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"Not a portion of the Galaxy must be denied him": Isaac Asimov's early *Foundation* stories and the future of social liberalism

In his third and final autobiography, Isaac Asimov claims that, though he "was only thirteen when Franklin Delano Roosevelt became President," he "was not too young to get an idea of what [Roosevelt] was trying to do" and that "the older [he] got, the more firmly liberal [he] became" (310). This claim, made while casually reminiscing about the roots of his political ideals, is key to understanding most of Asimov's fiction, but is particularly relevant to any discussion of the linked sequence of *Foundation* stories Asimov first published in *Astounding* between 1942 and 1950. Fixed up in the early 1950s into a series of three novels, the *Foundation* stories represent what is perhaps Asimov's most sustained engagement with social liberalism, a political ideology first formulated by John Stuart Mill in the mid-nineteenth century that explicitly seeks to balance the freedom of the individual against the interests and welfare of the larger community to which that individual belongs. In addition to forming the ideological basis for the New Deal, that series of ambitious social and political reforms which Roosevelt attempted to implement shortly after assuming the presidency in 1933, social liberalism also constitutes the ideological background against which Asimov wrote the *Foundation* stories, a

background which, in the stories themselves, informs the political objectives of the Foundation as a society. In these stories, the Foundation shares social liberalism's commitment to striking a just balance between individual freedom and social welfare. This commitment, however, is sorely tested by the arrival of the Mule, a mutant whose unexpected conquest of the Foundation rests on his ability to psychically manipulate the emotions of others, an ability which grants him a form of absolute and unpredictable freedom which far exceeds that of any other individual. Faced with the authentic and irrepressible liberty of the Mule, the Second Foundation, that part of the Foundation which secretly controls the rest, eventually decides that the freedom of the individual must be at least partly subsumed to the larger project of ensuring the welfare of society as a whole. In this sense, it is safeguarding the present and future wellbeing of the galactic community that is the real objective of the Foundation, and not the ultimately impossible goal of attempting to balance perfectly the freedom of individuals and their social welfare.

In an article published in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* shortly after the 1982 publication of *Foundation's Edge*, Asimov recounts a meeting he had in August 1941 with the editor of *Astounding*, John W. Campbell. In this meeting, he and Campbell "built up the notion of a vast series of connected stories that were to deal in intricate detail with the thousand-year period between the First and Second Galactic Empires," a series of stories which was to be modelled upon Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Asimov claims to have already read by this time "not once, but twice" (33). What makes this anecdotal account of the genesis of the *Foundation* series interesting is not, however, Asimov's assertion here that the series was intended to be a fairly straightforward retelling of the fall of Rome, but rather his insistence on situating the origin of the *Foundation* stories within their contemporary political context. At the beginning of his article, he is careful to note how "the

evil shadow of Adolf Hitler … [was] falling over all the world" (32) and how, in this sense, the *Foundation* series was as much a product of the politics of the early 1940s as it was the result of a burst of historical inspiration. And, indeed, the *Foundation* stories quickly diverge from the Roman source material which provided Asimov with his initial imaginative impetus. Rather than simply charting the course of the collapse of Rome in space, the *Foundation* series instead tells the story of how a society might be created which offers something *better* than the empire it seeks to replace. In this way, the *Foundation* stories are not merely about how a degenerate empire collapsed under the weight of its own bureaucracy and corruption, but are also stories that tell the tale of how a more just society might rise out of the ashes of failed empire to offer the galaxy its own version of the New Deal.

For Asimov, just as for many of those who supported the New Deal and its subsequent legacy, the government of the United States prior to the Roosevelt administration appeared to have failed in its primary task of representing the interests of *all* American people. This failure, which Asimov reflects on in some detail in his final autobiography, stemmed from what he claims was years of callous rule by conservative politicians, by people who "tend to like people who resemble themselves and [who] distrust others" (309). As he notes, "as a Jew, [he] had to be liberal" (310), if only because "in [his] youth … the backbone of social, economic, and political power rested with an establishment consisting almost entirely of people of Northwestern European extraction, and the conservatives making up that establishment were contemptuous of others" (309). For a man who "wanted to see the United States changed and made more civilized, more humane, [and] truer to its own proclaimed traditions" and who "wanted to see all Americans judged as individuals and not as stereotypes" (310), it is not difficult to imagine the

attraction of Roosevelt's social liberalism, and of the New Deal he proposed to the American people.

Coming to power with a clear mandate to rescue an economy poised on the brink of irreversible collapse, Roosevelt offered voters what he characterized upon his 1932 nomination to the leadership of the Democratic Party as a "new deal for the American people." This New Deal, a series of reforms and initiatives designed to stimulate the economy and reinvigorate politics itself, was central to Roosevelt's larger political platform for the next twelve years and, indeed, helped define the American political landscape until well into the late 1960s.[1] For Roosevelt and his supporters, the need for the New Deal itself was clear evidence that capitalism of the kind that focused exclusively on profit and championed the rights of the individual at the expense of social welfare was not working, and that this assumed supremacy of individual freedom was one of the root causes of the Great Depression. Such relentless individualism, Roosevelt and his fellow New Dealers argued, had already resulted in an almost bankrupt nation and could only ever lead to a world in which economic and political inequality were, as Asimov also feared, the inevitable order of the day.

In his first inaugural address, Roosevelt repeatedly rejects and condemns unrestrained individualism and the unrestricted capitalism supported by his conservative predecessors. As Roosevelt notes in this address, "we now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other; that we cannot merely take but we must give as well." Here as elsewhere, Roosevelt argues for a more socially accountable form of individualism, as well as for

[1] Though much of the economic impetus for the New Deal faded during the prosperous years following the Second World War, the Truman and Eisenhower administrations nevertheless maintained and even expanded a number of New Deal initiatives and programs. In the early 1960s, both Kennedy and Johnson, under the guise of their New Frontiers and Great Society civil rights campaigns, also reaffirmed their commitment to the spirit of the New Deal and its policy of limited government intervention in matters of individual liberty. It was only during Nixon's tenure as president, in fact, that the New Deal and its legacy began to be both questioned and seriously re-evaluated.

an understanding of both capitalism and liberalism that, as he notes in his 1941 state of the union address to Congress, continues to ensure "the preservation of civil liberties for all" while also working toward "the ending of special privilege for the few." Throughout his tenure as president, as he reminds the American public in his final state of the union address in 1944, Roosevelt continually espoused the belief that "true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence." Though he certainly believes that those "inalienable political rights" (1944 Address) guaranteed to the individual by the Declaration of Independence are vital to the success of American democracy, the safeguarding of such rights with no thought for the welfare of others, Roosevelt maintains, has "proved inadequate to assure us equality in the pursuit of happiness" (1944 Address).

"Disapproving of Roosevelt only when he wasn't liberal enough" (*I. Asimov* 310), the *Foundation* stories are Asimov's attempt to work through the intricacies and challenges of setting up a social liberal state even more ambitious than the one imagined by the president and other New Dealers. Established by Hari Seldon, a disabled scientist who bears more than a passing physical resemblance to Roosevelt as he appeared during the latter part of his presidency, the Foundation is intended to "to create a world better than the ancient one of the Galactic Empire" (*Empire* 96). As Bayta Darell, one of the Foundation's many ideological champions throughout the stories proclaims, the Galactic Empire was "falling apart … three centuries ago, when Seldon first established the Foundation – and if history speaks truly, it was falling apart of the triple disease of inertia, despotism, and maldistribution of the goods of the universe" (*Empire* 96). To remedy this "triple disease" of moral decay and social injustice, Seldon employed psychohistory, a type of mathematical sociology capable of transforming the behaviour of "the quadrillions that occupied the whole Galaxy" into "gigantic forces amenable to

statistical treatment" (*Second* 100). Using this new science of psychohistory, Seldon created a plan that would force the galaxy toward a second and inherently more just Galactic Empire, a plan that was intended to reduce to a thousand years the "thirty-thousand-year period of misery and anarchy" (*Second* 1) that "must elapse before a struggling new Empire could emerge from the ruins" (*Empire* 1). To ensure that this new course would be the one which the people of the galaxy would follow, Seldon created the two parts of the Foundation: the First Foundation, "a world of physical scientists[, which] represented a concentration of the dying science of the Galaxy under the conditions necessary to make it live again" (*Empire* 230), and the Second Foundation, "a group of Psychologists ready to assume leadership" (*Second* 107), when the time was right.

Considering themselves to be "the guardians of Seldon's Plan" (*Second* 67), members of the Second Foundation see themselves primarily as the stewards of humanity's larger wellbeing. As an unnamed student apprenticing to become one of the Speakers, or leaders, of the Second Foundation remarks, "the First Foundation supplies the physical framework of a single political unit, and the Second Foundation supplies the mental framework of a ready-made ruling class" (*Second* 107). For the Speakers of the Second Foundation, being members of this self-appointed ruling elite means frankly acknowledging the limits which must be placed upon the individual freedom of everyone within the Foundation. Though there is a desire, for instance, within the First Foundation to learn more about the inner workings of Seldon's Plan and about those who secretly refine and direct those workings, as the First Speaker of the Second Foundation notes, "we have still a society which would resent a ruling class of psychologists, and which would fear its development and fight against it" (*Second* 108). Given that this resentment would ultimately prevent the establishment of a more just second Galactic Empire, the Speakers of the Second

Foundation decide to hide their existence from the citizens of the First. In this way, they make a decision to prioritize social welfare at the expense of individual liberty, a decision that is characteristic of all forms of social liberalism. If classical liberals believe, as Adam Smith does, that "by pursuing his own interest [the individual] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it" (350), then the social liberals of Second Foundation believe instead, like John Stuart Mill, that it is important to limit individual freedom whenever the "actions [of individuals] are prejudicial to the interests of others" (156). As Mill notes in *On Liberty*, in a passage which would undoubtedly resonate with the Speakers of the Second Foundation, "as soon as any part of a person's conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it" (139). It is for this reason, if nothing else, that members of the Second Foundation are willing to sacrifice everything, including their own and others' freedom, for the bright future promised by Seldon's Plan.

If the universe only contained regular human beings, people whose behaviour could be predicted and manipulated by psychohistory and who would eventually "be ready for the leadership of Mental Science" (*Second* 107), then it is likely that Seldon's Plan would have continued as intended and the Second Foundation would have been able to develop their future social liberal empire in secret as they had originally hoped. The appearance and meteoric rise of the mutant Mule, however, throws a wrench in the Second Foundation's plans and also provides the Foundation as a whole with a poignant object lesson in the dangers of unrestrained individualism. Having grown up "haphazard, wounded and tortured in mind, [and] full of self-pity and hatred of others" (*Empire* 239), the Mule is capable of psychically manipulating the emotions of everyone who surrounds him. As he notes while describing his power to Bayta, "to me, men's minds are dials, with pointers that indicate the prevailing emotion … slowly, I learned

that I could reach into those minds and turn the pointer to the spot I wished, that I could nail it there forever" (*Empire* 239). As a result of this power which allows him to reliably bend everyone else's will to his own, the Mule acknowledges no limits on his own individual freedom. Consequently, his ambition knows no bounds and, as he reflects in a moment of frustration at his continued inability to locate and destroy the Second Foundation, the Mule believes that "not a portion of the Galaxy must be denied him … every star! Every star he could see – and every star he couldn't see. It must all be his!" (*Second* 10).

For the Second Foundation, whose members have already accepted the need to limit individual initiative for the benefit of society's social welfare, such unrestrained freedom predicated on such awesome psychic power is frightening indeed. In fact, the Mule represents "something which Hari Seldon could not foresee, the overwhelming power of a single human being, a mutant" (*Second* 2). Able to "instill into a capable general … the emotion of utter loyalty" (*Second* 218), "[the Mule's] most capable enemies become his most faithful subordinates" and, as one of the Mule's many loyal Converted generals notes, "the control is permanent" (*Empire* 219). For the Speakers of the Second Foundation, this willingness to tamper with others' emotions does more than just threaten their own monopoly on psychological manipulation; it also illustrates the truly dangerous extent to which the Mule denies that *any* limits can be placed upon his own individual freedom. For the Mule, as for the classical liberals whose political ideology both Asimov and Roosevelt reject, liberty means one's own individual freedom at all costs, regardless of how exercising that freedom might harm other people. It is for this reason that, in the end, the Second Foundation initiates an elaborate game of cat-and-mouse which eventually brings the Mule into direct contact with the First Speaker. At this confrontation, having convinced the Mule that he has been at least temporarily outwitted by the

Second Foundation's scheming and machinations, the Speaker is able to ensure that "anger and despair cornered [the Mule's] mind completely," a psychological state which allows the Speaker to then use his own formidable psychic powers to implant an emotional suggestion that transforms the Mule from a man of war into "a man of peace" (*Second* 77). As the First Speaker afterwards tells Bail Channis, a secret agent of the Second Foundation in the Mule's employ, "he retains his mental powers and his Empire – but his motivations are now entirely different" (*Second* 77); as such, both the Foundation and galaxy are now safe from the vaunting ambition and destructive individualism that the Mule embodied so completely.

Far from being simply what Asimov himself once characterized as a story about "the fall of the Galactic Empire and of the return of feudalism" ("Story" 33), the *Foundation* series is also a cautionary tale about the political consequences of unrestrained individualism. Informed by the politics of the New Deal and the social liberalism that rose to prominence during the Great Depression, the Second Foundation's successful attempt to curtail the Mule's freedom is entirely consistent with social liberal beliefs about what a government must do if it is to safeguard the interests of the people it claims to represent; just as Roosevelt throughout his presidency demanded that government restrict the freedom of the few to foster the freedom and welfare of the many, so too does Asimov's Second Foundation work to protect the liberty and wellbeing of everyone within the Foundation by making *all* individuals, even those with a superhuman will to power, accountable to others for their actions. In the future social liberal state imagined by the Speakers of the Second Foundation, as in the American nation envisioned if not realized by Roosevelt, there simply is no place for "supermen" like the Mule, for those individuals whose liberty can only exist at the expense of other people's freedom. Instead, as these social liberals

of the Second Foundation recognize, individual freedom must at times be constrained if the more socially just society planned by Seldon is ever to become a reality.

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