

**Psychohistorical Inferences Isaac Asimov's
*Prelude to Foundation***

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the psychohistorical inferences with Seldon Plan, the renewal process and the reasons for its abandonment with reference to Isaac Asimov's *Prelude to Foundation* (1988). It also presents a comprehensive picture of the science fictional universe of Asimov; secondly, the catastrophic elements in this Foundation universe; and finally, identifies the prime-movers who initiate the renewal process. Asimov is emphasizing the creative potential of the new science of Cybernetics as the most likely instrument of human survival. At the same time, Asimov does not ignore the realities of the potential misuse of science and technology; a fact illustrated by the new science of psychology and that of mental powers. In the series, the Seldon Plan is made to stand as a witness for the possible subversion of even the best intentions and designs.

Keywords: Isaac Asimov, *Prelude to Foundation*, Science Fiction, Psychohistory, Cybernetics, Seldon Plan

Isaac Asimov is, unquestionably, one of the greatest minds of this age, a genuine science fiction personality, publicizing the field, bringing readers into the fold, and newcomers feel welcome. This "elder statesman" of Science Fiction immigrates to America from Russia at the age of three, with his Jewish parents. He is an ardent 'fan' of Science Fiction. He writes his first story in 1937; his third story is the first to appear in print, in 1939. In his five decades of writing Science Fiction, he, along with others of his times, has helped in developing a genre once condemned as sub-literary 'trash' into an accepted and acclaimed literary genre. He is one of the most applauded among Science Fiction writers having won prestigious Science Fiction Awards repeatedly; he is awarded the Liberty Medal at the centenary celebrations of the Statue of Liberty.

Asimov's reputation as one of the giants of science fiction is built, not on his first story, but on the positronic robot stories, the Foundation stories, and "Nightfall" while "Nightfall" is still assessed not only as his best story but that of the genre itself, his robot stories and Foundation series are the high water marks in the evolution of Science Fiction. Asimov has provided a basic code of behaviour for the robots through the Three Laws. Similarly, he imagines the effects and mechanics of human

behaviour as a predictable phenomenon in his Foundation Series. If he considers his robot novels as his favourite, the readers have always favoured the Foundation series as his most popular Science Fiction work. From a humble start in 1942, when Asimov is only 21, the series of six novels stands today as one of the greatest and most acclaimed Science Fiction series of the genre. Beginning on a subway train-ride as a random thought and developed into a story theme in a discussion with the “Older Generation” Science Fiction writer - John Campbell, it has evolved into the ‘Foundation Universe’ with its own unique humans-only Galaxy.

The humans-only Galaxy is organized into a vast Galactic Empire modelled on the Roman Empire. The Galactic Empire and Psychohistory are two more inventions of Asimov, after the positronic robot and the Three Laws of Robotics. Psychohistory is a ‘new’ science of prediction which can identify the consequences of present trends and can foresee a Galactic catastrophe, in the fall of the Empire. The collapse of the Empire will mean great human misery which has to be ameliorated. The Empire will disintegrate, socially and politically, leading to a long period of anarchy which has to be prevented. Psychohistory, therefore, functions as a redemptive tool to salvage a humanity threatened with Galactic catastrophe. It proposes a ‘Seldon Plan’ which will, in a single millennium, bring about a new, second Galactic Empire. The Foundation series is a saga of this Seldon Plan, its vicissitudes, virtues and variations.

The Foundation Series is born under an eschatological sign. The Asimovian Foundation universe reveals successively developed apocalyptic repetition, of breakdown and renewal. The pendulum of man’s “own mad clockwork” has been swinging viciously between catastrophe and renewal. Once again, this swing has reached its extreme catastrophic end in the colossal fall of the Galactic Empire. The next stroke will be the positive constructive extreme, that of renewal. The Foundation universe and its millions of worlds and quadrillions of people are now poised at the threshold of yet another apocalyptic event, that of another renewal. And it is under this eschatological sign that the Foundation series begins.

The Foundation Series, therefore, looks at the humans-only Galaxy through a wide-angle lens at the events and processes of history as a medium of renewal. Asimov’s assumption is that while the future arises out of the present, the lessons of the past must serve as the wisest guides for any attempt to shape the future. History does not, and need not, repeat itself. The earlier blunders can be avoided. Asimov has made good use of the past as well as the present lessons of history. He has stated that the Foundation series is based on the ‘aura’ of the Roman Empire, the arrogant complacency of the British Empire, and the social system of the Roman Imperium. It is an accepted fact that by “... citing Toynbee’s cyclical theory of history as a basis for social theorizing and extrapolating from it into the future... Asimov creates a future political structure modelled on the Roman and British Empires” (27) says Charles Elkins in “Isaac Asimov’s ‘Foundation Novels: Historical Materialism Distorted into Cyclical Psycho-History.”

The influence of Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, and Karl Marx are also evident along with that of Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. There is also the presence of Calvinism in terms of its essential conflict between free will and predestination. These are all the

building blocks that have gone into the making of the Foundation series, an exercise in reshaping history, or a deliberate shaping of the future.

The reshaping in the case of the Foundation future history begins with *Prelude to Foundation*. This is one of the most recent of the Foundation novels, written in retrospect, as it were, to establish the origins of the Foundation series; to explain, in greater detail, the formulation of the basic assumptions of psychohistory; and, to connect the Robot stories and novels with this series. In other words, this novel acts as a ‘missing link’ that binds this series with the rest of Asimov’s Science Fiction and consolidates the Foundation universe into a concrete, fictional reality. All this is achieved by putting the mantic mantle on to the humaniform robot-hero, Daneel. Daneel is revealed as the prime-mover or precipitator who brings about the formulation of psychohistory and its derivative, the Seldon Plan. Hari Seldon, the original heroic figure is made to lose much of his prophetic stature. Apart from presenting these refurbished images of Seldon and Daneel, the novel is significant as a triumph of Asimov’s creative imagination in the construction of alternate worlds, in the exotic and extraordinary depiction of Trantor.

The novel, *Prelude to Foundation*, is set on Trantor, the ‘Eternal World,’ the supreme capital of the First Galactic Empire at its ‘twilight glow.’ It is a single planet-city of 200 million square kilometres entirely domed, divided into 800 sectors, and with a population of 40 billion. “In fact, in many ways Trantor is very much like an enormous and overgrown space settlement...” (67). Each of these 800 sectors are depicted as distinct sub-cultures existing in compelling interdependence: “...there may be a great deal of competitiveness and ill feeling among the sectors, but science is the one thing - the only thing - that holds us together” (147), says one of the scientists, Dr. Leggen. The notion of science as an integrative and cohesive force is, thus, emphasized by the picture of Trantor. The hero of the novel, Hari Seldon, is sent on a grand tour of Trantor in search of knowledge that will make his fledgling psychohistory into a practical science. We are taken through four main sectors of Trantor, on this ‘Flight’ of Seldon.

Psychohistory, which is the cardinal principle of the Foundation Series, is one of the most famous inventions of the Science Fiction genre. And Asimov has said categorically that this series has been created essentially to consider his psychohistory which he “made up” himself. In “A Conversation with Isaac Asimov,” he says,

...in the Foundation trilogy I deliberately and specifically dealt with what we might call political science or the science of history, and developed a technology for it. That was my attempt to broaden the notion of science in SF. (70)

Science is the integrating element, as in Trantor, in psychohistory also. Asimov the scientific rationalist, and the populariser and writer of science, has deliberately taken on the role of devising a science of prediction which is to be raised into an art. While science has been his main concern from the beginning, his abiding interest in history is of an equal force in shaping his Science Fiction career.

The two most important influences as far as history is concerned are that of Spengler and Toynbee. The pure cyclicism of Spengler expounded in his *The Decline of the West* (1918) is that:

“...every culture in the great wheel of history is equal to every other, and there is no such thing as mankind in the abstract, recording occur, or at any cumulative progress as the wheel turns... Outfoxing does no rate by acts of mortal men” (111). In *A Study of History*, Toynbee states:

The dialectics of civilizational rise and fall are simply part of the wise economy of world history. The future is open. End times come, but they do not compel, or necessarily compel, the re-setting of the cosmic clock. (189)

These are the basic assumptions which give rise to the psychohistorical view of history. By a process of blending and extrapolating, Asimov arrives at the essential driving forces of psychohistory. The psychohistorical concept neatly reflects an apocalyptic vision and is perhaps, a transformation of the apocalyptic in scientific and historical terms. In *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*, the words of Northrop Frye relate psychohistory, history and apocalypticism most effectively:

Every event in history... exists in relationship, first, to a cultural cycle which inevitably declines and dies, and, second, to a universal form evolving out of history and proceeding toward a civilized eternal existence. Hence the period of chaos between cycles shows these two aspects in the sharpest possible contrast. (264)

And Seldon’s psychohistory and its corollary, the Seldon Plan, are sharply concerned with the chaotic period between the cycles - the: First Galactic Empire and the potential Second Galactic Empire. The Seldon Plan is but the answer to the fundamental questions that Hummin puts to Seldon: “There are merely certain questions you must answer: Will the Galactic Empire crash and, if so, when? What will be the condition of humanity afterwards? Can anything be done to prevent the crash or to ameliorate conditions afterwards?” (*Prelude to Foundation* 71). Psychohistory, once it becomes viable, answers all these questions and devises alternate plans.

The hope of possessing a practical science of prediction is not special to Asimov. It is one of the persistent dreams and a consistent image in the Science Fiction genre, from the very beginning. It is one of the staple Science Fiction constructs, the magical device, a *deus ex machina* that was popular, like the time machines or the ray guns. But what Asimov brought to the concept was the science of probabilities as a mechanism, the element of uncertainty for suspense, and the philosophical question, “what is worth predicting?” for depth. The miracle has been replaced by a mechanism; the art of prediction has been transformed into a mathematical science. What could have been called “psychosociology” has become a psychological study of humanity, in mathematical terms... Conjectures are replaced by calculations. The unpredictable has become “calculable probabilities” (*Prelude to Foundation* 22).

Psychohistory and the Seldon Plan are apocalyptic tools of renewal in the Foundation series. Asimov, as has been pointed out earlier, is more deeply concerned and involved in the imagination of the processes of renewal rather than in the morbid imagination of catastrophe. In *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Mircea Eliade establishes two basic stages in the renewal pattern. In the first stage,

...a relationship was established between paradise and the earthly possibilities presenting themselves in the New World. During the next stage, the eschatological tension was reduced by the omission of the period of decadence and misery that was supposed to precede the 'Last Days,' and by arriving finally at the idea of a progressive and uninterrupted amelioration. (95)

The setting up of the two Foundations falls within this acknowledged pattern of renewal identified by Eliade.

The process of amelioration is the outcome of the "self-fulfilling prophecy" that psychohistory represents. This kind of treatment of prophecy, in the Foundation Series, in terms of history as a science above men had its origin in John Campbell's ideas about symbolic logic. Symbolic logic would so clear up the mysteries of the human mind that human actions would be predictable. It is Campbell who also inspired the founding of the Foundation series based on the Roman Empire. But the Galactic Empire in the Foundation stories is not the Roman Empire at the time of its fall but a Galactic Empire with foresight - psychohistory - to shorten the Dark Ages.

The final picture that the Foundation trilogy presents is a completely antithetical perception of the purpose and course of the Seldon Plan. The utopian image of the Foundations has been replaced by a dystopian, tragic potential. The present fate of the Seldon Plan reveals that the utopian idea that man can control events has been dashed. Time and again events have left man only the illusion of control, an array of options to deal with the failures and perversions of original intentions the line of expectations twist and foul, and from the fallibility of man and the general cussedness of things there comes a nightmare. The nightmare, usually, arises out of an internal flaw within the perfection of the utopia which needs to be 'corrected' or 'perfected.' In the apocalyptic and dystopian sense, this imperfection is a catastrophe that should develop from the destructive seeds within the trend itself. The derailment of Seldon Plan results not from any external forces but from within its own internal inadequacies and imperfections.

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