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Spaceship Earth — A Total Institution

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Abstract

The concept of Earth as a planetary spaceship serves as a root metaphor of ecological economics, sustainability science, and the broader environmental movement. This article first explores the origins of this metaphor and elucidates the core components and functions of a hypothetical Spaceship Earth. It then draws on Erving Goffman's characteristics of total institutions to show that such a spaceship would epitomise the most total institution ever known in human history. Acknowledging the continued influence of spaceship thinking, the article concludes by offering first hints to emergency exits from a planetary total institution with no mission other than orbiting another celestial body.

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I still reach for the stars, but all I touch is my horizon.

(Diary of Dreams, Tears of Laughter)

Introduction: An escape room exercise

Although “the great frontier for human activities during the space age has been intensive and microscopic, not extensive and macroscopic” (Deudney, 2020, p. 322), Christmas Eve 1968 has been staged not only as the eve of an epochal technological breakthrough (Kraus et al., 2023), but also as the prism of the perhaps most significant change of

perspective in centuries (Höhler, 2016). While in lunar orbit for ten days, the crew of the Apollo 8 mission saw and photographed the Earth rising above the lunar horizon. Taken from aboard a spacecraft, these *Earthrise* photographs testify the first human first-hand visions of Earth in motion. Whereas the *Earthrise* photographs show half the planet as a lonely floating island in the black sea of space, it was the Apollo 17 crew who in 1972 captured the first human-made photographs of “whole earth” as an isolated biosphere. Like the iconic *Earthrise* shot by William Anders, the most famous of these full pictures, known as *Blue Marble*, is counted among the most reproduced photographs in history.

Observing *The Island Earth* (Nicks, 1970) or “whole earth” from space, the spacemen projected their own situation onto the Earth. Confined to a small, precarious, and isolated life support system, they identified Earth as precisely the small, precarious, and isolated life support system on which they depended for survival. This conversion of Earth into a spaceship is reported to have fundamentally changed the spacemen’s attitude to their home planet, which they had just rediscovered as a fragile spacefaring ecosystem that should be handled and maintained with considerable care. Coined as *The Greening of the Astronauts* (TIMES Magazine, 1972, p. 43), this reported ecological turn included Apollo 13 crew member Jack Swigert’s public subscription to the idea “that space technology—earth-resources satellites, solar-energy generators, global communications networks and the like—is the answer to the environmental disasters that threaten this fragile earth.”

As space imagery proliferated, this *Lunar Effect* (id.) soon extended to non-spacefaring members of the human race such as Margaret Mead (2011, p. 503) who, in her 1977 *Earth Day* address, declared that “it was not until we saw the picture of the Earth, from the Moon, that we realized how small and how helpless this planet is—something that we must hold in our arms and care for.”

As it comprehensibly illustrated the planetary boundaries our “closed earth” (Boulding, 1966), space imaginary lent considerable plausibility to the idea of the supposedly inescapable limits to the growth possible on it. The new perspective on the planet, therefore, seemed to imply the need for a new global economy. If Earth is seen as “a single spaceship, without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution” (id. p. 7), then this spaceship can no longer sustain the “reckless, exploitative, romantic, and violent” *cowboy economy* of the past, in which humans depleted resources from one spot before they moved onto the next one to do more of the same. Rather, such a spaceship requires a spaceman economy where “we are primarily concerned with (...) stock maintenance, and any technological change which results in the maintenance of a given total stock with a lessened throughput (that is, less production and consumption) is clearly a gain.” (id., p. 8)

In outlining a circular economy for Spaceship Earth, “where sources and sinks are two sides of the same coin, endless growth is not feasible and materials need to circulate as long as possible within the socioeconomic system” (Haas et al., 2020, p. 1), and which he considered a necessary “condition for safeguarding and sustaining life on earth” (Chauhan et al., 2022, p. 2), Kenneth Boulding (1996) not just contributed to the foundations of ecological economics (Victor, 2015), but must be considered one of its “immediate roots” (Constanza, 2020; see also Røpke, 2004). Spaceship Earth was further propelled by a growing perception of “emerging issues of resource overconsumption and pollution” (D’Amato & Korhonen, 2021, p. 4) to the point where it entered the mainstream environmental and resource economics (Meran, 2023)

and where the “transition from ‘frontier economics’ to ‘spaceship economics’” would be “well under way” (Constanza, 2020, p. 4), were it not for a considerable proportion of earthly spacefarers who either deny their presence on a spaceship or knowingly consume this ship’s provisions as if they were unlimited.

For decades, the dominant strategy to control either deviant behaviour has been “to confront sceptics and resisters with the sheer omnipresence of warning signs that indicate the severe side-effects” (Roth, 2019, p. 504) of their unsustainable behaviour. These confrontational approaches, however, have recently been considered ineffective as they intensify defensive denial and reactance (Constanza et al, 2017). As the supposed problem of Spaceship Earth remains its crew (Höhler, 2014), however, the self-acclaimed commanders and counsellors of Spaceship Earth are currently complementing or substituting pedagogies of fear with approaches that treat unsustainable lifestyles as mental disorders or behavioural addictions in need for therapy. The point then is that these pathologies are identified as “societal” pathologies that afflict virtually everyone. “Examples include our societal addiction to inequitable over-consumption fuelled by fossil energy and the ‘growth at all costs’ economic model”, which is why it is going to take more than simply pointing out its problems. It is going to take ‘societal therapy’ to overcome this addiction” (Constanza, 2020, p. 4). The corresponding treatments, therefore, apply, in principle, to everyone.

Ecological economists are by far not the only spacefarers who pathologize the entire crew or passengers of their ship. The diagnosis that capitalist welfare societies are addicted to economic growth (Daly, 1974; Haapanen & Tapio, 2016; Jackson, 2009; Mishan, 1967; Rees, 1999; Slaughter, 2012; van Griethuysen, 2010) and that this addiction makes not only humans themselves, but the entire planet ill is also reflected in recent attempts to scale the concept of health to the planetary level. Claims for “planetary health” (Horton et al., 2014; Horten and Lo, 2015), defined as “the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends” (Whitmee et al., 2015) indeed imply that the entire planet is ill, a diagnosis prominently disclosed not least by the then-Prince of Wales and later King Charles III. on the occasion of Earth Day 2020.

The problem with this expansive health concept is not only its all-embracing claim, but also that prominent proponents of the planetary health or “One Health” concept defined health as the “state of complete (...) well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (Preamble to the WHO Constitution). If health is defined positively, then any failure to display an ever-longer list of positive health indicators may be problematised. The corresponding health concept is therefore total in at least two regards. First, it extends to all aspects of life on this planet. Second, it defines health as a precarious equilibrium of desired features whose maintenance requires constant monitoring and deviance-control paired with corresponding treatments and interventions. As there is suspicion anyway that many of the space technologies mentioned by the above Apollo 13 crew member are currently employed in such ways as to support scenarios of planetary biopolitics (Cavanagh, 2014; Hamilton, 2018), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2018), or digital dictatorships (Harari, 2017; 2020), there is concern that the increasingly comprehensive and fine-grained monitoring and problematisation of all aspects of life on this planet might develop totalitarian features and turn our spaceship into a global total institution.

Exit from an institution as total as is a planetary spaceship is hard to imagine. This circumstance turns an escape from

Spaceship Earth into the ultimate escape room exercise. In this article, I shall first provide an overview of the origins of the Spaceship Earth rhetoric, also highlighting that some early users of the concept have been well-aware of its potentially totalitarian implications. I shall then outline core characteristics of total institutions and demonstrate that Spaceship Earth meets many, if not all, criteria of a total institution. Having thus established that this planetary life support system is the perhaps most total institution ever conceived by mankind, I provide hints to exit-options directed to those passengers who are motivated to take on this ultimate escape room challenge.

The origins of Spaceship Earth

Some of the first Spaceship Earth rhetoric is most optimistic. Take the example of Henry George (2006[1879], p. 218) who thought of Earth as “a well-provisioned ship, this on which we sail through space. If the bread and beef above decks seem to grow scarce, we but open a hatch and there is a new supply, of which before we never dreamed.” George Orwell (2021[1937], p. 117) seemed to agree:

“The world is a raft sailing through space with, potentially, plenty of provisions for everybody; the idea that we must all cooperate and see to it that everyone does his fair share of the work and gets his fair share of the provisions seems so blatantly obvious that one would say that no one could possibly fail to accept it unless he had some corrupt motive for clinging to the present system.”

The “potentially” already indicates some reservations, and yet the world is great and could be of plenty if we just had the right system, namely socialism, in place.

Compare this assessment to one of the first popular appearances of Spaceship Earth in its more contemporary shape:

“We travel together, passengers on a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil; all committed for our safety to its security and peace; preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work, and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft. We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave—to the ancient enemies of man—half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the survival of us all.” (Adlai Stevenson II, US Ambassador to the UN, in his Speech to the UN Economic and Social Council on 9 July 1965).

Somewhen between 1937 and 1965, the world has shrunk. This new little world is a vulnerable and fragile craft in need of care, and we can only care for it if we all pull together. This is a matter of survival.

This basic storyline is characteristic of the Spaceship Earth literature, and it consequently also appears in the work of Barbara Ward (1966, p. 17), who “borrowed” the spaceship “comparison from Professor Buckminster Fuller”:

“The most rational way of considering the whole human race today is to see it as the ship’s crew of a single space ship on which all of us, with a remarkable combination of security and vulnerability, are making our pilgrimage through infinity. Our planet is not much more than the capsule in which we have to live as human beings if we are to survive the vast space journey upon which we have been engaged for hundreds of millennia – but without noticing yet our condition. This space voyage is totally precarious. Think of what could happen if somebody were to go mad or get dead drunk in a submarine and run for the controls. If some member of the human race got dead drunk on board of our spaceship, we are all in trouble. This is how we have to think of ourselves. We are a ship’s company on a small ship. Rational behaviour is the condition of survival” (Ward, 1966, p.18)

As the ship is vulnerable, so too is the “single, vulnerable human community” (Ward, 1966, p. 3) which is vulnerable precisely because it has not yet internalised the aforementioned rational considerations, lacks the discipline to rational behaviour, and, therefore, is at constant risk to act like drunkards on a submarine. Rational guidance and control must therefore be provided at first by scientific experts, and then increasingly by computers. “Only to their superhuman range of calculative capabilities can and may all political, scientific, and religious leaders face-savily acquiesce.” (Fuller, 1969, p. 10). Fuller indeed insists that computers will save the world.

“You may very appropriately want to ask me how we are going to resolve the ever-acceleratingly dangerous impasse of world-opposed politicians and ideological dogmas. I answer, it will be resolved by the computer. Man has ever-increasing confidence in the computer; witness his unconcerned landings as airtransport passengers coming in for a landing in the combined invisibility of fog and night. While no politician or political system can ever afford to yield understandably and enthusiastically to their adversaries and opposers, all politicians can and will yield enthusiastically to the computers safe flight-controlling capabilities in bringing all of humanity in for a happy landing. So, planners, architects, and engineers take the initiative.” (id., p. 44)

This dream of a world on autopilot is shared by Jay Forrester (1971, p. 1) who argues that computerised system models can inform policy far better than public deliberation between citizens whose “human mind is not adapted to interpreting how social systems behave” anyway. In this ship designed by planners, architects, and engineers, there is clearly no need for political debate anymore.

It is important to keep this basic design of Spaceship Earth in mind if we now return to the initial quote of this chapter, where Henry George (2006[1879], p. 218) described this craft as a well-provisioned ship, and read on to the next sentence: “And very great command over the services of others comes to those who as the hatches are opened are permitted to say, ‘This is mine!’”. And equally is it worthwhile to recall that George Orwell’s depiction of the world as a raft is preceded by the following lines: “And all the while everyone who uses his brain knows that Socialism, as a world-system and wholeheartedly applied, is a way out. It would at least ensure our getting enough to eat even if it deprived us of everything else.”

As much as his later oeuvre, Orwell’s 1937 outlook on the deprivations brought about by a world system dedicated to

barely more than our bare survival blend though not exactly nicely into Michel Foucault's (1973, p. 231) definition of total institutions as "complete and austere institutions" (Foucault).

Total institutions

The concept of total institutions was popularised by Erving Goffman through a collection of *Essays on the Conditions of the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* published under the title *Asylums*. The first of these four essays outlines the *Characteristics of Total Institutions*. Goffman's (1961, p. 3) examination of total institutions starts from an "everyday sense of that term"-definition of institutions as "places such as rooms, suits of rooms, buildings, or plants in which activity of a particular kind regularly goes on". His examples include train stations, factories, or family homes. All institutions absorb a certain degree of lifetime and energy from their members, he explains, yet some are more "encompassing" (id., p. 4) than others, and the most encompassing institutions are total institutions: "Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors." (ibid.)

Whereas in modern society individuals usually switch between a considerable number of institutions such as family home, public transport, workplace, and leisure facilities, the

"Central feature of total institutions can be described as a breakdown of the barriers ordinarily separating these (...) spheres of life. First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member's daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution." (id., p. 6)

In further specifying total institutions, Goffman identifies the following characteristics:

- There is one barrier between the total institution and the outer world that the inmates cannot cross. By contrast, individuals in the outer world are members of several institutions, whose borders they regularly cross.
- Inside a total institution, the personality of inmates is to the greatest possible extent reduced to the role they play in this institution. In the outer world, the personality of individuals is defined by a diverse set of roles they play in different institutional contexts.
- Total institutions aim at realising a total physical, mental, and social inclusion that covers all aspects of the life of their inmates. In the outer world, no single institution can raise justified claims of such total forms of inclusion.
- A total institution is governed by a central authority equipped with the power to discipline and punish.
- Total institutions pursue a particular goal following the aforementioned "rational plan" designed to achieve it.

From an inmate's perspective, this institutional design is experienced as a total barrier between himself and the outside world. Newcomers typically undergo admission procedures aimed at de-individualising them. These practices may include obedience tests and will-breaking exercises, rites of passage, situations of physical nakedness, enforcement of property dispossession, and uniformization.

Goffman then proceeds to distinguish different types of total institutions each devoted to the containment of different basic types of inmates. Thus, he identifies institutions

- For the vulnerable and harmless: Homes for the handicapped, aged, poor, or orphaned.
- For the vulnerable and unintentionally dangerous: Leper homes, mental hospitals.
- For the intentionally dangerous: jails, prisoners of war camps.
- Of forced labour and resocialisation: "army barracks, ships, boarding schools, work camps" (Goffman, 1961, p. 5).
- For retreats from the world or religious training stations: "abbeys, monasteries, convents, and other cloisters" (ibid.)

There are various possible combinations between these ideal types such as "prison factories (Foucault, 1995, p. 25) or "factory convents" (id, p. 298). In the context of this article, however, the most significant take-away is that Goffman is not the only theorist of total institutions to identify ships as total institutions. Foucault (1995) repeatedly refers to those "convict-ships" (Foucault, 1995, p. 115) that also feature prominently in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. The swimming factories depicted in *Moby Dick* or the accounts of the *Mutiny on the Bounty* further corroborate that ships may qualify as total institutions.

Neither leakages nor harbours

As austere as life is in many total institutions, most of them are not as total as it may seem. Escape from convict ships was difficult but possible, as exemplified by Jean Valjean's outbreak in *Les Misérables*. While on sea, life on a swimming factory may have been total hell, but even the most hellish ship must return to a harbour at some point. History and fiction are full of examples that illustrate the many possible leakages between supposedly total institutions and their outer world. The monk who begets a child, the boarder who sneaks out to a night party, the prisoner who takes drugs in her cell. The respective institutions are therefore better described as "porous" (Ellis, 2021) than as total institutions.

Spaceship Earth is different. By definition, this ship encompasses the entire human habitat. There is no life possible outside this ship except for short excursions in vessels that are technological extensions of it. There is and must be no leakage between this spaceship and the universe; and there is no harbour as this ship's only mission and mode of existence is to ceaselessly orbit another celestial body (Roth and Valentinov, 2023). There is hence no physical exit from Spaceship Earth. All this makes this ship the most complete and inescapable institution in the history of mankind.

In zooming in onto the "single, vulnerable human community" (Ward, 1966, p. 3) populating this institution, we recall that vulnerable individuals belong to Goffman's ideal types of inmates of total institutions. There is little doubt though that there are not only vulnerable and harmless passengers on Spaceship Earth, but also those who "go mad or get dead drunk (...)

and run for the controls” of our spaceship and bring us all in trouble (Ward, 1966, p. 18). This population of vulnerable and dangerous individuals will certainly have to live on separate decks or in dedicated compartments of our spaceship. Given the scale and scope of our collective madness that is, the “growth fetishism” (Hamilton, 2004), “growth mania” (Daly, 1974; 2013; Mishan, 1967; van Griethuysen, 2010), or “growth addiction” (Constanza, 2020,; Constanza et al., 2017; Daly, 1974; Haapanen & Tapio, 2016; Jackson, 2009; Mishan, 1967; Rees, 1999; Slaughter, 2012; van Griethuysen, 2010) that once motivated the construction of Spaceship Earth however, this and other special treatments might concern not only a small minority of reactionaries or deniers.

As for those who are qualified as and remain Type 1 inmates in Goffman’s typology, that is vulnerable and harmless individuals, the message is clear:

“The essence of civil peace is the sacrifice of private force. The citizen abandons to law courts, to impartial police, to all manner of mediating bodies (...) the right to settle his disputes. Increasingly, he asks society in return – through his government – to see that his economic and social grievances are not such as to leave him in urgent and unsatisfied need of redress. Most of the tasks of government come under these two headings – of law and order on the one hand, of welfare on the other. And the essence of our international anarchy today is that the functions of order and most of the functions of welfare will stop at the arbitrary boundaries of states. The greatest institutional gap in our world is created by an inescapable, planetary interdependence which (...) is matched by virtually no instruments of worldwide order and welfare. And it is through that gap that mankind can tumble into annihilation”. (Ward, 1966, p.20)

The key message here is that the sacrifice of private force must be intensified both in scope and scale. Ward clearly advocates the extension of a paternalistic welfare state model to the planetary scale, and it does not require much fantasy to imagine that definitions of private force may constantly be extended to include not only physical violence, but also, in more recent terms, “hate speech”, the spreading of “conspiracy theories”, the use of minority-insensitive language, climate change denial, or even the possession of ever-smaller amounts of cash or unregulated cryptocurrencies. Ward’s remarkable marriage of law-and-order conservatism and social democratic welfare paternalism is reminiscent of the secret alliances described in Heinrich Mann’s novel *The loyal subject*, which in the imperial Germany of the late 19th century were forged between conservative and social democratic leaders to frustrate the electoral success of liberal candidates. Unlike the 19th century case, however, her claim for an alliance of conservatism and welfarism is unconcealed as she insists that the inescapable planetary interdependence be match by inescapable planetary institutions, which she deems necessary to prevent annihilation.

The need for the “vulnerable human community” to become even more vulnerable and harmless for both themselves and their natural environment is further justified by the modus operandi of a “spaceman economy” where “the essential measure of the success of the economy is not production and consumption at all, but the nature, extent, quality, and complexity of the total capital stock, including in this the state of the human bodies and minds included in the system” and where “what we are primarily concerned with is stock maintenance”. (Boulding, 1966, p. 8) This steady-state stock-

keeping economy hence requires not only an extensive, but also an increasingly intensive monitoring of almost all aspects of life, including individual “states of mind”, and that the human community must be sufficiently vulnerable and harmless to consent with or endure their increasingly fine-grained surveillance.

It is therefore only consequential that in such a context of “global resource accounting” (Selcer, 2018, p. 90) performed to “monitor the health of the whole earth” (id., p. 174), the human community reappears as its own stock. To keep this human stock in balance, and thus in synch with the planetary ecosystem, spaceship thinkers were ready to ask great sacrifices from the (other) passengers of Spaceship Earth: “Suggestions of selective euthanasia and mass sterilization were not limited to works of SF but were also openly discussed in ecological publications.” (Höhler, 2014, p. 101) Thus, the “natural resource most threatened” on Spaceship Earth truly “is man himself” (Ward and Dubois, 1972, p. 217), though threatened not necessarily by his own impact on planetary ecosystem as suggested by Ward and Dubois, but more directly by the measures devised to keep this impact low: “How many people could the world support, who should live, who should decide, and how these were the questions population ecologists concerned themselves with.” (Höhler, 2014, p. 101f) When the chips are down, interventions at Spaceship Earth can be drastic.

The global mission and operating system of Spaceship Earth may thus be summarised as follows:

“Spaceship Earth must function as a single entity; international controls must exist (sic!) in several areas. It is simple to outline what is necessary: control of production and sales of arms, followed by control of international conflict; regulation of trade, resource utilization and environmental impact; and control of population” (Ehrlich and Harriman, 1971, p. 113)

Control in this context means coercion. “Seeing the counter-productive results of voluntary compliance with guidelines, we finally admit the necessity of coercion for all” (Hardin, 1976, p. 129f). Where this control does not imply ideas of brute force, it takes the form of attempts at therapeutic interventions on an individual, institutional, and planetary level.

While Spaceship Earth had been “downed” and hors de combat due to the “unexpected ascendancy of neoliberalism” (Selcer, 2018, p. 248) for the fin du 20eme siècle, there has been a considerable revival of the “coercion in a good cause” (Ehrlich, 1969, p. 166) mindset so characteristic of Spaceship Earth particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. In this context, it is noteworthy that this crisis, including the not infrequently draconian measures taken to manage it, has prominently been declared a “dress rehearsal” (Latour, 2021), “fire drill” (UN Global Compact executive director Lise Kingo in 2020), or some other form of blueprint for the management of the environmental or climate crisis.

If mankind is living in Spaceship Earth today, then our situation is defined by the most total barrier that has ever been established in the history of mankind between an institution and the outer world. The corresponding claim of inclusion would need to be equally total; we would hence be confronted with a zeitgeist according to which “Everyone has a role to play” (World Economic Forum) in the achievement of one or several sustainable development goals or the maintenance of the many precarious balances and equilibria on Spaceship Earth.

Our lives would be governed by a “single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution”

(Goffman, 1961, p. 6). Given the gigantic size of this institution, however, this rational plan would likely need to be broken down into context-specific instructions. Leon Faucher's rules *for the House of young prisoners in Paris* cited in Foucault (1995[1975], p. 6ff) are a prime example of such a rational plan. As detailed as this plan is in defining *when* prisoners must wash their hands and eat their bread, however, it remains unspecific as to *how* the prisoners wash their hands or eat their bread. Compare this to a recent initiative where drivers of "unsustainable" cars are, in principle, banned from driving in the Greater Milano Area. As a former right turned privilege, these drivers then are allocated a restrictive budget of kilometres they are still allowed to drive in the Greater Milan Area, but only if they subscribe to the MoVe-In system and install in their car a black box which they need to pair with their smartphone. This black box allows the system to monitor not only where the drivers are driving, but also how. The latter aspect is important as drivers may gain bonuses of additional kilometres if they adapt a sustainable driving-style defined as, e.g., the avoidance of rapid accelerations. In other words: these individuals gain privileges if they allow a black box to define *how* to wash their hands to prevent a planetary health crisis.

If Spaceship Earth is viewed as total institution, broader concepts of rationing and allowances would extend beyond just bread or mobility to encompass carbon. Global institutions such as the World Economic Forum would engage in discussions around "personal carbon allowance programs" as if the major issue with these programmes were that they "have had limited success due to a lack of awareness and fair mechanism for tracking emissions" (Kumar and Kaushik, 2022). In such context, it would be presented as good news is that during the COVID-19 crisis "huge number of unimaginable restrictions for public health were adopted by billions of citizens across the world" (ibid.). It would add to the good news that due to advances in digital technology "can enable tracking personal carbon emissions, raise awareness and also provide individual advisories on lower carbon and ethical choices for consumption of product and services" (ibid.). The same institutions would then make proposals of how these different aspects can be integrated into a carbon credit system that monitors individual lifestyle choices and prevents deviance from prescribed lifestyle models, or at least punishes this deviance by making it very costly. For this to be effective, individual members of the "single, vulnerable human community" would need to be almost constantly in a situation of comprehensive nakedness induced by the ubiquitous data surveillance, including health data surveillance, heralded by scholars such as Zuboff (2018) or Harari (2017; 2020).

As a total institution, Spaceship Earth would last not least be governed by a central authority equipped with the power to enforce compliance with the rational plan devised to achieve its mission. Strategies to extend at least intellectually the required "sure hand of expert-guided state planning" (Selcer, 2018, p. 245) to the planetary level would need to include concerted actions such as the simultaneous publication in more than 200 health journals across the globe of one and the same editorial entitled *Time to treat the climate and nature crisis as one indivisible global health emergency* (e.g., Abbasi et al., 2023). In this widely disseminated text, the authors would "call on the United Nations, political leaders, and health professionals to recognise that climate change and biodiversity loss are one indivisible crisis and must be tackled together to preserve health and avoid catastrophe" in general and on the World Health Organization to "declare the indivisible climate and nature crisis as a global health emergency (...) before or at the 77th World Health Assembly in May 2024" in particular. Equipped with recently increased powers (Behrendt and Müller, 2022), the World Health Organization would

then be expected to not only recommend, but also insist on the enforcement of measures that resemble or exceed those implemented during the COVID-19 crisis, though this time not under the pretext of a war against a virus, but a war against climate change. The permanent crisis of climate change would thus sanctify a permanent “state of exception” (Schmitt, 1922). The impact of the corresponding “exceptional” measures on the daily life of most human on this planet would certainly be dramatic.

Escape from Spaceship Earth

While there is little doubt that Spaceship Earth represents a total institution, there remains some doubt whether this institution has remained an ideal of the 20th century or evolved into a relevant paradigm for the 21st century. However, if Spaceship Earth is gaining traction once more, especially as calls for increasingly ruthless interventions for climate change mitigation and other planetary health goals become more prevalent, then the exploration of escape routes from this ship might be desirable for some members of our “single, vulnerable human community”.

The main contention of this article is not that Spaceship Earth is currently under construction. Instead, I argue that should this metaphorical ship be realized, it would quickly become the most total institution ever known to humanity. Parallels between the hypothetical scenario of this spaceship and ongoing debates would therefore warrant a proactive approach to locate escape paths to the nearest exits. As demonstrated in this article, there is no shortage of such parallels.

As with all escape room games, exits are neither located on each side of the cabin nor marked by illuminated signs, but only vaguely indicated by a gamemaster providing hints to them. In the case of an escape from as total an institution as is Spaceship Earth, however, this gamemaster would necessarily be part of the crew. There is hence no gamemaster either. There are only hints.

One first hint to exits from Spaceship Earth is missing self-implication. Whatever its colour or motive, spaceship thinking ultimately boils down to the perceived need for an “elite to take control of an earthly environment in bad repair.” (Höhler, 2014, p. 105) This leadership claim corresponds with the belief that a “true ship always has a captain” (Hardin, 1974, p. 36). The idea that Spaceship Earth must or can be a ship in that sense, however, has early been challenged even by prominent environmentalists, be it because such captain or steering elite could themselves make fatal decisions, be it simply because “Spaceship Earth (...) has no captain, and no executive committee. The United Nations is a toothless tiger, because the signatories of its charter wanted it that way” (ibid.). Whether autocratic in style or not, the issue with the supposedly required planetary therapies remains that the proponents of these interventions are necessarily members of the system they intervene into. Imagine family therapy sessions where one patient family member also plays the role of the therapist. This would be the reality of therapeutic interventions on a spaceship called earth. Heroic attempts to save humanity by extending the concept of health to the planetary level and engaging in planetary autotherapy do, therefore, at best “resemble Munchhausen’s attempt to pull himself and his horse out of the swamp by his own hair.” (Fritzsche, 2022, p. 2). At worst, they will worsen existing and add new pathologies.

A second hint to exits from Spaceship Earth is the realisation that the idea of earth as a small, precarious, and isolated

life-support system stems less from a collective epiphany inspired by the iconic Earthrise and Blue Marble. Rather, it is more a product of deliberate “campaigns to cultivate planetary loyalty” (Selcer, 2018, p. 190) that had started years, even decades before these enlightening images were captured. In March 1966, Stewart Brand awoke from an LSD-supported meditation on “Buckminster Fuller’s notion that people think of the earth’s resources as unlimited because they think of the earth as flat” (Turner, 2006, p. 69). One week later, he “started a campaign to persuade NASA to release what was rumoured to – but did in fact not then – exist: a colour photograph of the whole Earth. (...) Buckminster Fuller (...) agreed to help Brand his objective” (Potter, 2018). Brand later published the first edition of his Whole Earth Catalog (1968) which features a whole Earth photograph taken by a satellite in November 1967. Yet, the underlying idea is much older that “once a photograph of the Earth, taken from the outside, is available, we shall, in an emotional sense, acquire an additional dimension... once let the sheer isolation of the Earth become plain to every man whatever his nationality or creed, and a new idea as powerful as any in history will be let loose” (Hoyle, 1950, p. 9f); and Buckminster Fuller was aware of this idea when he first coined his notion of Spaceship Earth in 1951. The script had long been written when the astronauts took pictures of Earth in space and turned the planet into a screen for literally great cinema.

The third hint is related to a set of contradictions. While much of the Spaceship Earth literature is concerned with the prevention of a war, “war metaphors continue to proliferate” (Selcer, 2018, p. 249) in this body of literature. Apocalyptic scenarios of a third world war played a key role in *The birth of catastrophic environmentalism* (Hamblin, 2013), and this heritage is still reflected in the more recent rhetoric of a “grande guerre écologique” (Latour, 2015), wars against viruses, and fights against climate change. Spaceship thinkers have also been among the first to insist that

“The effectiveness of government intervention to increase capacity in time of war led inescapably to the conclusion that government could also intervene effectively to ensure that the economy did not fall away into depression in peace time but would, maintain on the contrary, a steady rate of expansion. (...) Thus, not by theory or dogma but largely by war-induced experience, the Western market economies have come to accept the effectiveness and usefulness of a partnership between public and private activity” (Ward, 1966, p. 11f)

This war economics and public praise of public-private partnerships (PPP) is still popular today. Take the example of the ceaseless PPP advocacy by the World Economic Forum or the European Union’s implementation of Mariana Mazzucato’s concepts of entrepreneurial statehood (2014) and “mission economy” (2021). Wars are proven strategies to manage public debts (Reinhardt and Rogoff, 2009), and the same might be true for the many good reasons to maintain or establish a war economy in times of peace. The resort to proxy wars against desertification, viruses, or climate changes might therefore amount to a “moral equivalent of war” (Selcer, 2018, p. 209) or an ostensibly more civilised functional equivalent to it. While this observation might resolve the tension between world peace rhetoric and the discursive ubiquity of war, a second and more fundamental contradiction is that Spaceship Earth’s war economics for global survival applies ideas of an open systems economy—characterized by assumed flows and exchanges between organic and social systems—to a closed living planetary system. However, in the context of such a closed system, theories of autopoietically closed systems would be more fitting. Such theories, as developed by Maturana and Varela (1980) or Luhmann (1995),

offer a more appropriate framework for understanding how systems relate to environments on planet Earth.

A fourth hint to an exit point from Spaceship Earth consists in the fact that its designers have constantly confused the environment with nature. Nature, however, is not *the* environment per se, but only the environmental concept of a subbranch of science, namely the natural sciences. In thus “making natural sciences the arbiters of the greatest good”, spaceship thinking opens “the door to a coercive ‘imperial ecology’” (Selcer, 2018, p. 85) that collides with the fact that other domains of society, including art, religion, and not least the social sciences have all reason to insist on their own and fundamentally different concepts of environment (Roth & Valentinov, 2020).

A fifth and, for the time being, final hint is that the spaceship agenda is not progressive but archconservative. This is true not only regarding its purported ends of natural conservation and resource preservation, but also its means. Both tacit and overt references prevail to elites of experts, researchers, engineers, architects, and planners who relate to the “natural resource most threatened” on Spaceship Earth, that is, “man himself” (Ward and Dubois, 1972, p. 217) like shepherds to a flock of sheep. Contemporary spaceship thinking also leaves little doubt that in a spaceship, circular, or mission economy the “sure hand of expert-guided state planning” (Selver, 2018, p. 245) should replace the invisible one. Space economic policy is therefore “not about picking winners, but picking the willing” (Mazzucato, 2021, p. 56), that is, those private partners who compliantly support whatever public mission. The resulting crony capitalism (Foss et al., 2022; Klein et al., 2022) would clearly be defined by privilege and compliance rather than by law and merit. Experiences from managing the COVID-19 crisis have raised concerns. During this crisis, former basic rights evolved into privileges that rewarded compliant behaviour. This shift, combined with recent calls for similar or even more drastic measures to combat what is being termed the next major “global health emergency”—climate change—fuels further worries. There is a growing apprehension about a potential permanent state of emergency. Such a state could justify permanent transformations of former rights into privileges. The culmination of this trend would a situation where the extension of human rights to nature (Stone, 2010; Latour, 2015) permanently undermines human rights for humans themselves. These transformations would represent a reactionary agenda.

If Spaceship Earth is a reality, then its launch is tantamount to a Second Copernican Revolution:

“With regard to the Copernican Revolution of the sixteenth century, having displaced the earth from its centre in the solar system to a more peripheral existence among a number of other, similar planets, this second revolution is said to have brought the earth back to the core of human attention. Both ‘revolutions’ overthrew the prevalent views of their times. While the first weakened the supremacy of the earth and of humankind in a larger cosmology, the second revolution, in a holistic sweep (...) brought the earth back into the centre of the human universe.”
(Höhler, 2016, p. 10)

In this case, Spaceship Earth has brought us back to the geocentric world so famously depicted in the Flammarion (1888) engraving. The firmament is a protective dome again, under which everything is well-sheltered, well-ordered, and well-tempered. For all its advantages, however, the life on this planetary total institution leaves some of us unfilled. Like the medieval traveller in the image, we feel an itch for putting our head through the spherical vault separating us from the

outside world. Yet there is no *Break on through to the other side* of Spaceship Earth except through one of its extensions. So, if we do not want to trade our current escape room for an even more daunting lifeboat (Hardin, 1974) experience, then this playful article is a serious invitation to look for further hints to *Doors of perception* that may serve as exits from a ship with no mission other than orbiting another celestial body.

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