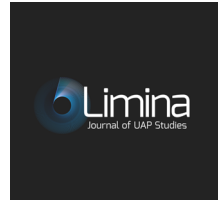




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Political Theory Needs the Alien (and Vice Versa)

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Dear Editor,

I am grateful for the invitation to offer a précis of *Theory of the Alien: Astropolitics, Spacepower, and the Outside*, a book whose central claim is that the Space Age compels political thought to pass through the alien in order to rediscover the human. The book is not, in the first instance, a study of outer space policy, extraterrestrial life, or UAP, although it addresses all three conceptually and substantively. It is an argument about the conceptual transformation of politics under conditions in which the Earth has become newly legible as a planet, outer space has become a political, economic, and strategic domain, and the human has become both challenged by and newly thinkable through its exposure to what exceeds it. In this sense, the alien names that exposure in its most concentrated form. The alien is neither merely another possible being from elsewhere, nor simply an object of hope, belief, fear, or ridicule. It is the conceptual figure of exteriority through which the human, the political, and the planetary become available to thought under the altered conditions of the Space Age. As such, however, the alien in my work is not a metaphor for ordinary cultural or political estrangement, but remains a conceptual figure whose strongest limit case remains the alien in the strong ontological sense: an agential form of life that comes from outside the terrestrial order within which our inherited political concepts have taken shape.

For most of its history, political thought has assumed the Earth, or the *terrestrial domain*, as the given stage of human action. Its basic categories developed under terrestrial conditions: peoples drawing borders, bodies moving across land, states claiming territory, powers contesting seas and skies, and institutions ordering the coexistence of finite and vulnerable creatures. Even when political theory has addressed empire, cosmopolitanism, world history, ecology, or universality, it has generally done so from within a spatial horizon whose planetary character remains only partially available to thought. The Space Age transforms this horizon without abolishing it. Once machines, animals, and then human animals passed beyond the atmosphere, the Earth could no longer appear only as ground, world, or globe. It also appeared as a

planet: a bounded and exposed body suspended in an exterior voidal medium whose material hostility, imaginative purchase, and strategic utility press back upon every inherited concept of political life.

This transformation does not require us to imagine that human beings have left terrestrial politics behind. Almost no one lives in outer space, and even the most ambitious projects of off-world traversal remain fragile, costly, and speculative. Yet terrestrial life and politics already depend thoroughly on extraterrestrial mediation. Navigation, military surveillance, climate modeling, and disaster response all rely in varying degrees on orbital infrastructures. Ordinary life is already entangled with this condition. Every use of GPS, every satellite image of a storm system, every digitally synchronized transaction, and every remotely sensed battlefield registers the presence of outer space within terrestrial order. We have more intimacy with the extraterrestrial domain already than is often acknowledged. The planet we inhabit is therefore no longer politically intelligible from the surface alone. Its weather, markets, borders, and wars are increasingly sensed, mapped, timed, and coordinated through systems that operate beyond the planetary envelope. To think politics under these conditions is to think from within a terrestrial world already threaded through the extraterrestrial.

This is what can be termed the *astropolitical*: the condition in which politics exceeds its terrestrial horizon and relies on the conceptual and material contrast with the extraterrestrial in order to retain its form. The term names more than the specialized subfield concerned with space law, space policy, or economic and military competition beyond the atmosphere. It names the broader transformation of political thought that follows once the terrestrial and the extraterrestrial become constitutively entangled. Politics has always involved the distribution and movement of bodies, the ordering of space, the production of shared worlds, and the stabilization and contestation of territories. Under Space Age conditions, those operations no longer unfold only within the elemental domains of land, sea, and air. They also unfold through the voidal medium of outer space, where orbit, signal, access, traversal, and return begin to modify the basic conceptual terms of political order.

The book therefore proceeds from a position of neither easy enthusiasm nor principled refusal. Much contemporary space discourse oscillates between expansionist, *upwing* confidence and prohibitive, *downwing* skepticism: outer space appears either as the next domain of resource extraction, development, species survival, and civilizational destiny, or

as a costly and dangerous evasion of terrestrial responsibility. Both orientations disclose something pressingly real. The extraterrestrial domain does present opportunities for technical, scientific, economic, and political transformation. It also intensifies risks of militarization, environmental damage, political overreach, and exploitative fantasy. Yet the decisive question is no longer whether politics should enter outer space, as if the decision remained ahead of us. The Space Age has already bound terrestrial life to extraterrestrial infrastructures and imaginaries. The more urgent task is to develop concepts adequate to that binding, so that political theory can reckon with the strange fact that even thinking our Earth now requires thinking through what lies beyond it.

The book accordingly develops a theory of *spacepower*. I use the term broadly to name the infrastructural capacities by which orbital and extraterrestrial systems reorganize perception, timing, and territory, including but not limited to the projection of force into or through outer space. Spacepower is *tentacular* in this sense. It extends through satellites, ground stations, launch systems, and the innumerable technical prostheses that make outer space actionable from Earth, while making Earth newly actionable from outer space. Its operations are logistical, spectacular, perceptual, and sometimes coercive. Land power, sea power, and air power persist within this arrangement, but spacepower binds and reconfigures them under planetary conditions. Through its tentacles, the planet is sensed, timed, and governed otherwise.

The book then turns from infrastructure to myth, image, and narrative. The Space Age has always required forms of mediation able to translate technical achievement into collective meaning. Astronautics provides the most visible instance of this labor. The astronaut appears as an authorized figure of departure and return: a terrestrial animal lifted beyond the planetary horizon, sustained by machines, disciplined by institutions, exposed to the void, and then returned to Earth as emblem or exemplar and even sometimes as casualty. Around this figure gathers the *mythopoetics of spaceflight*, from state rhetoric and televised spectacle to astronaut memoirs marked by awe, professional restraint, exhaustion, psychic difficulty, and spiritual intensification. Through the astronaut, the human encounters itself as technically ungrounded and newly planetary. Spaceflight therefore does more than carry bodies into orbit or to the Moon. It produces a figure through which human beings can conceive and perceive themselves *becoming extraterrestrial* without ceasing to ask what, if anything, remains

human in the passage.

Ufology supplies the murkier and less authorized counterpart to this astronautical imaginary. Where the astronaut departs under institutional sanction and returns as the embodiment or witness of human technical capacity, the UFO intrudes without permission, appears unevenly, withdraws from stable classification, and leaves behind a trail of disputed evidence, bureaucratic confusion, unstable testimony, and cultural fascination. In the book, I treat the UFO first as a *conceptual vehicle* rather than as a solved (or unresolved) empirical object. Concepts, as I see them, function like tools that help or hinder us in navigating the world and orienting ourselves in relation to it. *Conceptual engineering* matters even for empirical investigation. Inquiry does not simply apply neutral methods to pre-given objects; it moves through conceptual infrastructures that help determine what can be observed, which anomalies count as significant, what kinds of explanations appear plausible, and how evidence becomes available as evidence in the first place. As such, the importance of the UFO lies in how it stages the encounter with exteriority under conditions of uncertainty. The UFO arrives, or appears to arrive, from the Outside. It presses against the borders of airspace, sovereignty, and common sense. Astronautics gives the Space Age its heroically liminal figure of departure and return. Ufology gives the Space Age an unsettlingly liminal figure of intrusion and withdrawal, one that makes the human appear vulnerable not only to deception or invasion, but to the breakdown of the categories by which we decide what counts as knowledge at all.

From here the book advances one of its central conceptual claims: the alien cannot be reduced to the familiar conceptual vocabulary of otherness. This is also why we need a *political theory of the alien*. We have inherited metaphysical, science fictional, astrobiological, and conspiratorial theories of the alien, but there are far fewer attempts to ask what the alien does to the basic categories of political thought: sovereignty, agency, territory, and world. Otherness has been indispensable for modern philosophy and political theory, but it often preserves the stability of the very identity it places under pressure. The alien is a stranger concept than this. It names a relation to exteriority that is asymmetrical without being simply non-relational, disruptive without being absolutely unknowable, and exogenous without remaining safely elsewhere. *The alien crosses thresholds*. It comes from outside a given order while revealing something about how that order draws, polices, and revises its own borders. In

political terms, this means that the alien cannot be treated only as an enemy, messiah, or visitor. It is the figure through which political order confronts what exceeds its existing categories while nevertheless demanding some possible relation: war, hospitality, quarantine, translation, diplomacy.

The reciprocal structure here is crucial. If the alien is the figure through which political order encounters exteriority, then the human becomes legible only by way of that encounter. A concept of the human without any concept of the alien risks mistaking its own local conditions for universal structure. It treats terrestrial embodiment, familiar cognition, and inherited forms of agency as if they exhausted the possible field of political life. In parallel, a concept of the alien without any concept of the human drifts toward abstraction, reducing alienness to indefinite difference or sheer opacity. The book argues instead that the human and the alien acquire political significance together. The alien is the contrastive pressure by which the human ceases to appear self-evident, while the human supplies the political anthropological problem through which alienness becomes more than isolation, estrangement, or distance. To theorize either term requires us to ask what kind of being can act, suffer injury, respond to a hail, and refuse or share a world.

This is where the German philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner becomes indispensable for the book's argument. Plessner's account of *eccentric positionality* describes the human as a living being that does not simply coincide with itself. Human beings live from within their bodies, but they can also take up a relation to that embodied life, see themselves from outside, and respond to their own conditions as conditions. This eccentric structure does not make the human wholly sovereign over itself. It marks the human as exposed, divided, mediated, and open to the many worlds it inhabits and constructs. For political theory, the consequence is decisive. Political agency requires more than life, intelligence, or responsiveness. It requires a being capable of standing in some relation to its own position, its own limits, and its own possible actions. An extraterrestrial alien of political salience need not resemble us in biology, language, or form. It would, however, need some structurally comparable capacity for eccentricity: the capacity to occupy a world while also taking distance from that occupation. Without such eccentricity, there may be degrees of complexity or organization, but not politics in any meaningful sense.

The recent *UAP security crisis* provides a concrete test case for this argument. UAPs matter here because they expose the difficulty institutions face when confronted by

underdetermined phenomena that are visible enough to demand classification, yet unstable enough to resist ordinary procedures of knowledge. Such phenomena disturb several systems at once: airspace security, scientific authority, public trust, and the tacit philosophical anthropology through which political actors decide what kinds of agents can appear in the world and warrant recognition as competitors, partners, or interlocutors. My point is not to settle the identity of any particular object, incident, or report. Rather, UAPs show how quickly political order becomes epistemologically charged when the anomalous enters its field of perception. Before anyone can decide what should be done, institutions must decide what kind of thing has appeared, who is authorized to know it, which explanations can be publicly entertained, and which vocabularies may be used to describe it without threatening the legitimacy of the systems that produce them.

The book's final movement extends alienness to the planetary. If politics has become planetary, then political thought must confront a scale of existence no individual, community, or state can directly experience as a whole. The planetary arrives through mediation: satellite images, climate models, risk projections, and, perhaps principally, the images and myths by which a bounded world becomes available to fear, care, judgment, and contestation. I call this *planetary mythotechnics*. Myth, in this sense, names one of the durable ways finite beings orient themselves toward realities too vast, diffuse, abstract, or terrifying to inhabit directly, what philosopher Hans Blumenberg calls *the absolutism of reality*. Technical infrastructures do similar work in another register. Together, myths and technics render the planet politically apprehensible. They allow Earth to appear as battlefield, archive, damaged ecology, common inheritance, *homeworld* – and as an *alienworld* suspended in the grimdark void.

The book ends with the conceptual motif of *nostos*, the homecoming that only becomes possible after and through a departure. The Space Age imposes a second sailing on political thought. Having crossed the threshold of the extraterrestrial, however partially and unevenly so far, we cannot return to an earlier terrestrial self-evidence. Earth no longer appears simply as the ground beneath us, the globe we map and circulate across, or even as the world we inhabit. It appears as a planet whose conditions are fragile, mediated, and contested, and whose political meaning has been transformed by the Outside that environs it. The same is true of the human. Once exposed to the alien, the human can no longer appear as a completed or given object of philosophical anthropology, a sovereign subject, or a stable essence. It

becomes visible instead as the eccentric animal that departs from itself in order to return in an altered form, the creature whose political life is constituted by exposure to what is alien, mediation through fields of contrastives, and recurring negotiation of what counts as home, agency, or subject in the first place.

The line of inquiry I pursue in *Theory of the Alien* opens onto two related forthcoming projects, both currently in preparation. The first, tentatively titled *Luminous Vermin: UFOs and the Limits of Knowledge* (to be co-authored by Michael Glawson), will take up the conceptual stakes and cultural history of ufology more directly, approaching UFOs as underdetermined phenomena that move through scientific, bureaucratic, religious, and security discourses without settling comfortably inside any of them. Its governing problem is epistemological and institutional: how do communities produce, authorize, and disavow knowledge when the object in question remains unstable? The second, *The Esoteric State: Military-Industrial Imaginaries and the Politics of Secret Worldbuilding*, will widen the frame to some of the strangest and frequently disavowed undertakings of the national security state, including psychological warfare, human experimentation, managed perception, psychic research, and related projects. These are revealing exceptions through which the norms of modern power come into view, especially where the state acts on the conditions under which reality itself can be governed, narrated, perceived, and destabilized. Jean Baudrillard will be a crucial interlocutor there, as a theorist of secrecy, media, simulation, and political order whose work remains unusually suited to a world in which power operates by modulating the boundary between knowledge and non-knowledge.

Theory of the Alien provides the political anthropological basis and stakes for these next inquiries. Political thought needs the alien because the alien names the exteriority through which the human, the planet, and politics become legible. Likewise, the alien needs a political theory because, without concepts of recognition, agency, secrecy, mediation, and world-making, alienness remains only a projective fantasy of absolute otherness or a merely empirical puzzle awaiting solution. To think the alien is not to abandon the human. It is to rediscover the human as the creature that becomes intelligible only by passing through *the Outside*.

With kind regards,
Dr. Michael Uhall

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Michael Uhall is a political theorist at Indiana University East. His research spans political ecology, critical geography, philosophical anthropology, the philosophy of technology, intelligence and security studies, and film and literary criticism. His work has appeared with Bloomsbury and Stanford University Press, in *Contemporary Political Theory*, *Nature and Culture*, *Critical Horizons*, and *Configurations*, and in public-facing venues such as *3:AM Magazine*, *Ancillary Review of Books*, *Extrapolation*, *Gothic Nature*, *Limina*, *Lovecraft Annual*, *Radical Philosophy*, and *Vault of Culture*.

Theory of the Alien: Astropolitics, Spacepower, and the Outside is forthcoming in late 2026 with Routledge, an imprint of Taylor & Francis.