

SABINE HÖHLER (2014) *SPACESHIP EARTH IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL AGE, 1960-1990*. NEW YORK: ROUTLEDGE. ISBN: 978-1848935099.

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Living Space

Sabina Höhler's book, *Spaceship Earth in the Environmental Age, 1960-1990*, does an excellent job of tracing the interest in closed systems as they proliferated in the emergent environmental discussions of the 1950s and '60s, and resonated in the following decades. The Spaceship Earth concept is used to engage not only those economists, scientists, and activists who were actually discussing the interconnected systems of the planet, but also, and rightly with more emphasis, the cultural implications of the end of the endless frontier.

Höhler makes an important contribution by focusing a history of environment around the compelling technological and social figure of Spaceship Earth. She operates with a robust Foucauldian framework, quoting the philosopher early on for his 1967 suggestion, in the essay on heterotopias, that the twentieth century would be the 'epoch of space.' This was not only due to the 'new awareness and significance of the global' (3) that Höhler is concerned to document, but also the interdependence of spaces, economies, and social formations that such a turn also entailed. Indeed, Höhler reads Foucault at length in the introduction, indicating that the concern about space she wants to describe is not only about science and political knowledge, but also about the importance of systems and their effects. Foucault's concern for 'what type of storage, circulation, marking, and classification of human elements should be adopted in order to achieve a given end' (19) becomes the diagrammatic schema for the book, whose major sections are labeled Storage, Circulation, and Classification (I will return to Höhler's omission of the 'marking' aspect of Foucault's claims below).¹ These terms are integrated into the framework of the project as a means to clarify the 'specific cultural-technoscientific

practices that created a new architecture for conceiving the environment as a global *interior space*' (19, italics in original). More the globe as interior than a global interior, Circulation, Storage, Classification help to keep the reader focused on what is at stake as the environmental movement enters the common culture, often under the rubric of Spaceship Earth, in the 1960s and 70s. These motifs also continuously tether the historical descriptions in the text back to Höhler's compelling theoretical premise, embedded, as she sees it, in the concept of Spaceship Earth, that the environment 'was no longer a pristine nature to be conserved, rather ... a juridical and scientific object to be internationally negotiated, administered, and allocated' (13).

This last point is crucial: *Spaceship Earth in the Environmental Age* does the valuable work of mapping the contours of a history of environmentalism that is strictly focused on the interactions of economies and ecologies. There is an abundance of compelling evidence, and Höhler lays it out in constructive narratives and readable prose. Of especial note is the 'Storage' chapter, in which she describes the concern over population explosions. From Ehrlich, to *Limits to Growth*, to *Soylent Green*, the chapter captures the spectrum of interest of scientific and sociological analysis and popular narratives that all equated population growth with a sense of societal decline in the period. Rather than dismissing the quasi-scientism of many of these claims, or apologizing for the authors, she carefully locates the felt imperative for drastic, often draconian, population regulation in the charged political and cultural context that she is describing. The chapter describing Biosphere III, an isolated dome constructed outside Phoenix and inhabited for extended periods, is equally rich, providing a nuanced understanding of this quixotic effort both on the terms of the science that fed it and the ambitions for extra-atmospheric living that resonated from it. Höhler also discusses a number of the more straightforward and well-known systems analysts, from Kenneth Boulding to R. Buckminster Fuller to Garret Harding. Here as well, her even though incisive treatment recounts their important contributions to the closed world premise while keeping them in the context of the policy, NGO, and cultural discussions that informed them.

Amid these delicate narratives, the reader can begin to identify the emergent patterns of a new kind of interdisciplinary analysis of the history of the environment. The book appears as part of a series on the History and Philosophy of Technoscience, and thus is already productively enmeshed within these evolving paradigms for

understanding how historical discussions transform according to present imperatives – concerns over the Anthropocene, broadly considered, have ignited a wealth of scholarship around the history, or better the genealogy, of contemporary predicaments.² On the one hand, one could look to this book for its crucial contributions to this growing interdisciplinary literature: it cogently discusses a number of familiar figures, tropes, and events in a new light, and provides the reader with a rich foundation with which to further explore the subject. On the other hand, one could begin to discern a sort of interdisciplinary orthodoxy, in which a certain number of individuals and institutions are the consistent placeholders for the much more dynamic and less clearly defined emergence of new ways of thinking about the world that condition the ‘environmental age.’ This is not to disparage Höhler or her scholarship, indeed my own work and that of many colleagues is caught in this same trap (Barber, 2016; Roberston, 2012; Scott, 2016), but to suggest that the significance of a seemingly foundational book such as this is in a state of inflection and disruption. Or rather, that as we read books such as *Spaceship Earth* we begin to understand with more nuance and through more detailed narratives the complexity of what we think of as ‘science,’ ‘ecology,’ ‘environmentalism’ and other terms, and begin to see openings toward other narratives and other subjects whose conditions can, working off of these foundational texts, be better described, whose voices can be better expressed. In other words, what is the historiographic valence of the Spaceship Earth concept as a historical framing: is it too copious, or too marginalized? What sort of regional, economic, or disciplinary readings can clarify the role of these theoretical discussions in the material conditions they also analyzed? Can these general, atmospheric concepts be made more specific, and tied to a wider range of narratives, events, and ideas. Such possibilities, of course, likely exceed the scope of a single volume.

Thus the occlusion of the ‘marking’ term amidst Foucault’s incitement for the framework of Höhler’s book. The biopolitical imperative, the expansion of governmentality and the arts of government in the period under discussion also involved a complex means of assessing and evaluating the relative rights of different individuals – according to race, class, nationality – amid the push for increased rights for the environment. The environment itself, in other words, was marked in different ways and according to different means, as were the individuals and collectives who interacted with it. While it may be the case that Spaceship Earth was a largely Euro-American approach to visualizing the world, why, indeed was that

the case? And what are the other figures or frameworks that it serves to diminish? Were there alternative planetary imaginaries in the tendencies leading to the Chipko Movement in the Upper Pradesh? Or to the resistance work of Ken-Saro Wiwa in Nigeria? It is not to say that all of these stories need to be integrated into the details of this narrative, but, given that it is a story of imagining global processes, the occlusion of this persistent othering comes out in sharp relief. The process of marking, noting, evaluating, and differentiating – on the ethical, economic, and ecological terms of environmental justice – could have found a productive place in Höhler’s narrative; or, perhaps, in a book that will be inspired by it. Put differently, while Foucault’s framework opened up some interesting discussions, its limitations are also clear; other theorists of space, from Keller Easterling to Giorgio Agamben to Peter Sloterdijk, could have helpful interlocutors to clarify the claustrophobia that spaceship earth seems also to induce. Höhler’s book makes a valuable contribution to this new kind of interdisciplinary literature, and will be useful for scholars and students alike.

Endnotes

¹ Höhler’s primary reference is to Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22-27; a text read closely in architectural discourse. She also relies on Foucault’s lectures, especially those published as *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978* (New York: Picador, 2009) and *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-1979* (New York: Picador, 2008).

² Of the most thorough is Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (New York: Verso, 2016); see also MacKenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene* (New York: Verso, 2015), and the responses to the Eco-Modernist Manifesto, from Eileen Crist, Bruno Latour, and others, in *Environmental Humanities* vol. 7 (2015).

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