

# FANDOM CONVENTIONS: A SOCIOLOGICAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Dr. Ronald Lorenzo  
Prairie View A & M University

## Introduction

Fandom conventions have become postemotional. In *Postemotional Society* (Sage, 1997), Stjepan Mestrovic builds on observations about contemporary social character. What becomes postemotional includes the social and systemic rationalization of things in general, including emotions. In fandom conventions, the systemic rationalization of fandom has come at a cost for the genuine and spontaneous celebration of a common interest of fandom. The interaction that fans have with each other becomes mechanized and assembly-like. The machine-like process of fandom conventions is not neutral in its moral form, but takes an almost predatory-like character in its exploitation of fans. In its worst manifestations, fans come to be seen as resources by the celebrities and companies that come to conventions. Instead of being perceived as people who are offering a gift of common interest towards a cultural phenomenon, such as a television show, movie, or genre, fans and celebrities interact in a mechanical way. The business model has taken over fandom conventions in general, and instead of the conventions expressing primarily a 'parenting instinct' or 'instinct of workmanship' in fostering the enthusiasm of fans, conventions are

constrained and interested in pecuniary concern.

Fandom is generally defined as the "psychological connection with others sharing the same interests" but could be expanded to also include the social connections that fans have with others in sharing interests (Schroy et al 148). Within fandom, fans take part in various activities to express their enthusiasm of a common interest, such as fanaticism over a wide range of interests or activities: professional wrestling, Star Wars, My Little Pony, the furry lifestyle, comic books, anime, etc. This study does not concern itself with testing a hypothesis but in illuminating patterns of culture to show how the fandom convention has changed from its origins into the form that exists today. This study also does not concern itself with testing a theory, only in interpreting and illuminating observations about fandom conventions from a novel perspective.

## Fandom Conventions: Yesterday and Today

An early history of fandom conventions is considered to be *The Immortal Story: A History of Science Fiction Fandom* (1954) by Sam Moskowitz (Samuelson 57). Moskowitz chronicled the first known science fiction convention, which was held

in Philadelphia on October 22, 1936 (Moskowitz 82). The gathering was small, with about a dozen people in attendance, mostly from New York and Philadelphia (Samuelson 57, Moskowitz 82). The group of enthusiasts met in one of the member's home and declared their gathering to be the first science fiction convention (Moskowitz 82). The group elected a convention chairman and secretary, and the agenda of the convention included discussion about science fiction and plans to organize a convention for the following year (Moskowitz 82). The first science fiction was a homemade event, which was the result of fans gathering to share their enthusiasm for the literary genre. In sociological terms, the emotion of the fans welling up to the surface and creating something (such as a gathering) is known as collective effervescence (Durkheim 227-8).

Moskowitz chronicles that the second science fiction convention took place in Leeds, UK, on January 3, 1937 (99). The British convention was held at the Theosophical Hall in Leeds (Samuelson 57). Remarkably, the convention was had no entry fee, but fans were asked to write ahead of time for tickets (Moskowitz 99). About twenty fans were in attendance (Moskowitz 99). More organized than the American convention held a few months before, the British convention came to order, read messages to the delegates from academicians, writers, and the Oklahoma Scientifiction Association (Moskowitz 99). The convention had presentation on how to advance interest in science fiction and closed with the resolution that the organization hosting the event publish a

regular periodical for its members (Moskowitz 99).

The two earliest science fiction conventions, then, were driven by the enthusiasm of the fans and dedicated to advancing that interest to new fans. The concern for generating revenue was absent. Fandom conventions continued through the 1940s and 1950s, with turnouts numbering in the hundreds, and featured panels, discussions, and author signing (Samuelson 57). By contrast, today, fandom conventions number in the tens of thousands (Samuelson 57). A large fandom convention can generate revenue in the millions and bring greater amounts of money to the local economy. San Diego Comic-Con in 2016 drew 130,000 fans, generated over \$17 million in revenue, and pumped more than \$100 million to the local economy (McDonald). This for a convention that began in 1970 with a few fans gathering in the basement of the U.S. Grant Hotel (McDonald). The Comic-Con has become a juggernaut for the entertainment industry, which uses it as a launching pad for movies, video games, television shows, and other media. A way to view large fandom conventions is to see them as commercials that fans pay to see.

### **Marcel Mauss: Fandom Conventions and Gift Exchanges**

Marcel Mauss's book, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (1990 [1950]), can help shed light on fandom conventions' purpose. Mauss was the nephew of Emile Durkheim, a founder of sociology. In his own right,

Mauss was an anthropologist, and *The Gift* is an influential book in his discipline. One way to examine conventions and to understand the trajectory of their social change is by looking at the exchange of gifts.

Mauss stated that gift-giving is present in all societies, and is in fact the building block for all social relationships. Not limited to physical objects, a gift could be anything according to Mauss, such as a kind word, a gesture, or a greeting. In genuine gift giving there are universal rules that are observed, with social consequences for observing or failing to observe those rules. The rules are the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate.

One can think of the exchange of greetings as having all three of these rules. In an exchange of greetings, one is obliged to make a greeting and the second person is obliged to receive (or acknowledge) the greeting, and to return it. In a successful gift exchange, where all of the rules are followed, the result is that a relationship is formed between the gift giver and the recipient. The two parties create emotional bonds.

If the second person does not return the greeting, he or she breaks with the rules. The consequences for breaking the rules of gift-giving are serious. Mauss states that “to refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality (13)”. Maori people, for example, believe that gifts are vehicles for spiritual forces, and that gift exchanges create a spiritual bond between giver and recipient (Mauss 11-3). Similar restrictions

carry over into present times: we are warned from a young age not to accept gifts from strangers. An interpretation is that accepting a gift from a stranger means accepting or inviting some potential and unseen menace. Likewise, receiving a faulty gift is a violation of gift exchange rules. Receiving a faulty gift obligates one to return a faulty gift in exchange.

Mauss believed that contemporary society was losing “the spirit of the gift” because of the complications brought about by money (Mestrovic 2015: 7). In relation to the use of money replacing gift exchanges, the following can be observed:

[W]e moderns are slowly but surely losing the spirit of the gift. In modern societies, money has largely replaced or at least weakened the spirit of the gift. In exchanging money for an object, favor, or other intangible good, the modern person is *not* making a present of some part of oneself. Money is fungible, and the goods and services it purchases are treated as fungible or interchangeable assets... Mauss lamented that the weakening of the spirit of the gift was weakening social bonds and the very existence of society. But many modern types are relieved that when they are paid for acts of generosity, kindness, compassion, or heroism on the job, they are free from emotional obligations to the recipients of the spirit of the gift. Emotional bonds are inefficient, time-consuming, and exhausting (Mestrovic 2015: 7-8).

Mauss stressed that genuine gift giving can never be repaid and that the value of gifts cannot be calculated without destroying the gift itself (Mestrovic 2015: 8). Faulty gift exchanges lead to broken friendships and relationships (Mestrovic 2015: 8).

The early conventions described by Moskowitz seem to have been ones in which genuine gift exchanges took place. Fans exchanged each other's enthusiasm and friendship. One fan opened his house to total strangers in an act of camaraderie and friendship. In the British convention, prominent science fiction writers attended without asking to be paid (Moskowitz 99). In both of the earliest science fiction conventions, fans were not charged for attending.

The large fandom conventions are far different in their character than those early gatherings. A major new feature in fandom conventions is the celebrity appearance. Celebrities of television shows or movies, usually actors, command fees for making an appearance and also charge fans for autographs and photographs taken with them for additional fees. The result are scenes described as similar to movies about drug smugglers:

It's like a scene from *Blow* or *Goodfellas*: a room full of money with professional cash counters." This isn't a description of a drug den or casino cage. It's the backroom of a fan festival, says one producer familiar with such events, where thousands of die-hards — many in costume — pay admission to fork

over bigger bucks for autographs and photos with their favorite stars. And nearly all of this money is going into the pockets of talent big and small who, in many cases, now can earn more from weekend fan events than from the shows and movies making them famous. (Goldberg)

The demand for personal appearances is lucrative, and stories circulate of celebrities literally taking home garbage bags stuffed with \$20 bills:

Fan conventions, where stars can take home hundreds of thousands of dollars in exchange for a few hours of time, once were the domain of has-beens and sci-fi novelties. But the business has become so lucrative — think \$500,000 for Captain America's Chris Evans or *The Walking Dead* favorite Norman Reedus to appear — that current TV and film stars are popping up at events like Salt Lake City Comic-Con and *Heroes* and *Villains* Fan Fest. The demand has become so overwhelming that agencies including WME, CAA, UTA, ICM, APA, Paradigm and Gersh have in the past three years added "personal appearance" agents to sift through the hundreds of annual events, book talent and (of course) score their 10 percent commission. (Goldberg)

To be fair, the celebrities who charge money for their appearances, autographs, and photo opportunities are only part of the

new convention equation. Another part of the equation is the fan who stands in line for an autograph, pays his or her money, and then immediately goes online with his or her smartphone to monetize the value of the autograph by searching web sites. In Maussian terms, there is a broken relationship between fans and celebrities. There is no genuine, spontaneous, or emotional gift exchange. There is no “spirit of the gift,” and the attenuated gift exchange shows a weakening in the social bonds of fandom.

### **Thorstein Veblen: Peaceable and Predatory Instincts of Fandom Conventions**

Gift giving that is genuine and spontaneous, as described by Mauss, can also be described as peaceable. Another theorist whose ideas can be used to elucidate some of the points made by Mauss is Thorstein Veblen. Thorstein Veblen is remembered as a social critic, and his formal academic preparation was in economics, not sociology. Veblen is not mentioned regularly in sociology textbooks (Mestrovic 2003: 1). However, he has influenced and informed the sociology of mainstream sociologists such as David Riesman, Jean Baudrillard, and C. Wright Mills (Mestrovic 2003: 1). Veblen coined the phrase conspicuous consumption, and he is

best known for his book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. In that work, Veblen draws the distinction between peaceable culture and predatory culture.

In a society, both elements are usually present. Peaceable culture pertains to

elements of culture such as idle curiosity, workmanship, and the parenting instinct. In idle curiosity, a peaceable person will learn for the sake of learning with no ulterior motive in mind. In workmanship, peaceable individuals dedicate themselves to craftsmanship in the making of things. Veblen’s description of the parenting instinct is that peaceable individuals look after and care for things as if they were parents looking after a child.

The conventions that Moskowitz described had another peaceable element in that they offered fans presentations about science fiction, their interest in fandom. Present day conventions have this peaceable element as a holdover from earlier times. Thus, many fandom conventions are organized and governed as non-profit corporations with the purpose of educating the public and promoting an interest in their fandom interests. At conventions there will often be panels and discussions by academicians and other non-celebrities in order to foster interest in the fandom. However, the fact that these type of panels and discussion groups exist does not change the basic nature of most fandom conventions. The crowds the fandom conventions draw are drawn to the predatory elements of the convention, not the peaceable ones.

The predatory instinct in a society includes those things that are meant to be destructive, wasteful, and useless. Veblen saw advertising, for example, as useless because it does not convey information about a product, but rather conveys the “honorific value” of the product to the consumer (Mestrovic 2003: 2).

Advertisements, too, Veblen interpreted as modern day competition or warfare between corporations making similar products (Mestrovic 2003: 2).

Veblen's critique of predatory activities extends to cultural habits that are otherwise acted out by non-predatory people. For example, Veblen found that dog ownership was predatory (Mestrovic 2003: 5). According to Veblen, many dogs that people own as pets are "useless" and "wasteful," consuming resources to be fed and cared after while producing or providing no tangible benefits to their owners (Mestrovic 2003: 5). A predatory aspect of dog ownership especially concerns itself with pet ownership as a sign of status (Mestrovic 2003: 5). People may object that dogs are useful when they provide companionship for their owners, but Veblen's view is that the companionship is a rationalization (Mestrovic 2003: 5). Veblen points out that people who are not predatory can and do pick up predatory behaviors from their culture: ordinary, peaceable people are impelled towards status-seeking (Mestrovic 2003: 5).

Another phrase that Veblen coined and is associated with status-seeking is invidious distinction. There are many examples from the contemporary fandom convention that touch on status-seeking and invidious distinction. A phenomenon with many conventions is cosplay, or costume play, where attendees spend their own money to wear a themed costume. Although the amount of money spent on costumes can be relatively low, more elaborate costumes can easily cost in the thousands of dollars. Like a dog, the costume serves no useful purpose,

and a Veblenian interpretation of it is that it is wasteful. Likewise, fans who attend conventions are peaceable people who have adopted a predatory habit from fandom culture.

Another example of predatory behavior among peaceable types deals with the different levels of access to celebrities that fans can buy at conventions. As stated above, fans can buy access to the celebrity to get an autograph or a photograph, which again, is useless from a Veblenian point of view. The memento from such an encounter does provide invidious distinction to the fans. However, in addition, fans can often pay for VIP passes or pay for special events – such as a lunch – to have closer interaction with the celebrities of fandom. The rationalization again can be made that charging fans money for autographs and other encounters with celebrities is for logistical purposes, e.g., in order to enable the maximum number of fans having access to somebody famous. The Veblenian perspective is that the encounter with the celebrity is useless except for purposes of invidious distinction or conspicuous consumption.

In larger conventions, celebrities are often driven around in golf carts. The rationalization is that the golf cart promotes efficiency and decreases the liability to the convention from the celebrity being injured. In Veblenian terms, carting around the celebrity confers distinction and status on the individual, which is predatory. The golf cart eliminates the possibility of the basic workmanship of walking which is peaceable.

## David Riesman and the Social Engineering of Fandom

One sociologist who was influenced by Veblen's sociological theories was David Riesman. Riesman was not a sociologist by training but a lawyer, yet he wrote the best-selling sociology book of all time in 1950, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Culture* (Mestrovic 1997: 41). Riesman focused on the changing social character of America during the 1950s, which was firmly in the direction that social character currently exists. Riesman expanded on the concept of social character, a concept first used by his mentor, Erich Fromm in *Fear of Freedom* (2001 [1942]). Riesman transported the concept of social character into sociology, and it can be regarded as a social phenomenon. Social character is different from personality, or the thoughts and behaviors that are stable within individuals (Riesman 3). Social character, rather, addresses the common organization of a person's drives and satisfactions (Riesman 3-4). Social product is found within individuals, but as Riesman explained, social character is also the shared product of groups.

Riesman's book delved into a thorough analysis of social character types, of which he described three: tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed. The three types were not implied to be a hierarchy or an evolution, but as three modes of social organization that come to existence in historical order.

Fandom conventions in their present form are created with an other-directed social character, and hence appeal to other-

directed individuals. Riesman described the other-directed social type as entirely motivated from without, which meant constantly referring to what he called "the jury of one's peers." The other-directed person constantly takes his or her cues from the signals of others. In the consumption of media, the other-directed person will watch a television show or movie but is constantly scanning the opinions of the peer group when deciding how he or she should react. Riesman lived in an age before Facebook or the Internet Movie Database, but internet sites dedicated to rating every conceivable product or service (and even people) fall in line with his observations of other-directed types.

The earlier social character, the inner-directed person, drew attitudes from the sphere of production (Riesman 150). By contrast, other-directed types are trained by the media to be consumers, not just of consumer products but in all other spheres as well, including politics (Riesman 151). Popular culture is a tutor to other-directed types, and it trains other-directed types to see politics, for example, or other areas of life as products, games, recreations, entertainment while the other-directed person is trained to view himself or herself as a "purchaser, player, spectator, or leisure-time observer" (Riesman 189).

Fandom has been engineered towards consumption. This has been done through the combination of constant, media directed messages about consumption and the ever present search for approval and identity from one's group. Hence, fandom conventions have become about consumption: who goes to the best ones,

who can get the best picture, who gets the best autograph, and who gets into the best celebrity panel.

### **Conclusion: Mestrovic and the Postemotional Fandom Convention**

The postemotional state is one in which genuine, spontaneous emotions have been replaced by synthetic, quasi-emotions (Mestrovic 1997: xi). Riesman foresaw that the long-term trend for other-directed types was to become bereft of genuine emotions, and he was correct in that assessment (Mestrovic 1997: xi). What Riesman did not predict was the way that media through the filter of the peer group would create artificial emotions among other-directed types.

Stjepan Mestrovic stated that behind the idea of the 'postemotional' is the recycling of dead emotions from the past (1997: 2). He does not address fandom conventions, but he does address renaissance festivals in stating that they try to re-engineer the emotions that constituted the real Renaissance (Mestrovic 1997: 3). Fandom conventions also are an extension of the nostalgia industry which continuously recycles products to "signify simultaneity between the past and the present" (Rojek in Mestrovic 1997: 2).

Earlier fandom conventions give a glimpse at the original emotional state of fans. Fans came together in a very spontaneous, even disorganized way, but they were driven by genuine emotion. The earliest conventions were a true welling of collective effervescence. By contrast, contemporary conventions are highly

organized events with all the trappings of a bureaucracy (contracts, schedules, calendars, budgets, payrolls, standard operating procedures, etc.). The genuine excitement of going to a fandom convention for a maligned genre (as science fiction was in the 1930s) is something that is lost in present times. Today's conventions are highly choreographed events in which fans are prompted to consume conspicuously.

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