. It celebrates governance as controlled violence, but focusing exclusively on militarism misses other aspects of the novel. As Farah Mendelsohn notes in *The Pleasant Profession of Robert Heinlein*, Heinlein shows a continual interest in education, both institutional and self-esteem, and an abiding interest in child raising. The entrance into the military simultaneously represents the shift from negligent, indulgent parenting to a more proper approach to that process. In that context, the novel acts as a kind of bildungsroman, as the protagonist, Juan 'Johnnie' Rico, moves from high school to basic training and then to officer training. He learns to be a responsible adult and a potentially responsible citizen. *Starship Troopers* imagines a different route from childhood to adulthood and citizenship through that process. Intertwined in that process is the representation of a government that operates on a vastly different logic than our current government.

That developmental journey allows the novel to imagine a substantially different approach to governance to the liberal hegemony of its creation and even current strains of neoliberal governance. A single interplanetary government controls the Earth and its planetary colonies, created out of the ashes of a profound crisis in democratic governance by a small group of veterans. Citizenship is primarily defined through military service, although there are unnamed alternatives. That creates a sharp distinction between the citizen who governs and the civilian who lives in the civil sphere of commerce and consumption. The government is profoundly limited in the civil sphere, demanding only limited taxes and making limited economic demands. Its most significant interventions in that sphere occur in the space of schooling in the form of a citizenship class and punishment for lawbreakers. Students must attend civics classes, introducing everyone to the society's basic moral and ethical framework. Punishment takes the form of corporal punishment, ranging from flogging to capital punishment. Parents can be punished for the behavior of their children. These shifts are framed in distinctly utopian terms. They represent a shift from a pre-scientific space of ignorant governance to one grounded in scientific knowledge. Those institutional shifts represent an original approach to pedagogy based on a scientific

understanding of human nature that allows for human flourishing by creating a distinction between those capable of wielding sovereignty and those not capable of wielding sovereignty.

Heinlein's military experiences and evolving views on the military are essential to understanding the novel.[1] He was part of a multi-generational military family and entered the Navy via the Naval Academy despite having other academic options. Heinlein left the military due to his tuberculosis, but he remained committed to national defense and attempted to re-enlist with the onset of World War II. When rejected, he accepted work at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Alec Nevala-Lee noted that Heinlein had been disappointed by the prosaic bureaucratic labor put in front of him, but eventually accepted the day-to-day bureaucratic work required of him. (Nevala-Lee 168) He expected that same dedication to the war effort from others and became quite critical of individuals in the science fiction community who he saw as shirking their military responsibility. He wrote critical letters to John W. Campbell and Forry Ackerman about their lack of participation in the war effort.[2] He continued to place a great deal of value in maintaining a strong military presence as a form of self-defense during the Cold War, arguing against the decision to stop nuclear testing on the part of Dwight D. Eisenhower and criticizing advocates of those decisions, such as the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. He later claimed that both played a substantial role in causing Heinlein to write the novel. (Mendlesohn 45-46) However, that commitment to militarism was complicated by his, at times, more libertarian perspectives. He broadly opposed conscription and felt that no one should be forced to join the military. That service should be willingly given.

Intertwined with that was a shift in Heinlein's politics. While Heinlein always held the Soviet Union in disdain, he was also initially committed to the social democratic politics that defined Upton Sinclair's EPIC campaign, in which he played a significant part. His entrance into science fiction was an effort to move those politics forward after Sinclair's defeat. He also had real commitments to the fight against racism and sexism, which shaped his collected works. However, his views gradually drifted rightward. His second wife, Virginia, convinced him of the superiority of the free market over his previous social democratic ideals, and his criticisms of the Soviet Union congealed into an increasingly reactionary anti-communism. (Mendlesohn 28) He gradually shifted from supporting the Democratic Party to supporting the Republican Party, eventually supporting Barry Goldwater's run for president and expressing sympathy for the John Birch Society. He also became increasingly pessimistic about the prospects of the American people living up to his expectations of the governance process, especially after his failed The Heirs of Patrick Henry Society project. (Mendlesohn 46, 227) He was deeply suspicious of shifting pedagogical practices and child-raising practices created by the at-time liberal hegemony. At the same time, his views on marriage and sexuality, along with his ongoing commitment to a genuinely colorblind society, placed him in tension with that conservative project, issues that continued to put him at variance with that project even as he more fully committed to it.

Those various concerns entered into the narrative logic of the story. The novel provides a thin extrapolative thread to explain the legitimacy crisis that created the conditions for the new society.

There is no specific description of the collapse of that government or the factors that led to its collapse. "It wasn't a revolution; it was more like what happened in Russia in 1917—the system collapsed; somebody else moved in". (179) However, juvenile delinquency is a substantial symptom of the collapse. This phenomenon framed as 'the terror' is described in the following terms: "Murder, drug addiction, larceny, assault, and vandalism were commonplace. Nor were parks the only places—these things happened also on the streets in daylight, on school grounds, even inside school buildings. But parks were so notoriously unsafe that honest people stayed clear of them after dark". (113) That threat is then linked to current reforms in child-raising techniques. The coddling of the child leads to the rise of the criminal because they have not received the necessary moral training to create a moral citizen. In effect, the abandonment of corporal punishment created the conditions for the crisis. Children were no longer being molded into citizens capable of defending the nation. The outrage that the nation may consider abandoning its nuclear self-defense by unilaterally stopping testing, a sort of coddling, is then reread through the coddling of the child.

That collapse then allowed for a new mode of governance created by the forces that escaped that very logic of coddling: veterans. As veterans, they began by attempting to address immediate concerns to stop looting and other behaviors, and slowly, they began to create alternative structures of governance that replaced the former system. Johnnie Rico frames that shift in the following terms:

> What started as an emergency measure became constitutional practice… in a generation or two. Probably those Scottish veterans, since they were finding it necessary to hang some veterans, decided that, if they had to do this, they were not going to let any "bleedin', profiteering, black-market, double-time-for-overtime, army-dodging, unprintable: civilians have any say about it." (179-180)

In effect, the transformation could almost be understood in evolutionary terms, shifting from an artificial and destructive mode of governance into one that responded to and accepted a foundational and inherent human nature. That then translated into a new kind of governance that allowed for human flourishing and a stable world government. The conditions for the entire edifice were created by creating that pedagogical system that distinguished between the unreliable civilian and the reliable soldier, one who sacrifices as opposed to one who is too selfish and childish to do so.

That governance is framed through a series of educational processes that operate through the disciplinary structures identified by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Each level is designed to separate the incapable from the capable, to reward the specific willingness to sacrifice and to kill and be killed. Capability can also be understood through Foucault's terms, a distinction between those capable of becoming the kind of docile body that can be shaped by the state and those who cannot or will not play that role. That process of distinction takes a number of steps. Everyone goes through the basic elements of the education system and must attend citizenship

classes that introduce those individuals to the basic principles of governance. It is understood that most individuals will comply with those rules, but only sometimes will they understand them. The first break is between those who enter into military service and those who either continue their schooling or begin to work in the private sector. The opening section of basic training has a basic goal: to drive out as many people as possible and ensure that only those willing to sacrifice are given the possibility of citizenship. After that winnowing process, the training process moves to a molding process, turning those willing subjects into weapons to be implemented by the government, to inflict the 'controlled violence' of warfare, or to act as the instrument of the sovereignty of that government. The subsequent division is officer training, where potential officers move from learning to be instruments of violence to understanding the tactics and strategies of implementing those tools and the governing logic of those tactics and strategies. Pedagogy becomes the tool to create these distinctions and to create distinctions between who governs and who is governed, along with further distinctions of the amount of influence on that governance. Each step of the process shapes the citizens' engagement in the sovereign project of governance through the lens of responsibility.

Embedded in that process is a particular conception of the subject. The infant is effectively understood as a blank page, only responding to the stimuli and internal drives. As a moment in the civics class frames it, "Man has no moral instinct. He is not born with moral sense. You were not born with it. I was not—and a puppy has none. We acquire moral sense, when we do, through training, experience, and hard sweat of the mind." (117) An effective pedagogical system understands that original state and attempts to cultivate an ethical subject through negative and positive interventions. Within this context, corporal punishment is presented as the most effective intervention to shape the individual. That form of punishment is commonly accepted in schools, the household, and later in the military. Its minimal usage establishes its efficacy. That use of discipline is intertwined with a strong emphasis on civics. That punishment is used to guide the student into playing the role of a moral and ethical actor in that society. Additionally, the father is expected to play that role for the child at home and can be potentially punished along with the child if he does not fulfill that role. Analogous to the school, the correct use of preventative coercion creates a society in which most people not only obey these rules but embody the logic of those rules. However, this system also assumes that while almost everyone can live up to this bare minimum, it takes an extra level of commitment to be in a position to make decisions about how that governance should occur.

The narrative repeatedly critiques and blames the collapse of the society on the figure of the reformer and the child psychologist. However, its assumptions are strikingly similar to those very figures. After all, similar to figures such as Dr. Spock, it assumes that the science of child development can be founded and placed in a longer tradition of the scientific management of the household. As William Graebner notes, the project of the social psychologist Dr. Spock can be understood as a social engineering project, designed to create a new kind of subject that is immune to the dangers of charismatic authority and totalitarianism in favor of a stable democratic

society. He posits a family that acts as a group with the parents at the head but allows for the child's input. Terry Strathman notes that those views were often in tension with figures such as Dr. John Watson, who argued for a more behavioralist approach, emphasizing using disciplinary measures and a rigorous schedule to instill a sense of self-discipline in the child (Strathman 4). Heinlein implicitly embraces that alternative tradition, embracing the more authoritarian approach against the democratic inclinations of Spock. The novel idealizes a far more hierarchical image of the family and explicitly criticizes the rejection of corporal punishment by figures such as Spock. Additionally, rather than embracing the more dynamic Freudian notion of the subject embraced by Spock, the narrative embraces the behavioralist assumptions of the tradition of Pavlov and Skinner. The child is to be molded like clay through the controlled use of positive and negative stimuli. Punishment is a key pedagogical tool, and its efficacy is established by creating the conditions of its minimal use. The controlled violence of corporal punishment allows for the creation of a disciplined subject made into a moral subject through the aversion to violence created by the evolutionary instinct of survival itself.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to collapse the story's logic too entirely into traditions of right-wing authoritarian utopian stories despite the real militarism and authoritarian logic at the story's center. Most significantly, the story imagines a post-democratic society without racial prejudice. The protagonist is revealed to be Filipino three-quarters of the way through the story. However, the descriptions of the various other characters are continually marked to reveal the diversity of the society and the lack of boundaries for anyone. We see a society where European names may be connected to faces worldwide. The distinction between the formerly colonized and colonizers may exist in the name, but it does not exist in the actual daily lives of the people who hold those names. The state and society celebrate that element and frame the regime's legitimacy, which retains some connections to the earlier ideal of democracy. “Superficially, our system is only slightly different; we have democracy unlimited by race, color, creed, birth, wealth, sex, or conviction, and anyone may win sovereign power.” (183) We see in the framing the commitment to equal access and the assumption that equal access will allow all to enter. However, equal access is tied to a commitment to service that allows for a genuinely meritocratic test of the worth of the citizen and one that creates a genuinely stable basis for democracy. That commitment is also a commitment to society as a whole rather than to any part of society over another. The citizen must show “Social responsibility above the level of family, or at most of tribe.” (184) The state may distinguish between citizens and civilians, but they are all wrapped up in the state and must be protected.

It is additionally significant that there is a mutual debt in this process. Unlike many right-wing authoritarian narratives, the basic logic of the society is not grounded in a social Darwinist image of the fit and the unfit. If the citizen must be willing to sacrifice, the state must find a place for that citizen and the skills they bring to the table. That could take the form of a role as a cook or some other background role of the military, or it could take the form of disabled soldiers entering into teaching. The high school civics teacher is one such example, and the story emphasizes

the sheer number of disabled veterans who work as trainers for the officers' training process. Those individuals are brought in because they can do the job well and create the conditions for other soldiers to remain on the battlefield. Rico emphasizes the capacity of these veterans in his description of the training process. "Our coach in dirty fighting sat in a powered chair, wearing a plastic collar, and was completely paralyzed from the neck down. But, his tongue wasn't paralyzed, his eye was photographic, and the savage way he could analyze and criticize what he had seen made up for his minor impediment." (174) The society is enriched by its willingness to create the conditions for these individuals to contribute, bringing the sharp critical skills of the veteran to the pedagogical process and creating a space in which his disability only acted as a 'minor impediment.'

At the same time, the story emphasizes the oligarchic nature of the state through the sharp gap between civilians and citizens. That gap is explored throughout the novel, starting from the perspective of civilians, and then moving to the military perspective as Johnnie is drawn into military life. Johnnie's father frames his opposition to Johnnie's enlistment in the following terms. "Let's table that, shall we? Listen, and let me tell you what you are going to do—because you want to. In the first place, this family has stayed out of politics and cultivated its own garden for over a hundred years—I see no reason for you to break that fine record. I suppose it's the influence of that fellow at your high school—what's his name? You know the one I mean." (23) The world of non-citizenship is framed as a good in this conversation rather than a lack. Sticking to your own business, avoiding politics, and creating a private space is framed as a virtue, a positive good. It is also notably framed within the language of tradition. It is a stable set of conventions that have lasted over a century, pointing to a stable social order in the private sphere. He then opposes this virtue to the vainglorious nature of civil service, described as "parasitism, pure and simple—a functionless organ, utterly obsolete, living on the taxpayers. A decidedly expensive way for inferior people who otherwise would be unemployed to live at public expense for a term of years, then give themselves airs for the rest of their lives." (24) Participating in the polis is then understood as a vice, as leaving the cultivation of one's own 'garden' to enter a space of frivolous parasitism.

Civilian life takes on those same qualities for the military, as Johnnie discovers when he travels into the city on a pass after months of basic military training. He observes, "I had no more than stepped out of the shuttle, my first pass than I realized in part that I had changed. Johnnie didn't fit in any longer. Civilian life, I mean. It all seemed amazingly complex and unbelievably untidy." (124) The previously familiar space of the city becomes challenging to navigate, and that complexity produces an unpleasant disorderliness. Those qualities can also be seen in the civilians who chose not to serve and confronted the service members. "There were some young fellows there, too, about our age—the right age to serve a term, only they weren't—long-haired and sloppy and kind of dirty-looking. Well, say about the way I looked, I suppose, before I joined up." (126) The disorder of the city maps onto the body of the civilian, who is not shaped by the discipline of the military. Johnnie recognizes a former version of himself in those unruly bodies and feels a sense of aversion to that former self. The civilian is the undisciplined self, the one incapable of self-

governance and incapable of understanding that lack. Later in the narrative, there is a continual emphasis on the control of civilians when interacting in military institutions. They can contribute, but their contributions are framed in terms of particular tasks shaped by the larger disciplinary structures of the military and in service of goals that allow military personnel to take on more critical tasks.

Those shifts are a product of the training process embedded in the entrance exam and the disciplinary process of basic training. That begins with a series of tests to discover the potential citizen's capacities and then place that individual into a training track that makes sense for them. The next step is to test the fortitude of those who go through the process. "Its immediate purpose was to get rid of, run right out of the outfit, those recruits who were too soft or too babyish ever to make Mobile Infantrymen. It accomplished that, in droves. (They darn near ran me out)." (53) From there, the process moved into shaping those individuals into soldiers, into weapons for the society. The training becomes individualized and focuses on developing a broad set of skills. Even in the case of the infantry, this shaping was in service of the construction of an elite force. "Most people think that all it takes is two hands and two feet and a stupid mind. Maybe so, for cannon fodder. Possibly, that was all Julius Ceasar required. But a private soldier today is a specialist so highly skilled that he would rate 'master' in any other trade; we can't afford stupid ones." (29) We again see the expert soldier put in opposition to the image of the soldier as a conscript. The training process creates an elite force capable of incredible specialization, not a democratic mass.

That governance structure is framed as one grounded in scientific and mathematical certainty. Officer training emphasizes this element. Every attempt at a guess is met with a demand of certitude, insisting that there is an answer grounded in science that is mathematically defendable. "Speak up, Mr. Rico. This is an exact science; you must have proof." (179) At its core, the scientific element of the training process is tied to the evolutionary assumptions identified above. There is a foundational aversion to pain that can translate into a mechanism for changing the behavior of the subject. The process is precise. "It was made *as hard as possible* and on purpose." (53) It is both a selection process and a later disciplinary process based on the core tenets of human nature. The educational process evolves from the student and basic recruit shaped by those forces to the officer trained on how to wield those same mechanisms. We see an implicit governing mechanism that goes back to figures such as Aristotle, seeing the need for a potential ruler to learn to be ruled before taking that later role. That is then interlinked with the development of a moral subject from an essentially amoral one.

However, an intellectual elite does not control the technocratic process. The system does not work because it picks citizens because of their intellectual skills, which are never assumed to indicate a unique ability to govern. Instead, they are understood to provide a series of technical skills that need to be directed by others. At the most immediate level, Johnnie Rico is an ordinary individual who does not stand out intellectually. Farah Mendlesohn goes as far as to argue that "his role is to channel the voices of wisdom. Throughout the novel, in fact, Johnnie is positioned as a follower and subject to the rhetoric of convincement." (Mendlesohn 127) We watch as he

imbibes the society's methods and reproduces them. One can understand this through the lens of Georg Lukacs's work on the historical novel and frame Rico as a mediocre hero who is transformed by the shifting forces in his world rather than being an active agent in shifting those forces. That very quality makes him such an ideal vehicle for the system. He is the ideal form of the docile body that takes in the disciplinary formation of the state. In a sense, the hero of the story is the method, and Johnnie attests to the validity of that method in his transformation by showing that his transformation is somehow representative of the capacity of that method.

These qualities are not unusual for the average citizen. In a training session for officers, the instructor asks the cadets what distinguishes the average citizen from the average civilian. The candidates provide several hypothetical solutions, ranging from the additional civic virtue of the citizen to additional intelligence and other virtues. In each case, that proposition is shot down. Citizens are not drastically different than non-citizens in many ways. They are not necessarily more disciplined than non-citizens once they leave the military and commit crimes at the same level as non-citizens. They certainly are not more intelligent than non-citizens, and there was even a failed attempt at a coup that attempted to replace the veteran with the scientist as the citizen par excellence. However, there is one distinct difference, according to the instructor:

> I'll state the obvious: Under our system, every voter and officeholder is a man who has demonstrated through voluntary and difficult service that he places the group's welfare ahead of personal advantage. And that is the one practical difference. He may fail in wisdom; he may lapse in civil virtue. But his average performance is enormously better than that of any other class of rulers in history. (182)

That willingness to sacrifice defines the concept of 'responsibility.' The citizen has two qualities: to be willing to function as the instrument of the sovereign, to kill and to die, and to do so in a manner that places the group ahead of his interests.

That returns to the question of militarism. After all, the entire logic of the system calls for this act of testing, marking the distinction between those who are willing to sacrifice and those who are not. Early in the narrative, there is a sense that logic does not work well during peacetime. Basic training may put the potential citizen's life at risk, but there is some sense that the risks in that situation do not have the same impact as the real risks of war. As the later training officer notes in refuting the argument that citizens are more disciplined than non-citizens, “And you have forgotten that in peacetime most veterans come from non-combatant auxiliary services and have not been subjected to the full rigors of military discipline; they have merely been harried, overworked, and endangered—yet their votes count.” (180-181) The focus of that statement may have been a refutation of the inherent qualities of the citizen. However, it also makes an implicit argument about the limitations of peacetime itself, which does not allow the introduction of discipline that can only occur with military engagement. The ultimate focus of the societal transformation may be disciplinary and pedagogical, but those shifts do not work without the adversarial conditions of warfare. Likewise, civilians cannot understand the value of the process

without the direct example of warfare. Without warfare, the state can appear to be unnecessary or even parasitical. Only war can legitimate the state and create the conditions for citizens to wield its power. Expansion also allows for the renewal of these qualities; the narrative emphasizes that the outer colonies are far more likely to produce recruits and citizens. In effect, the narrative embraces the logic of the Turner thesis, the need for expansion to allow for national renewal. War plays a role in that expansion, creating new sets of citizens committed to that process.

That necessity then confirms the basic nature of governance from the novel's perspective, which repeatedly insists that governance is the practice of wielding violence in a controlled manner. In this sense, the disciplinary apparatus of the state is focused on constructing a very old-fashioned sort of governmental practice, the figure of the sovereign. In effect, the recruit moves from being trained to acting as an instrument of the sovereign to killing in a controlled manner to enforce the goals of statecraft. It then shifts to taking the role of the sovereign, of guiding that instrument of violence. The narrative distinguishes the justified violence of the government from the unjustified violence of the criminal through the concept of control, the proper violence is a kind of instrumentalized violence that is directed towards using that violence to accomplish the goal most effectively, minimizing that violence so it does not exceed that goal. That quality is then paired with responsibility. The citizen must be responsible and aware of the implications of their actions to make the right decisions. To do that, they need to learn from the actual practice of war, keeping up with Heinlein's pedagogical assumptions.

The entire system then depends on that element of antagonism to stabilize the system. Warfare becomes the way that the docile body of the eventual citizen is justified, evaluated, and brought into being. That disciplinary mechanism extends to the civilian in the form of schooling and the judicial system through the select use of corporal and capital punishment, which are used to mold compliance into both spheres. It simultaneously legitimates the divide between civilians and citizens and creates the mechanism to distinguish the two roles. It also guarantees stability by siphoning any potential threats to the military system. However, the system's success is more than a guarantee of stability; the night watchmen state of the military creates protective insulation to allow the market to flourish. It's difficult not to see this in the long tradition of wish fulfillment that many scholars of utopianism have seen as a central element of the genre. As Heinlein becomes discouraged at the prospect of real social change, he turns to the realm of fiction to escape that failure, imagining a society that escapes the perceived failures of democratic governance to escape his own failed interventions in the democratic political sphere. The result is the substitution of pedagogy and war for that space, creating a totalizing and expansionist system that ironically reproduces the presumed concerns around the anti-communist politics that initiated the process.

Notes

1. My understanding of Robert Heinlein's evolving positions is shaped by Farah Mendlesohn, *The Pleasant Profession of Robert A. Heinlein*. Unbound, 2019 and Alec Nevala-Lee. *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction*. Dey St., 2018.

2. Robert Heinlein's criticisms of John C. Campbell are covered in Alec Nevala Lee, *Astounding: John W. Campbell, Isaac Asimov, Robert A. Heinlein, L. Ron Hubbard, and the Golden Age of Science Fiction*: Dey St., 2018 (x). The critical letter sent to Forrest Ackerman was covered in Glyer, Mike. "How Did I Not Know This?" File 770, 29 May 2010. https://file770.com/how-did-i-not-know-this/ Accessed 23 February 2025.

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