

# The Astrosociological Imagination: The Challenge of Human Progress

By Stephanie Lynne Thorburn

## Abstract

This paper offers an overview of *The Astrosociological Imagination*. The project addresses the vision of human progress conceived by the space advocacy movement and its ethical and methodological parameters. These humanist sociology papers explore the core themes inherent to the rhetorical promise of societal transformation offered in the Space Renaissance Initiative manifesto.

**Key themes:** Human progress, transformative studies, humanism, paradigmatic science, discourse analysis.

*The Astrosociological Imagination* comprises a collection of reflexive sociology papers on the Space Renaissance Initiative (SRI). The work shares some of the essentially humanist themes of C. Wright Mills's 1959 classic text *The Sociological Imagination*[1] and seeks to integrate social, personal and historical elements into a discourse analysis of the SRI. The work explores critically the conceptual precepts of Max Weber[2] on rationalisation in contemporary industrial society in relation to environmental and socio-cultural developmental issues. The SRI is an organisation that challenges the parameters of our thinking in regard to human scientific, technological evolution and offers a pragmatic series of proposals.

At the inception of *The Astrosociological Imagination* anthology, the project was initially defined as a treatise on human progress, evaluating the mercurial and unconventional discourses of the SRI. Following an overview of related literature and appropriate methodological approaches, the research question evolved into an assessment of the rhetorical appeal of the Space Movement per se, as expressed via the Space Renaissance. A discourse analysis addressing the notion of technological and societal development outside the confines of Earth is an evocative brief for a thesis; the work is situated in a contemporary postmodern milieu. Three central strands emerge at the core of this discursive treatise on human survival and progress.

## 1. Ethical Dimensions

The manifesto of Space Renaissance can be considered as an extension of the remit of sustainable development philosophies beyond our own atmosphere. The SRI advocates space development through focusing on our resource crisis and a need for the establishment of radical, new energy solutions through initiatives including space-

based solar power and the problems of a growing population. The establishment of space colonies such as those theorised by Professor Gerard O'Neill[3] are justified by emphasising our vulnerability in context of recent Earth crises of anthropogenic and non-anthropogenic origin. Unlike conventional sustainable development theorists, the SRI does not ignore more fundamental equations and instead suggests a need for reassessment of economic and environmental issues through an avant-garde open world view, extending our concept of society from the parochial remit of Earth.

Ethical issues are paramount in assessing the social and ethical dimensions pertinent to sci-fi cyber space colonies. Contemporary schools of thought pertaining to existing political environmental theory offer an illuminating comparison. Theorists such as Bookchin[4] have proposed a form of radical social re-rationalisation. This working model seeks to maintain small scale social organisations on Earth, utilising more environmentally friendly technology, and is a system fundamentally based on the retention of a more ethical form of both instrumental and value-orientated rationality.

Historically, such small scale communities have not necessarily lead to a reduction of hierarchy or domination. In *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism*[5], David Pepper evaluates *The Ecologist's* "Blueprint for Survival," an important work that he notes has been translated into the fiction of "ecotopia".[6] This perspective places particular value on enhanced quality of life and greater harmony between man and nature. It is certainly a model of social re-rationalisation that would, in my view, resonate with the utopian visions of the SRI, considering its allied emphasis on improvements in quality of life, education, creativity, and the re-conceptualisation of community via an open world model.

A healthy caution is offered by Pepper in regard to the potential for fascist elements inherent within such models as Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, however. Whilst socialist traits can be found in the notion of decentralised production and the control of technology through the people, the antecedents for a form of anarchic social ecology are certainly a latent reality – it is debatable whether such regimes would result therefore in socialist utopia or fascist dystopia. In the context of space colonisation, social ethics are paramount. The SRI manifesto is, though, more radical than any form of social ecology that has been attempted on Earth and further is necessarily concerned with a redefinition of the stereotypical view of "technocentrism" in the context of human progress.[7]

## **2. Transdisciplinarity and Transformation.**

Research into human progress and societal transformation via space advocacy is also a paradigmatic sphere. The *raison d'être* of this research is in essence a quest to foster a

meaningful dialogue between qualitative research sociology and the scientific community. The theoretical emphasis is orientated toward both postmodern and traditional sociological perspectives conveyed through the sociology of science. Societal expansion into space can be equated to human evolution as expressed via perceptual paradigmatic shifts. Thomas Kuhn's theory articulated in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*[8] regarding the non-linear evolution of science promises the possibility of alterations in our perceptions of "normal science" via paradigmatic revolutions. Despite advances in technology and science, the space advocacy movement still might be viewed as somewhat anomalous to present day constructs. Over time, whether one's personal views coincide with the goals of the SRI or affiliated groups such as the Paradigm Shift Institute, improvements in scientific theory and practice may ultimately result in space advocacy organisations becoming more established. It is the role of publications such as the *Journal of Space Philosophy* to document these changes in our perceptual and philosophical norms.

Methodological models integral to Socioastronomy are both interdisciplinary and fundamentally transdisciplinary in essence. Socioastronomy comprises an aggregation of specialised spheres drawing from sociology, philosophy, space policy and transformative studies. The goal of transdisciplinarity is not to replace the expertise of each discipline, but rather to approach challenging research questions via transcending many disciplines, encouraging a holistic viewpoint that recognises the complexity and diversity of knowledge when applied to problem solving within the academic community.[9]

### **3. Linear Progress in the Face of Human Adversity.**

The transformative ambitions held by space advocacy groups such as the SRI are a response to some of the most frustrating problems humans face in developing new viable solutions to Earth's crises. The ambition of becoming an exo-society, namely a society that has evolved sufficiently ultimately to live within a lunar colony as theorised by O'Neill, would certainly demand a completely new cognitive perceptual schemata. The act of establishing a lunar colony is still considered socially to be beyond the remit of ordinary contemplation. The historical and discursive rhetoric of Space Renaissance as an organisation is seminal in conceiving of human progress not merely via advocating the advancement of science. The persistent appeal of its goals is achieved through a conceptual viewpoint advocating an apparently coherent form of linear progress, transposing the most precious elements of human history, culture, and knowledge since the Renaissance into a nascent unknown sphere beyond Earth, toward a new rebirth or Renaissance. Thus, civilisation and the human narrative continue through a combination of historically informed continuity and necessary radical change.[10]

The overarching discursive rhetoric of space advocacy per se is grounded in a progressive, existentialist construction of Earth and the Cosmos. The emphasis is on nurturing progress and shared human values, whilst also seeking to break with limiting epistemological elements of past philosophies from the 19th and 20th centuries. This fundamental manifesto for human advancement is novel, yet such an iconoclastic notion requires considered caution. I believe the goals of the SRI are worthy of our consideration as humankind endures significantly troubled times. Critics would naturally condemn the myopia of space advocacy and its naive preoccupation with expenditure on unrealistic budgets to develop the space industry and settlements as financially wasteful during an economic recession. Undoubtedly to stabilise our environmental and economic demise, we should evoke answers increasingly on the basis of significant scientific and social advancements to reach out for a viable range of complex, insightful solutions. Engaging with the nascent school of thought encapsulated by the Space Renaissance in connection to human progress requires ethical value neutrality and innovative hermeneutic research techniques.

### **Notes**

[1] C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

[2] Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905; Repr. London: Routledge Classics, 2001).

[3] G. K. O'Neill, *The High Frontier: Human Colonies in Space* (New York: William Morrow, 1977).

[4] Murray Bookchin, "What is Social Ecology," and "Rethinking Ethics, Nature and Society," in *The Modern Crisis* (Philadelphia: New Society/Black Rose Books, 1986).

[5] David Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism* (London: Routledge, 1993), chapters 1, 2, and 7.

[6] "Blueprint for Survival," *The Ecologist* 2, no. 1 (September 14, 1972).

[7] Stephanie L. Thorburn, "The Astrosociological Imagination and the Space Renaissance Initiative: A Discourse Analytical Perspective," (literature review). *American Chronicle*, November 4, 2010, [www.americanchronicle.com/articles/view/197380](http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/view/197380).

[8] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

[9] R. Volckmann, "Creativity and Transdisciplinarity: An Interview with Alfonso Montuori," *Integral Review* 5, no. 2 (2009): 273-87.

[10] Stephanie L. Thorburn, "Nurturing Human Progress: Space Renaissance Congress 2011." *International Space Fellowship News*, August 4, 2011, [spacefellowship.com/news/art26356/nurturing-human-progress-space-renaissance-congress-2011.html](http://spacefellowship.com/news/art26356/nurturing-human-progress-space-renaissance-congress-2011.html).

### **Further Reading**

Adriano Autino, Patrick Q. Collins, Annie Bynum, Shaun Moss, Frank Stratford, Niklas Jarvstraat, Michael Martin-Smith, Martin Dudziak, Ken Ford, Dan Walt, Andrzej Kotarski, Arthur Woods, Vincent Werner, and Anton Volkonskiy. *The Space Renaissance Manifesto*, [www.spacerenaissance.org/papers/The\\_Space\\_Renaissance\\_Manifesto.pdf](http://www.spacerenaissance.org/papers/The_Space_Renaissance_Manifesto.pdf).

Adriano Autino, Patrick Q. Collins, and Alberto Cavallo. *Three Theses for the Space Renaissance* (Privately published, 2011).

Edward Goldsmith, Robert Allen, Michael Allaby, John Davoll, and Sam Lawrence, "Blueprint for Survival," *The Ecologist* 2, no. 1 (September 14, 1972).

R. Murphy, *Rationality and Nature: A Sociological Inquiry into a Changing Relationship* (Boulder, CO: West View Press, 1994), chapters 1-5 and 9.

G. K. O'Neill, "The Colonisation of Space." *Physics Today* 27, no. 9 (1974): 32-40.

### **Related Links**

Socioastronomy homepage: [www.socioastronomy.webs.com](http://www.socioastronomy.webs.com)

Space Renaissance International: [www.spacerenaissance.org](http://www.spacerenaissance.org)

### **Kindle publications: Stephanie Lynne Thorburn**

Stephanie L. Thorburn, *The Astrosociological Imagination*, Kindle edition, 2012. See [www.amazon.co.uk/Astrosociological-Imagination-Renaissance-Initiative-ebook/dp/B007XUKSP2/ref=sr\\_1\\_4?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1345629476&sr=1-4](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Astrosociological-Imagination-Renaissance-Initiative-ebook/dp/B007XUKSP2/ref=sr_1_4?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1345629476&sr=1-4)

Stephanie L. Thorburn, "Consciousness, Human Enigma & Parapsychology," Volume 1 from: *Human Enigma and the Human Sciences*. Kindle series 2012. Chapter 5 discusses the Space Renaissance, Prof. Gerard O'Neill, and the space advocacy

movement. See [www.amazon.co.uk/Consciousness-Enigma-Parapsychology-Volume-ebook/dp/B008Y11Y3Y/ref=ntt\\_at\\_ep\\_dpt\\_1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Consciousness-Enigma-Parapsychology-Volume-ebook/dp/B008Y11Y3Y/ref=ntt_at_ep_dpt_1)

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**About the Author:** Stephanie Lynne Thorburn is a freelance writer, researcher and alternative therapist with an interest in holistic health. She writes features primarily focused on music and nascent areas of social science, including Sociology, especially Environmental Sociology and Parapsychology. She holds an MA in Sociology: Qualitative Research from Goldsmiths College, London, UK and a combined honours degree in Sociology Psychology from City University, London. Stephanie has undertaken a range of vocational diplomas including Graphic Arts (UKCHT), Parapsychology, and Computing with distinctions. She is a fellow of the Institute for Meridian Psychotherapy and Associated Complementary Therapies and is on the Board of Editors of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*.

Stephanie has freelanced extensively for press, especially the online news journal Los Angeles Chronicle and PR-Inside.com. She assisted on the Space Renaissance Initiative Board of Directors in 2010.

Over time, Stephanie Lynne has authored a series of music related eBooks, notably *Incendiary Soul*, a succinct biography of the Sales Brothers and *Blues Scholars*, a compendium eBook of her features on blues greats including Robert Johnson and John Lee Hooker. Ongoing academic works include her continuing postgraduate published papers, *The Astrosociological Imagination* and *Primordial Essences*, a book on creative arts and energy healing (recently a top-ranked text on Amazon KDP select). She edits her own avant-garde webzine “Nuance”. Currently Stephanie Lynne is working on an independent research project via prior publication, utilising sociological discourse analytical methods. For up-to date news and publications, see [www.stephaniethorburn.webs.com](http://www.stephaniethorburn.webs.com)



**Editor's Note:** Kepler Space Institute welcomes Stephanie Lynne Thorburn as a young researcher and author who has been active in the Space Renaissance International (SRI). Her work for the sociological future of humans in Space is a valuable contribution to our Issue #1 of the *Journal of Space Philosophy*. *Bob Krone, PhD.*

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