

“Only in fantastic parallels can one imagine a modern recurrence [of a ‘spatial revolution’ like the European ‘discovery’ of the ‘New World’], such as men on their way to the moon discovering a new and hitherto unknown planet that could be exploited freely and utilized effectively to relieve their struggles on earth.”

Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*, 1950

“Can we and all nations not live in peace? In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world. And yet, I ask you, is not an alien force already among us? What could be more alien to the universal aspirations of our peoples than war and the threat of war?”

President Ronald Reagan, United Nations General Assembly, September 21, 1987

It seems certain enough that people from every place in every time have looked to the heavens in wonder and yearning, seeking there guidance and solace, while fixing anxieties and aspirations alike to the movements of the stars. This appears no less true today in the age of Mars One, Virgin Galactic and Hollywood-style trailers for the European Space Agency’s Rosetta Mission, featuring planets terraformed by telekinesis, than it was at any previous point in history. Yet when the military-industrial cosmologies of the Cold War-era space programs are being resurrected with a transfusion of entrepreneurial zeal from so-called ‘NewSpace’ enterprises and the US Congress has passed the SPACE Act, effectively recognizing property rights for resource extraction in outer space, it looks like the architectures and institutions of the human presence in space are entering a phase of unprecedented intensification.

Ronald Reagan was of course not alone in imagining that world-unity might be forged under the threat of an alien menace from outer space. The idea that an extra-terrestrial enemy might provide the universal emergency needed to overwrite every earthly antagonism was already a common trope of science fiction speculation by the time he embarked on his first acting career. Indeed, the mix of internationalist ambition and geopolitical antagonism undergirding Reagan’s comments is a key characteristic of the institutions of international governance that emerged in the wake of the Second World War such as the United Nations, NATO, the European Union and the associations of scientific co-operation that issued from within them: from the International Space Station to the UNFCCC. Hence, although visions of alien enmity are rooted in the realm of fantasy, the familiar architecture

of international institutions has been imagined as an arena in which earthly antagonisms might be managed and global crises faced co-operatively. Today they provide the framework within which a concerted effort is being made to carefully map future threats from space, albeit in the form of asteroids and orbital debris rather than some form of hostile life from beyond. Yet it perhaps speaks more to the contemporary horizon of human presence in space that these 'near earth objects' are considered opportunities as often as they are hazards – viewed as occasions for extracting value and 'stepping stones' for final frontierism as much as dangers that necessitate an infrastructure of collectively governed 'planetary defense.'

Whether this array of orbital bodies will be appropriated as extra-planetary strata, extending the natural environment that has sustained human life into the cosmos like a great planetary prosthesis, and altering the relationship between 'Earth' and 'world' in hitherto impossible ways, is still a matter of speculation. However, the line between science fiction and science fact is increasingly smeared by the looping effects of cultural hyperstition as well as governance models based on risk management, catastrophe preparedness and others logics of anticipation.

Perhaps the more testing question is whether such an eventuality might take shape within the framework of existing terrestrial social relations and models of international governance or reshape fundamentally. For example, might extra-planetary space provide a new arena for familiar forms of geopolitical competition, as the advocates of 'astropolitics' tell us (whether the current distribution of domination would be enhanced, buckled or reconfigured in such a scenario), or represent a new frontier for off-sourcing prevailing patterns of capitalist accumulation (asteroid mining providing an extra-planetary 'spatial fix' for the collision of capital crises and 'planetary boundaries'). Alternately, could an intensification of human activity in space alter the very grounds of social existence, and indeed human life as such, to an extent that the parameters of the imaginable dictated by the present no longer apply? Is it possible that a truly new world might be born of NewSpace; that new modes of relation and new forms of power might emerge from new spaces of human existence? Might decoupling the categories of 'human' and 'earthling' produce not only new modes of alienation but novel experiences of freedom, or might the 'alien' continue to serve as a metaphor for those parts of humanity excluded from its name, where the liberation of a few remains structured at the expense of many? What institutional frameworks might be adequate to the task of ordering such a socio-planetary metamorphosis, from what might they draw legitimacy and who might they be designed to serve? Such questions assume that humans cannot increase their activities in space without producing feedbacks and that an exit from the planet's atmosphere is not an entrance into a sphere of technical neutrality.

In a world characterized by militarized inequality and environmental devastation on a planetary scale, it is easy to dismiss talk of an united human future in space as a dangerous delusion or depoliticizing distraction, but perhaps imaginaries that point to evolving powers of cosmic collectivity, whether they emerge from speculative fictions or the nascent institutions of space governance, can serve as a reminder that universality is a trajectory realized contingently through collective construction rather than some sort of essential human condition that can be unearthed by the peddlers of authenticity. Whilst the future international institutions envisaged in science fiction worlds such as Star Trek, Battlestar Galactica or Stargate SG-1 might be considered to simply extend the grip of Eurocentric liberal internationalism and US exceptionalism along a Promethean vector of space exploration, they may also help to recall that whilst the limits of the human condition might not be essentially fixed to those of the planet, transcending the Earth's atmosphere will not necessarily mark the closure of the political.

—Rory Rowan, 2015

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