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Marking territory in the infinite

Speculating on the implications of flags in space—By Taylor R. Genovese

Over the past few weeks there has been a lot of discussion and media attention about the [International Flag of Planet Earth](#). A student project from a Swedish design school that proposes a universal flag that would represent the entirety of planet Earth, the creator, in all likelihood, did not create this project with theoretical interplanetary politics in mind. That being said, as an anthropologist interested in outer space, I was immediately struck by the implications of taking such a flag off of our planet—further solidifying in my mind the argument that anthropology has a justifiable place in every discipline!

The sentiment underlying the International Flag of Planet Earth is that all humans should think of themselves as a part of a global, borderless community. However, there seems to be a disturbing colonialist trend in the media that suggests this flag should be used to lay claim as humans begin to travel to other worlds. Some argue that the proposition of this flag is a step forward—a breaking down of the oxymoronic idea of nationalism in outer space. Others, however, have interpreted it as furthering an imperialist, hyper-capitalist philosophy in the cosmos. For example, an article on The Verge used explicitly colonialist language in their reporting of this project—their headline was “This is the flag we’ll plant when we conquer an alien planet.” Although this may be facetious, it’s certainly not subtle.

It should be made clear that I am not writing this article to condemn space migration in totality. This article addresses only an infinitesimal fraction of what global and interplanetary politics may consist of, and is meant to contribute to a wider dialogue on the anthropology of outer space. The unfortunate future of the human species points only to extinction if we do not begin creating permanent habitations off-world. My hope is to remove the rose tint and romanticism of space travel and create a realistic conversation about how current neoliberal philosophies could hurt our future when we leave Earth.

Historically, flags have been used globally as symbolic tools of conquest in order to enforce socio-cultural unity. Although the earliest example of flags as a symbol can be traced back to ca. 3000 BCE in Iran, the modern idea of a flag—that is, a piece of graphically designed fabric attached to a pole—became widespread during the ancient Roman era. The military standard used to identify Roman legions was called a vexillum (today, as a consequence, the scientific field of flag study is called vexillology). From that point onward, flags have primarily been utilized as military tools: signaling across long distances, identifying units and affiliation, and claiming lands. The colonialist tradition of raising your flag within a foreign land in order to lay claim has signaled ownership and expedited the extraction of resources for imperial powers. Many lives have been sacrificed in order to fly a flag. During World War II, the forces of both the United States and the Soviet Union conducted missions with one of the primary purposes being the raising of a flag. The iconic photographs from the Americans on Iwo Jima and the Soviets on the roof of the Reichstag illustrate the significance—and willingness to have troops killed—that countries place on erecting flags. The question becomes: is it worth sacrificing even a single life in order to put up a flag? Furthermore, do we really want to continue this uneasy tradition by planting a representation of a troubled world on another celestial body?

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Anthropologist David Graeber has described the current global economy as “kamikaze capitalism” because bureaucrats and ruling parties have no problem destroying themselves as long as they are able to silence or destroy their critics. Bringing this economic philosophy to the stars is a dangerous path and—as we can see from the recent US legislation allowing private corporations to keep any resource they are able to mine off of asteroids—is one that is already being tread. All paths to outer space seem to be pointing towards privatization. While this is not intrinsically detrimental, the elements of direct democracy and justice are being left out of the conversation. We are in danger of continuing a tradition of ignoring the suffering of the majority of Earth’s population and neglecting the well-being of our planet itself. These issues would not simply cease because we leave Earth— they will continue to arise unless we can think of different approaches to space migration and economics. These are the possible consequences of allowing only the wealthy elite or companies whose sole purpose is accumulation of capital to enter space.

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This critique is looking at a small cog within the massive conceptual machine of space travel and its subsequent politics. I’m speculating on space migration through the lens of modern globalized capitalism because I believe a conversation is needed—especially one that includes the public and the social sciences, as this International Flag project shows. Too often, only the “hard” sciences are consulted anytime there is a discussion about outer space. It is sometimes easy to forget that we can have the technology fully developed and ready to launch, but if we cannot live with one another—and more importantly, understand one another—peacefully, the experiment of living in space will fail. We need to look to anthropology, and other social sciences, to shed light on

these issues.

In engaging with this interdisciplinary field between social science and space science, I am standing on the shoulders of giants. The field (although not formalized) extends back decades and continues contemporarily. While I am passionate about this area of study, I am aware of the limitations of my approach. I can only contribute to this topic from the perspective of a white, straight, Western male. Questions that pop into my head as I consider the complexities of human space travel include: What is the feminist view of space travel? What is the LGBTQ perspective? How might Indigenous cultures, which include traditional understandings of the relationship between people and the Earth, reflect on space travel or migration? What lessons can be drawn from colonial, post-colonial, or anarchist theory in contributing to this conversation? I am definitely a newcomer to the field and would like to hear from those who have been active in studying this topic for much longer than I have.

All this may seem like it has very little to do with a design project but one must not forget the symbolism behind a flag. Flags are representative of qualities and philosophies of the people that use them. I always found it hypocritical that the American astronauts planted the US flag on the moon during the Apollo missions, while simultaneously making exaggerated statements about the mission's importance to all of humankind. However, I find it interesting—if not karmic—that today the flags that are flying on the moon are bleached white (the international color of peace and surrender). The harsh environment of the moon has changed their very meaning. While we certainly need to pursue the migration of humans into space, we should aim to pursue it with a critical approach in order to not make the same mistakes we are currently making on Earth. I would be lying if I said I did not want to journey into outer space. In fact, I held steadfast to my dream of becoming an astronaut until high school, when the reality that I was atrocious at mathematics set in. However, if I ever enter space, I want to do so without flags. If you look at living in space metaphysically, the existence of flags outside of our planet seems unnecessary. Perhaps it is because outer space is so expansive; why would we feel the need to mark our territory in a place that is infinite? More to the point, what would we be trying to signal by doing so? When we do venture into the stars, let's do it with the spirit of equality, justice and mutual-aid, not with the current institutional conventions conveyed by our use of a flag.

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