

Sovereignty and the UFO

Alexander Wendt *The Ohio State University*

Raymond Duvall *University of Minnesota*

Modern sovereignty is anthropocentric, constituted and organized by reference to human beings alone. Although a metaphysical assumption, anthropocentrism is of immense practical import, enabling modern states to command loyalty and resources from their subjects in pursuit of political projects. It has limits, however, which are brought clearly into view by the authoritative taboo on taking UFOs seriously. UFOs have never been systematically investigated by science or the state, because it is assumed to be known that none are extraterrestrial. Yet in fact this is not known, which makes the UFO taboo puzzling given the ET possibility. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, the puzzle is explained by the functional imperatives of anthropocentric sovereignty, which cannot decide a UFO exception to anthropocentrism while preserving the ability to make such a decision. The UFO can be “known” only by not asking what it is.

Keywords: *sovereignty; UFOs; state of exception; undecidability; epistemology of ignorance; Agamben*

An Anthropocentric Sovereignty

Few ideas today are as contested as sovereignty, in theory or in practice. In sovereignty theory scholars disagree about almost everything—what sovereignty is and where it resides, how it relates to law, whether it is divisible, how its subjects and objects are constituted, and whether it is being transformed in late modernity. These debates are mirrored in contemporary practice, where struggles for self-determination and territorial revisionism have generated among the bitterest conflicts in modern times.

Throughout this contestation, however, one thing is taken for granted: sovereignty is the province of humans alone. Animals and Nature are assumed to lack the cognitive capacity and/or subjectivity to be sovereign; and while God might have ultimate sovereignty, even most religious fundamentalists grant that it is not exercised directly in the temporal world. When sovereignty is contested today, therefore, it is always and only among humans, horizontally so to speak, rather than vertically with Nature or God. In this way modern sovereignty is anthropocentric, or

constituted and organized by reference to human beings alone.¹ Humans live within physical constraints, but are solely responsible for deciding their norms and practices under those constraints. Despite the wide variety of institutional forms taken by sovereignty today, they are homologous in this fundamental respect.

Anthropocentric sovereignty might seem necessary; after all, who else, besides humans, might rule? Nevertheless, historically sovereignty was less anthropocentric. For millennia Nature and the gods were thought to have causal powers and subjectivities that enabled them to share sovereignty with humans, if not exercise dominion outright.² Authoritative belief in non-human sovereignties was given up only after long and bitter struggle about the “borders of the social world,” in which who/what could be sovereign depends on who/what should be included in society.³ In modernity God and Nature are excluded, although in this exclusion they are also reincluded as the domesticated Other. Thus, while no longer temporally sovereign, God is included today through people who are seen to speak on Her behalf. And while Nature has been disenchanted, stripped of its subjectivity, it is re-included as object in the human world. These inclusive exclusions, however, reinforce the assumption that humans alone can be sovereign. In this light anthropocentric sovereignty must be seen as a contingent historical achievement, not just a requirement of common sense. Indeed, it is a metaphysical achievement, since it is in anthropocentric terms that humans today understand their place in the physical world. Thus operates what Giorgio Agamben calls the “anthropological machine.”⁴

In some areas this metaphysics admittedly is contested. Suggestions of animal consciousness fuel calls for animal rights, for example, and advocates of “Intelligent Design”

¹ Anthropocentrism need not mean *all* human beings, since historically many physical humans were not considered humans socially. cf. Philip Almond, “Adam, Pre-Adamites, and Extra-Terrestrial Beings in Early Modern Europe,” *Journal of Religious History* 30 (2006): 163-74.

² Majid Yar, “From Nature to History, and Back Again: Blumenberg, Strauss and the Hobbesian Community,” *History of the Human Sciences* 15 (2002): 53-73.

³ Gesa Lindemann, “The Analysis of the Borders of the Social World,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 35 (2005): 69-98.

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

think God is necessary to explain Nature's complexity. Yet, such challenges do not threaten the principle that *sovereignty*, the capacity to decide the norm and exception to it, must necessarily be human. Animals or Nature might deserve rights, but humans will decide that; and even Intelligent Designers do not claim that God exercises temporal sovereignty. With respect to sovereignty, at least, anthropocentrism is taken to be common sense, even in political theory, where it is rarely problematized.⁵

This "common sense" is nevertheless of immense practical significance in the mobilization of power and violence for political projects. Modern systems of rule are able to command exceptional loyalty and resources from their subjects on the shared assumption that the only potential sovereigns are human. Imagine a counterfactual world in which God visibly materialized (as in the Christians' "Second Coming," for example): to whom would people give their loyalty, and could states in their present form survive were such a question politically salient? Anything that challenged anthropocentric sovereignty, it seems, would challenge the foundations of modern rule.

In this article we develop this point and explore its implications for political theory. Specifically, our intent is to highlight and engage critically the limits of anthropocentric sovereignty. In doing so, we seek to contribute to an eclectic line of critical theory of modern rule—if not sovereignty per se—which problematizes its anthropocentrism, a line that connects (however awkwardly and indirectly) Spinozan studies (including Donna Haraway and Gilles Deleuze) to Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Jane Bennett, and others.⁶ We do so through the

⁵ Both the promise and the limits of modern critique are suggested by Jürgen Habermas, "A Conversation about God and World," in *Religion and Rationality*, ed. E. Mendieta (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002), 147-67; and William Connolly, *Why I Am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁶ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (London: Routledge, 1991); Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*; Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973); Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

phenomenon of the Unidentified Flying Object, or “UFO,”⁷ the authoritative disregard for which brings clearly into view the limits of anthropocentric metaphysics.

We proceed in four sections. In the first, we describe an animating puzzle—the “UFO taboo”—in order to set the empirical basis for our theoretical intervention. In the next we make this taboo puzzling through an immanent critique of the authoritative claim that UFOs are not extraterrestrial (ET). Then, in the third section, we solve the puzzle through a theoretical analysis of the metaphysical threat that the UFO poses to anthropocentric sovereignty. We conclude with some implications for theory and practice.

A Puzzling Taboo

On March 30-31, 1990, two Belgian F-16s were scrambled to intercept a large, unidentified object in the night sky over Brussels, which had been observed by a policeman and ground-based radars. The pilots confirmed the target on their radars (never visually) and achieved radar lock three times, but each time it responded with violent turns and altitude changes, later estimated to have imposed gravitational forces of 40gs. In a rare public statement the Belgian defense minister said he could not explain the incident, which remains unexplained today.⁸

One might expect unexplained incidents in NATO airspace to concern the authorities, particularly given that since 1947 over 100,000 UFOs have been reported worldwide, many by militaries.⁹ However, neither the scientific community nor states have made serious efforts to identify them, the vast majority remaining completely uninvestigated. The science of UFOs is minuscule and deeply marginalized. Although many scientists think privately that UFOs deserve study,¹⁰ there are no opportunities or incentives to do it. With almost no meaningful variation,

⁷ We refer to “the” UFO, because that is how UFOs are treated in modern rule, as singular phenomenon. As known from subsequent identifications, however, UFOs are in fact not all the same.

⁸ The official report by the Belgian Air Force is at www.ufoevidence.org/documents/doc408.htm.

⁹ In the literature, 100,000 is a stylized figure since there is no complete database.

¹⁰ Peter Sturrock, “Report on a Survey of the Membership of the American Astronomical Society Concerning the UFO Problem,” *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 8 (1994): 1-45.

states—all 190 of them—have been notably uninterested as well.¹¹ A few have gone through the motions of studying individual cases, but with even fewer exceptions these inquiries have been neither objective nor systematic, and no state has actually looked for UFOs to discover larger patterns.¹² For both science and the state, it seems, the UFO is not an “object” at all, but a non-object, something not just unidentified but unseen and thus ignored.¹³

The authoritative disregard of UFOs goes further, however, to active denial of their object status. Ufology is decried as a pseudo-science that threatens the foundations of scientific authority,¹⁴ and the few scientists who have taken a public interest in UFOs have done so at considerable cost. For their part, states have actively dismissed “belief” in UFOs as irrational (as in, “do you believe in UFOs?”), while maintaining considerable secrecy about their own

¹¹ We lack the space to defend this key empirical assumption of our argument. Suffice it to say that although there is some variation in UFO secrecy, in our view the only serious potential exception to the taboo itself is France (although there have been suggestions the Soviet Union became interested in UFOs in the last days of the regime). Since 1977 the French government has quietly funded study on selected UFO cases; see Gildas Bourdais, “The Death and Rebirth of Official French UFO Studies,” *International UFO Reporter* 31 (2007): 12-16. This falls far short of a systematic effort to find out what UFOs are, but in light of our argument the French case (and perhaps Soviet) would be worth examining in detail.

¹² The only nominally scientific study of UFOs in the United States was the politicized and methodologically flawed 1969 Condon Report; Edward Condon and Daniel Gillmor, eds., *Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969). For critiques of the Report see David Saunders and Roger Harkins, *UFOs? Yes! Where the Condon Committee Went Wrong* (New York: World Publishing, 1968); J. Allen Hynek, *The UFO Experience* (New York: Doubleday, 1975); Wendt, Duvall / Sovereignty and the UFO 629 (New York: Marlowe, 1972); James MacDonald, “Science in Default: Twenty-two Years of Inadequate UFO Investigations,” in *UFOs—A Scientific Debate*, ed. Carl Sagan and Thornton Page (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972), 52-122; and Peter Sturrock, “An Analysis of the Condon Report on the Colorado UFO Project,” *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 1 (1987): 75-100.

¹³ cf. Lorraine Daston, ed., *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁴ The orthodoxy’s attitude toward ufology is typified by the *Skeptical Inquirer* (circulation: 35,000), published by the aptly named “CSICOP,” or Committee for the Scientific Investigation of the Claims of the Paranormal. See T. Pinch and H. M. Collins, “Private Science and Public Knowledge,” *Social Studies of Science* 14 (1984): 521-48.

reports.¹⁵ This leading role of the state distinguishes UFOs from other anomalies, scientific resistance to which is typically explained sociologically.¹⁶ UFO denial appears to be as much political as sociological— more like Galileo’s ideas were political for the Catholic Church than like the once ridiculed theory of continental drift. In short, considerable *work* goes into ignoring UFOs, constituting them as objects only of ridicule and scorn. To that extent one may speak of a “UFO taboo,” a prohibition in the authoritative public sphere on taking UFOs seriously, or “thou shalt not try very hard to find out what UFOs are.”¹⁷

Still, for modern elites it is unnecessary to study UFOs, because they are known to have conventional—i.e., non-ET—explanations, whether hoaxes, rare atmospheric phenomena, instrument malfunction, witness mistakes, or secret government technologies. Members of the general public might *believe* that UFOs are ETs, but authoritatively We *know* they are not. In the next section we challenge this claim to knowledge. Not by arguing that UFOs are ETs, since we have no idea what UFOs are—which are, after all, *unidentified*. But that is precisely the point. Scientifically, human beings do not know that all UFOs have conventional explanations, but instead remain ignorant.

In this light a UFO taboo appears quite puzzling. First, if any UFOs were discovered to be ETs it would be one of the most important events in human history, making it rational to investigate even a remote possibility. It was just such reasoning that led the U.S. government to fund the Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI), which looks for signs of life around distant stars. With no evidence whatsoever for such life, why not study UFOs, which are close by

¹⁵ On the U.S. government’s involvement with the UFO issue see David Jacobs, *The UFO Controversy in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), and Richard Dolan, *UFOs and the National Security State* (Rochester, NY: Keyhole, 2000).

¹⁶ See Ernest Hook, ed., *Prematurity in Scientific Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Note that the taboo is not necessarily on publicity; although official secrecy about UFOs is pervasive, it is a contingent rather than essential feature of the taboo (also see note 74 below). As for the term *taboo*, if one may speak of a spectrum the UFO taboo seems deeper than the “nuclear taboo” in international politics (Nina Tannenwald, “The Nuclear Taboo,” *International Organization* 53 [1999]: 433-68), but shallower than the paradigmatic anthropological cases of incest or cannibalism. cf. Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Deviance and Moral Boundaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

and leave evidence?¹⁸ Second, states seem eager to “securitize” all manner of threats to their societies or their rule.¹⁹ Securitization often enables the expansion of state power; why not then securitize UFOs, which offer unprecedented possibilities in this respect? And finally, there is simple scientific curiosity: why *not* study UFOs, just like human beings study everything else? At least something interesting might be learned about Nature. Notwithstanding these compelling reasons to identify UFOs, however, modern authorities have not seriously tried to do so. This suggests that UFO ignorance is not simply a gap in our knowledge, like the cure for cancer, but something actively reproduced by taboo.

Taking this taboo as a symptom, following Nancy Tuana,²⁰ we inquire into the “epistemology of [UFO] ignorance,” or the production of (un)knowledge about UFOs and its significance for modern rule. We are particularly interested here in the role of the state, while recognizing the story is also about science.²¹ Thus, our puzzle is not the familiar question of ufology, “What are UFOs?” but, “Why are they dismissed by the authorities?” Why is human ignorance not only unacknowledged, but so emphatically denied? In short, why a *taboo*? These are questions of social rather than physical science, and do not presuppose that any UFOs are ETs. Only that they might be.

A Key Premise and the Argument in Short

First the argument. Adapting ideas from Giorgio Agamben, supplemented by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, we argue that the UFO taboo is functionally necessitated by the anthropocentric metaphysics of modern sovereignty. Modern rule typically works less through

¹⁸ Indeed, Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) advocates have been at the forefront of UFO skepticism. For a critique of SETI see Alex Ellery, Allen Tough, and David Darling, “SETI—A Scientific Critique and a Proposal for Further Observational Modes,” *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* 56 (2003): 262-87.

¹⁹ On securitization see Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, eds., *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

²⁰ Nancy Tuana, “Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance,” *Hypatia* 19 (2004): 194-232; and Tuana, “The Speculum of Ignorance,” *Hypatia* 21 (2006): 1-19.

²¹ For the latter see especially Ron Westrum, “Social Intelligence about Anomalies: The Case of UFOs,” *Social Studies of Science* 7 (1977): 271-302.

sovereign coercion than through biopolitics, governing the conditions of life itself.²² In this liberal apparatus of security, power flows primarily from the deployment of specialized knowledges for the regularization of populations, rather than from the ability to kill. But when such regimes of governmentality are threatened, the traditional face of the state,²³ its sovereign power, comes to the fore: the ability to determine when norms and law should be suspended—in Carl Schmitt’s terms, to “decide the exception.”²⁴

The UFO compels decision because it exceeds modern governmentality, but we argue that the decision cannot be made. The reason is that modern decision presupposes anthropocentrism, which is threatened metaphysically by the possibility that UFOs might be ETs. As such, genuine UFO ignorance cannot be acknowledged without calling modern sovereignty itself into question. This puts the problem of normalizing the UFO back onto governmentality, where it can be “known” only without trying to find out what it is—through a taboo. The UFO, in short, is a previously unacknowledged site of contestation in an ongoing historical project to constitute sovereignty in anthropocentric terms. Importantly, our argument here is structural rather than agentic.²⁵ We are not saying the authorities are hiding The Truth about UFOs, much less that it is ET. We are saying they cannot ask the question.

Although we draw on theorists not associated with epistemic realism, a key premise of our argument is that a critical theorization of the UFO taboo in relation to modern rule is possible only if it includes a realist moment, which grants to things-in-themselves (here the UFO) the power to affect rational belief. To see why, consider Jodi Dean’s otherwise excellent *Aliens in America*, one of the few social scientific works to treat UFOs as anything more than figments of over-active imaginations.²⁶ Like us, Dean emphasizes that it is not known what UFOs are, leaving

²² Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* (New York: Picador, 2003).

²³ Michel Foucault, “Governmentality,” *Ideology and Consciousness* 6 (1979): 5-21.

²⁴ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); also see Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

²⁵ cf. Albert Harrison and James Thomas, “The Kennedy Assassination, Unidentified Flying Objects, and Other Conspiracies,” *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 14 (1997): 113-28.

²⁶ Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); see also Brenda Denzler, *The Lure of the Edge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); and Debbora Battaglia, ed., *E.T. Culture* (Durham, NC:

open the ET possibility. But for her the significance of this ignorance is to exemplify the postmodern breakdown of all modern certainties, such that scientific truth is now everywhere a “fugitive”—not that it might be overcome by considering, scientifically, the reality of UFOs.

In the UFO context such anti-realism is problematic, since its political effect is ironically to reinforce the skeptical orthodoxy: if UFOs cannot be known scientifically then why bother study them? As realist institutions, science and the modern state do not concern themselves with what cannot be known scientifically. For example, whatever their religious beliefs, social scientists always study religion as “methodological atheists,” assuming that God plays no causal role in the material world. Anything else would be considered irrational today; as Jürgen Habermas puts it, “a philosophy that oversteps the bounds of methodological atheism loses its philosophical seriousness.”²⁷ By not allowing that UFOs *might* be knowable scientifically, therefore, Dean implicitly embraces a kind of methodological atheism about UFOs, which as with God shifts attention to human representations of the UFO, not its reality.

Yet UFOs are different than God in one key respect: many leave physical traces on radar and film, which suggests they are natural rather than supernatural phenomena and thus amenable in principle to scientific investigation. Since authoritative discourse in effect denies this by treating UFOs as an irrational belief, a realist moment is necessary to call this discourse fully into question. Interestingly, therefore, in contrast to their usual antagonism, in the UFO context science would *be* critical theory. In this light Dean’s claim that UFOs are unknowable appears anthropocentrically monological. It might be that We, talking among ourselves, cannot know what UFOs are, but any “They” probably have a good idea, and the only way to remain open to

Duke University Press, 2005). In contrast, and more typical of authoritative attitudes in social science, recent research in psychology on “alien abductions” dismisses the ET hypothesis *a priori*; see Susan Clancy, *Abducted* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and, for an alternative view, David Jacobs, ed., *UFOs and Abductions* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000).

²⁷ Habermas, “A Conversation about God and World,” 160; also see Austin Harrington, “Habermas’s Theological Turn?,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37 (2007): 45-61. For a provocative critique of methodological atheism see Douglas Porpora, “Methodological Atheism, Methodological Agnosticism, and Religious Experience,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 36 (2006): 57-75.

that dialogical potential is to consider the reality of the UFO itself.²⁸ Failure to do so merely reaffirms the UFO taboo.

In foregrounding the realist moment in our analysis we mean not to foreclose *a priori* the possibility that UFOs can be known scientifically; however, we make no claim that they necessarily would be known if only they were studied. Upon close inspection many UFOs do turn out to have conventional explanations, but there is a hard core of cases, perhaps 25 to 30 percent, that seem to resist such explanations, and their reality may indeed be humanly unknowable—although without systematic inquiry we cannot say. Thus, and importantly, our overarching position here is one of methodological agnosticism rather than realism, which mitigates the potential for epistemological conflict with the non-realist political theorists we draw upon below.²⁹ Nevertheless, in the context of natural phenomena like UFOs agnosticism can itself become dogma if not put to the test, which requires adopting a realist stance at least instrumentally or “strategically,” and seeing what happens.³⁰ This justifies acting *as if* the UFO is knowable, while recognizing that it might ultimately exceed human grasp.

Proving Our Ignorance

Our argument is that UFO ignorance is political rather than scientific. To motivate this argument, however, we first need to critique UFO “skepticism” as science.³¹ Science derives its authority from its claim to discover, before politics, objective facts about the world. Since today these putative facts include that UFOs are not ETs, we have to show that this fact is not actually scientific. We consider very briefly the strongest arguments for UFO skepticism and show that

²⁸ cf. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*; and Marguerite La Caze, “The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity,” *Hypatia* 17 (2002): 1-19.

²⁹ Porpora, “Methodological Atheism”; and Sven Rosenkranz, “Agnosticism as a Third Stance,” *Mind* 116 (2007): 55-104.

³⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “In a Word: Interview,” in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1-24.

³¹ The widely used phrase is misleading, however, because “skepticism” should imply doubt but openness, whereas in UFO discourse it has been deformed into positive denial.

none justifies rejection of the ET hypothesis (ETH). Indeed, they do not come close.³² It is *not* known, scientifically, that UFOs are not ETs, and to reject the ETH is therefore to risk a Type II error in statistics, or rejecting a true explanation. Of course, this does not mean that UFOs are ETs, either (inviting a Type I error), but it shifts the burden of proof onto skeptics to show that a Type II error has not been made.³³ The UFO taboo is then puzzling, and open to political critique.

“There is No Evidence”

Echoing Hume’s discussion of miracles, Carl Sagan once said about UFOs that “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence,” and the empirical evidence for the ETH is certainly not that. If there is any ET signal in the noise of UFO reports it is very weak. However, some evidence warrants reasonable doubt.

Physical evidence. Usually the first objection to the ETH is the lack of direct physical evidence of alien presence. Some ET believers contest this, claiming that the U.S. government is hiding wreckage from a 1947 crash at Roswell, New Mexico, but such claims are based on conspiracy theories that we shall set aside here. Not because they are necessarily wrong (although they cannot be falsified in the present context of UFO secrecy), but because like UFO skepticism they are anthropocentric, only now we know that UFOs *are* ETs but “They” (the government) aren’t telling. Such an assumption leads critique toward issues of official secrecy and away from the absence of systematic study, which is the real puzzle. In our view secrecy is a symptom of the UFO taboo, not its heart.

While there is no direct physical evidence for the ETH, however, there is considerable *indirect* physical evidence for it, in the form of UFO anomalies that lack apparent conventional explanations—and for which ETs are therefore one possibility.³⁴ These anomalies take four

³² See especially Jacques Vallee and Janine Vallee, *Challenge to Science: The UFO Enigma* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1966); McDonald, “Science in Default”; Hynek, *The UFO Experience*; and Michael Swords, “Science and the Extraterrestrial Hypothesis in Ufology,” *Journal of UFO Studies* 1 (1989): 67-102.

³³ cf. John Lemons, Kristin Shrader-Frechette, and Carl Cranor, “The Precautionary Principle: Scientific Uncertainty and Type I and Type II Errors,” *Foundations of Science* 2 (1997): 207-36.

³⁴ Illobrand von Ludwiger, *Best UFO Cases—Europe* (Las Vegas, NV: National Institute for Discovery Science, 1998); and Peter Sturrock, *The UFO Enigma* (New York: Warner Books, 1999).

forms: ground traces, electro-magnetic interference with aircraft and motor vehicles, photographs and videos, and radar sightings like the Belgian F-16 case. Such anomalies cannot be dismissed simply because they are only indirect evidence for ETs, since science relies heavily on such evidence, as in the recent discovery of over 300 extra-solar planets (and counting).³⁵ For if UFO anomalies are not potentially ETs, what else are they?

Testimonial evidence. Most UFO reports consist primarily of eyewitness testimony. Although all observation is in a sense testimonial, by itself testimony cannot ground a scientific claim unless it can be replicated independently, which UFO testimony cannot. Such testimony is problematic in other respects as well. It reports seemingly impossible things, much is of poor quality, witnesses may have incentives to lie, honest observers may lack knowledge, and even experts can make mistakes. In view of these problems skeptics dismiss UFO testimony as meaningless.

Problems notwithstanding, this conclusion is unwarranted. First, testimony should not be dismissed lightly, since none of us can verify for ourselves even a fraction of the knowledge we take for granted.³⁶ In both law and social science, testimony has considerable epistemic weight in determining the facts. While sometimes wrong, given its importance in society, testimony is rejected only if there are strong reasons to do so. Second, there is a very large volume of UFO testimony, with some events witnessed by literally thousands of people. Third, some of these people were “expert witnesses” —civilian and military pilots, air traffic controllers, astronauts, astronomers, and other scientists. Finally, some of this testimony is corroborated by physical evidence, as in “radar/visual” cases.

In short, the empirical evidence alone does not warrant rejecting the ETH. It does not warrant acceptance either, but this sets the bar too high. The question today is not “Are UFOs ETs?” but “Is there enough evidence they *might* be to warrant systematic study?” By demanding proof of ETs first, skeptics foreclose the question altogether.

³⁵ Peter Kosso, “Detecting Extrasolar Planets,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 37 (2006): 224-36.

³⁶ Peter Lipton, “The Epistemology of Testimony,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 29 (1998): 1-31.

“It Can’t Be True”

Given the inconclusiveness of the empirical record, UFO skepticism ultimately rests on an *a priori* theoretical conviction that ET visitation is impossible: “It can’t be true, therefore it isn’t.” Skeptics offer four main arguments to this effect.

“*We are alone.*” Philosophers have long debated whether life exists beyond Earth,³⁷ but the debate has lately intensified in response to empirical discoveries like extra-solar planets, water on Mars, and “extremophile” organisms back home. A thriving discipline of astrobiology has emerged, and the view that life exists elsewhere seems poised to become scientific orthodoxy. However, this does not mean that (what humans consider) *intelligent* life exists. The only evidence of that, human beings, proves merely that intelligence like ours is possible, not probable. The Darwinian “Rare Earth hypothesis” holds that because evolution is a contingent process, human intelligence is a random accident, and the chances of finding it elsewhere are therefore essentially zero.³⁸

This is a serious argument, but there is a serious argument on the other side too, going on within evolutionary theory itself, where the neo-Darwinian orthodoxy is today being challenged by complexity theorists.³⁹ Rather than contingency and randomness, complexity theory highlights processes of selforganization in Nature which tend toward more complex organisms. If the “law of increasing complexity” is correct then intelligent life might actually be common in the universe. Either way, today it is simply not known.

“*They can’t get here.*” Even if intelligent life is common, skeptics argue it is too far away to get here. Relativity theory says nothing can travel faster than the speed of light (186,000 miles per second). Lower speeds impose a temporal constraint on ET visitation: at .001 percent of light speed, or 66,960 miles per hour—already far beyond current human capabilities—it would take 4,500 Earth years for ETs to arrive from the nearest star. Higher speeds, in turn, impose a cost

³⁷ Michael Crowe, *The Extraterrestrial Life Debate, 1750-1900* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³⁸ Peter Ward and David Brownlee, *Rare Earth* (New York: Copernicus Books, 2000).

³⁹ Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1995).

and energy constraint: to approximate light speed a spaceship would need to use more energy than is presently consumed in an entire year on Earth.

Physical constraints on inter-stellar travel are often seen as the ultimate reason to reject the ETH, but are they decisive? Computer simulations suggest that even at speeds well below light the colonization wave-fronts of any expanding ET civilizations should have reached Earth long ago.⁴⁰ How long ago depends on what assumptions are made, but even pessimistic ones yield ET encounters with Earth within 100 million years, barely a blip in cosmic terms. In short, ETs *should* be here, which prompts the famous “Fermi Paradox,” “Where are They?”⁴¹

Additionally, there are growing, if still highly speculative, doubts that the speed of light is truly an absolute barrier.⁴² Wormholes—themselves predicted by relativity theory—are tunnels through space-time that would immensely shorten the distances between stars. And then there is the possibility of “warp drive,” or engineering the vacuum around a spaceship, enabling it to skip over space without time dilation.⁴³ Speculative as these ideas are, their scientific basis is sufficiently sound that research is currently being funded through the “Breakthrough Propulsion Program” at NASA. They may prove to be wrong or beyond human capacity. But if humans are imagining them just 300 years from our scientific revolution, what might ETs 3,000 years, much less 3,000,000, from theirs be imagining?

“*They would land on the White House lawn.*” If ETs came all this way to see us, why don’t they land on the White House lawn and introduce themselves? After all, if humans encounter intelligent life in our own space exploration, that’s what *we* would do. On this view, the fact that ETs have not is evidence they are not here. But is it? Again there is debate. The “embargo” or “zoo hypothesis” suggests that ETs might have quarantined Earth as a wildlife

⁴⁰ Martyn Fogg, “Temporal Aspects of the Interaction Among the First Galactic Civilizations,” *Icarus* 69 (1987): 370-84.

⁴¹ Stephen Webb, *Where is Everybody?* (New York: Copernicus Books, 2002).

⁴² J. Deardorff, B. Haisch, B. Maccabee, and H. E. Puthoff, “Inflation-Theory Implications for Extraterrestrial Visitation,” *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* 58 (2005): 43-50.

⁴³ H. E. Puthoff, S. R. Little, and M. Ibison, “Engineering the Zero-Point Field and Polarizable Vacuum for Interstellar Flight,” *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* 55 (2002): 137-44.

preserve.⁴⁴ Or, ETs might be interested in contact, but want humans to discover their presence ourselves to avert a violent shock to our civilization. Finally, even humans might not land on the White House lawn. In the popular science fiction show *Star Trek*, the Federation maintains a policy of “non-interference” toward lower life forms; might not real space-faring humans adopt a similar policy? Whatever the answer, debates about ET intentions have no scientific basis.

“*We would know.*” The last skeptical argument is an appeal to human authority: with its panoptic surveillance of the skies the modern state would know by now if ETs were here. Of course, conspiracy theorists think the state does know, but there is no need to embrace this debatable proposition to call the skeptical argument into question. First, skepticism assumes an ability to know the UFO that may be unwarranted. If ETs have the capability to visit Earth, then they may be able to limit knowledge of their presence. Second, no authority has ever actually *looked* for UFOs, the effect of which on what is seen should not be under-estimated. Finally, in view of pervasive UFO secrecy more is probably known about them than is publicly acknowledged. This does not mean what is known is ET, but it could provide further reason to think so.

Given the stakes, ignoring UFOs only makes sense if human beings can be certain they are not ETs. We have shown there is more than reasonable doubt: the ETH cannot be rejected without significant risk of Type II error. What is *actually* known about UFOs is that we have no idea what they are, including whether they are alien; far from proving UFO skepticism, science proves its ignorance. With so little science on either side, therefore, the UFO controversy has been essentially theological, pitting ET believers against unbelievers. In this fight, the unbelievers have secured the authority of science, giving them decisive advantage. Their views are taken as fact, while those of believers and agnostics are dismissed as irrational belief. Since science does not actually justify rejecting the ETH, why would unbelief be so hegemonic? The UFO taboo is puzzling, we submit, and demands a deeper look at how its “knowledge” is produced.

⁴⁴ John Ball, “The Zoo Hypothesis,” *Icarus* 19 (1973): 347-49; J. Deardorff, “Examination of the Embargo Hypothesis as an Explanation for the Great Silence,” *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* 40 (1987): 373-79.

Anthropocentrism and UFO Ignorance

Authoritative insistence on knowing the UFO only through ignorance is necessitated by the threat it poses to the anthropocentric metaphysics of modern rule. Within modern rule we focus specifically on sovereignty, but in our conceptualization sovereignty cannot be understood without reference to governmentality, which sets the normative context of sovereign decision. Thus, in what follows we both begin and end with governmentality, while keeping our remarks to a minimum in order to focus on the metaphysics of sovereignty per se. In doing so we recognize that the relationship between governmentality and sovereignty is contested among political theorists. Focused on the specific problem of the UFO taboo, we do not take sides in this debate except to accept the view that the two aspects of modern rule are intertwined.

Governmentality, Sovereignty, and the Exception

In thinking about the problem of rule, political scientists have traditionally focused on either individual agents or institutional structures, in both cases treating government as a given object. In contrast, Foucault's concept of governmentality is focused on the "art of governing," understood as the biopolitical "conduct of conduct" for a population of subjects.⁴⁵ Thus, governmentality concerns the specific regime of practices through which the population is constituted and (self-)regularized. "Modern" governmentality marks a shift in discourses of rule away from the state's sovereign power—its ability to take life and/or render it bare—and toward its fostering and regularizing of life in biopolitics. The object of government is no longer simply obedience to the king, but regulating the conditions of life for subjects. To this end biopolitics requires that the conditions of life of the population be made visible and assayed, and practical knowledge be made available to improve them. As a result, with modern governmentality we see the emergence of both panoptic surveillance and numerous specialized discourses—of education, political economy, demography, health, morality, and others—the effect of which is to make populations knowable and subject to the regularization that will make for the "happy life."

A constitutive feature of modern governmentality is that its discourses are scientific, which means that science and the state are today deeply intermeshed. Through science the state

⁴⁵ Foucault, "Governmentality," 11.

makes its subjects and objects known, lending them a facticity that facilitates their regularization, and through the state science acquires institutional support and prestige. Despite this symbiosis, however, there is also an important epistemological difference between the two. Science seeks, but knows it can never fully achieve, “the” truth, defined as an apolitical, objective representation of the world. To this end it relies on norms and practices that produce an evolving, always potentially contested body of knowledge. The state, in contrast, seeks a regime of truth to which its population will reliably adhere. Standards for knowledge in that context privilege stability and normalization over the uncertain path of scientific truth. Although science and the state are allied in the modern UFO regime, we suggest in conclusion that this difference opens space for critical theory and resistance.

Modern governmentality directs attention away from sovereign power and toward the socially diffuse practices by which it is sustained. Yet as Agamben reminds us,⁴⁶ sovereignty remains important, because every regime of governmentality has outsides, even while exceeding the capacity for regularization. This outside is both external, in the form of actors not subject to normalization, and internal, in the form of people’s capacity to do otherwise (hence their need to be “governed”). Ordinarily these limits do not severely threaten modern rule, but some exceed the capacity for regularization.

Schmitt calls such situations “states of exception”: “any severe economic or political disturbance requiring the application of extraordinary measures,” including abrogation of law by those who govern in its name.⁴⁷ Extending and modifying Schmitt’s analysis, Agamben emphasizes a “zone of indistinction” between the juridical order and the state of exception, which is neither fully in nor outside the law. Thus, while sometimes constitutionally recognized, the state of exception is “not a special kind of law,” but necessarily transcends the law.⁴⁸ In Sergei Prozorov’s terms, the state of exception is a “constitutive outside” or “excess” to law that is the latter’s condition of possibility.⁴⁹ As such, for Agamben (if not for Schmitt) a state of exception is

⁴⁶ See also Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*.

⁴⁷ Translator’s note in Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5, footnote 1.

⁴⁸ Agamben, *State of Exception*, 4.

⁴⁹ Sergei Prozorov, “X/Xs: Toward a General Theory of the Exception,” *Alternatives* 30 (2005): 81-112.

always potentially there, even when not actually in force, permanently contaminating the law. On the other hand, the state of exception also belongs to the law, since it is by the latter's limits and/or failure that it is known. States of exception cannot be declared willy-nilly, but must make sense within the regime of truth they would uphold. Thus, law and the exception are co-constitutive rather than mutually exclusive.

"Sovereign is he who decides the exception."⁵⁰ Like the state of exception it decides, sovereignty is both outside and inside law. On the one hand, it is the ability to found and suspend a juridical order. To that extent sovereignty transcends the law, its decisions seeming to come out of nowhere, like a "miracle."⁵¹ In saying this Schmitt emphasizes sovereignty's omnipotence, if not to realize its intentions then at least to decide them. However, even Schmitt recognizes that sovereign decision is not literally a miracle, but has conditions of possibility. Among Agamben's contributions is in showing that those conditions include the very corpus of law that is to be suspended in the decision of the exception. In this way sovereignty is also inside and limited by law.

Anthropocentrism and the Undecidability of the UFO

If the limits of the governmental regime are exposed, the sovereign generally can be counted on to survey and to securitize the threat; that is after all what its sovereignty is for. In this light the UFO is the proverbial dog that didn't bark, a potential threat not only un-securitized but never even properly surveyed. About the UFO, in short, there has been no *decision* as to its status as exception, only an ignoring. The reason, we argue, lies in the triple threat that the UFO poses to modern rule, at once physical, ontological, and metaphysical.

Exceptions presuppose an exterior. Because modern rule is grounded in a scientific worldview that does not recognize the existence of supernatural phenomena, this exterior is normally understood today in purely spatiotemporal terms.⁵² Threats can then take two forms,

⁵⁰ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Agamben, *State of Exception*.

physical threats to life and ontological threats to identity or social being.⁵³ Given sovereignty's need to transform the contingency of decision into taken-for-granted authority, it is only by reference to the intrusion of such threats into its field of visibility that the state of exception can be justified. Importantly, the sovereign cannot decide the terms of its encounters with these intrusions, only their status as exception.

On one level the UFO is a traditional spatio-temporal threat, because one of the possibilities that we must countenance if we accept that the UFO is *truly* unidentified is that its occupants are ETs—and that threatens both the physical and ontological security of modern rule. The physical threat, of course, is that ET presence in “our” solar system would indicate a vastly superior technology to human beings’, raising the possibility of conquest and even extermination. (In this respect it matters greatly that They might be Here, rather than far away as in the SETI scenario.) The ontological threat is that even if the ETs were benign, their confirmed presence would create tremendous pressure for a unified human response, or world government. The sovereign identity of the modern state is partly constituted in and through its difference from other such states, which gives modern sovereignty its plural character. Any exteriority that required subsuming this difference into a global sovereignty would threaten what the modern state is, quite apart from the risk of physical destruction.

It might be argued that these spatio-temporal threats alone can explain the UFO taboo. On this view, by virtue of the possibility that UFOs are ETs, the UFO calls into question the state's claim to protect its citizens, which it would be unwilling to admit. Because the threat is so grave, the only rational response is to ignore the UFO. States are enabled in this policy by the fact that UFOs do not (yet) interfere with the conditions of life of human populations, and as such have not compelled recognition.

However, at least two considerations militate against reducing the UFO threat to spatio-temporal terms. First, states show little reluctance to ignore other existential threats; if immigrants, pandemics, and terrorists are readily securitized, despite states' inability to secure their populations from them, then why are not UFOs? Second, given that UFOs do not interfere with modern governance, and with no indication that states actually believe the ETH, the UFO

⁵³ On ontological security, see Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics,” *European Journal of*

would seem cynically to be an ideal securitization issue. Because it leaves physical traces it can be represented *as if* it were real, justifying the growth of state power, even as states know the threat is imaginary. To be sure states may have other worries—but then all the more reason to stage a UFO threat to bolster their capacities. Thus, Hollywood notwithstanding, in our view the threat of the UFO is not primarily alien invasion or the black helicopters of world government. Challenges to the “physics” of modern sovereignty are necessary conditions for the UFO taboo, but they are not sufficient.

The UFO threat is different in the challenge it poses to the *metaphysics* of modern sovereignty, which are fundamentally anthropocentric.⁵⁴ Because the contemporary capacity to command political loyalty and resources depends upon it, the assumption of anthropocentrism must be unquestioned if modern rule is to be sustained as a political project. As a condition of their own sovereignty, therefore, before modern states can deal with threats to their physical and ontological security, they must first secure this metaphysic.

How is this done? Sovereign decision is no help, since modern sovereignty can only instantiate an anthropocentric metaphysic, not step outside to decide the exception to it. So here modern sovereignty must give way to governmentality, or authoritative procedures to make anthropocentrism “known” as fact. In contrast to past processes of normalization in which the visions of shamans or seers were taken to be authoritative, the standards of knowledge in modern governmentality are primarily scientific. Thus, since there is no scientific evidence for miracles, it is known that God does not intervene in the material world. Similarly, since there is no evidence Nature has subjectivity, it is known not to. Anthropocentrism will be secure until scientific evidence to the contrary comes along.

An unknown that incorporates the possibility of ETs confounds this metaphysical certainty, creating a situation in which its status as exception cannot be decided. We develop this

International Relations 12 (2006): 341-70.

⁵⁴ In ufology, this is known as the “ontological shock” argument; we prefer “metaphysical” to highlight the ways in which the UFO is presented within modern discourse as an almost supernatural phenomenon.

suggestion using Derrida's concept of "undecidability,"⁵⁵ while arguing that the particular form undecidability takes in the UFO case disrupts its usual operation.

Something is undecidable when it "does not conform to either polarity of a dichotomy, (for example, present/absent, cure/poison, and inside/outside)," but is both at once.⁵⁶ Perhaps confusingly, undecidability does not mean a decision cannot be made, but that a decision on which side of the binary an undecidable belongs is *compelled*. Undecidability is a "condition from which no course of action necessarily follows,"⁵⁷ yet which requires a decision to resolve oscillation between dichotomous poles. The UFO is undecidable in this sense, and thus compels decision.

However, to "decide" an exception it would seem necessary for the sovereign first to acknowledge the existence of a disturbance in its field of visibility and try to determine what the disturbance is. "Decision," in other words, suggests an effort to *know* potential threats rather than merely reenact the norm, if only to make better decisions—yet states have made no meaningful effort to know the UFO. Disturbances may be acknowledged, but then states have mostly abjured a scientific standpoint in favor of public relations on behalf of the established regime of truth, re-affirming that We already know what these (unidentified) objects are (not). The effect is to constitute the UFO as un-exceptional, but not by "deciding."⁵⁸

This suggests that we need to look more closely at the moment of transition from undecidability to the decision, or what Derrida calls the "logic of the palisade,"⁵⁹ which in this case does not seem to be automatic. More specifically, we propose that the UFO compels a decision that, by the modern sovereign at least, cannot be made. The reason is the particular

⁵⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63-171.

⁵⁶ Jack Reynolds, "Habituality and Undecidability: A Comparison of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on the Decision," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10 (2002): 449-66, at 450.

⁵⁷ Aletta Norval, "Hegemony after Deconstruction: The Consequences of Undecidability," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 9 (2004): 139-57, at 143, quoting Ernesto Laclau.

⁵⁸ Here there is a direct contrast with conspiracy theories, which assume that a decision has been made. If so, then this part of our argument is wrong, although one might then fairly ask why the decision was kept secret.

character of the UFO's undecidability, at once potentially objective and subjective, each pole of which poses a metaphysical challenge to anthropocentric rule.

On the one hand, UFOs appear indeed to be objects, not necessarily in the narrow sense of something hard and tangible, but in the broader sense of natural processes that produce physical effects. The effects are subtle and elusive, which means that UFOs are not unambiguously objects, but radar anomalies and other physical traces suggest something objective is going on.

As unidentified object the UFO poses a threat of unknowability to science, upon which modern sovereignty depends. Of course, there are many things science does not know, like the cure for cancer, but its authority rests on the assumption that nothing in Nature is in principle unknowable. UFOs challenge modern science in two ways: (1) they appear random and unsystematic, making them difficult to grasp objectively; and (2) some appear to violate the laws of physics (like the 40g turns in the Belgian F-16 case). This does not mean that UFOs are in fact humanly unknowable, but they might be, and in that respect they haunt modern sovereignty with the possibility of epistemic failure. To see how this might be uniquely threatening it is useful to compare the UFO to three other cases of what might be seen as unknowability.

One is the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in quantum theory, which acknowledges inherent limits on the ability to know sub-atomic reality. Since the Uncertainty Principle has not stopped physicists from doing physics, this might seem to undermine our claim that potential unknowability precludes a decision on the UFO as object. Yet, there are known unknowns and unknown unknowns, and here the two cases differ. Quantum mechanics emerged in a highly structured context of extant theory and established experimental results, and is a systematic body of knowledge that enables physicists to manipulate reality with extraordinary precision. With quantum theory we know exactly what we cannot know, enabling it to be safely incorporated into modern science. The UFO, in contrast, emerges in a context free of extant theory and empirical research, and raises fundamental questions about the place of human beings in the universe. That we might never know what we cannot know about UFOs makes their potential objectivity more problematic for the modern project.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 147.

A different problem is presented by God, whose existence science also declaims ability to know. Once fiercely contested, the notion that God can be known only through faith not reason is today accepted by religious and secular authorities alike. Since God is not potentially a scientific object, science does not consider the question to be within its purview. Miracles are recognized by the Church, but the criteria by which they are made authoritative are not primarily scientific. UFOs, in contrast, leave unexplained physical traces and as such fall directly within the purview of modern science.⁶⁰ It is one of the ironies of modern rule that it is far more acceptable today to affirm publicly one's belief in God, for whose existence there is no scientific evidence, than UFOs, the existence of which—whatever they might be—is physically documented.

Perhaps the best analogue to the epistemic threat posed by UFO objectivity is extra-sensory perception or “psi.” Here we have a subtle and elusive phenomenon that might be objective, and which raises similar worries about unknowability for the modern episteme.⁶¹ And here too we see tremendous resistance from the scientific community to taking it seriously. Nevertheless, and interestingly, psi research has been undertaken by *states*,⁶² suggesting that potential unknowability by itself does not preclude sovereign decision, if, were the phenomenon to become known, it could serve human purposes.

Indeed, were the UFO *merely* an object, it is hard to see that its potential unknowability would preclude a decision on its status as exception. *Qua* object, and only object, the UFO threatens neither the physical nor the ontological security of modern rule, which we have argued are necessary conditions for the metaphysical threat from UFOs to be realized. (In this respect the UFO contrasts interestingly with the possibility of catastrophic asteroid impacts, which in fact has been recently constituted as a physical threat.)⁶³ As with other anomalies there might be

⁶⁰ cf. Edward Berryman, “Taking Pictures of Jesus: Producing the Material Presence of a Divine Other,” *Human Studies* 28 (2006): 431-52.

⁶¹ See Robert Jahn and Brenda Dunne, “The PEAR Proposition,” *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 19 (2005): 195-245.

⁶² For purposes of espionage, by the United States and Soviet Union during the cold war; Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff, *Mind-Reach* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2005).

⁶³ Felicity Mellor, “Colliding Worlds: Asteroid Research and the Legitimization of War in Space,” *Social Studies of Science* 37 (2007): 499-531.

sociological resistance to seeing UFOs, but if science does its job properly, the resistance should break down and a serious effort to identify UFOs eventually undertaken.

Unlike some objects, however, the UFO might also have subjectivity (ETs). In itself non-human subjectivity need not be a problem for anthropocentric sovereignty. Although modernity is constituted by a general de-animation of Nature, debates about animal consciousness raise anew the possibility that subjectivity is not limited to humans.⁶⁴ However, while it may generate anxiety,⁶⁵ animal subjectivity does not threaten modern rule either physically or ontologically. Superior intelligence enabled humans long ago to domesticate animals, ensuring that any subjectivity they might have will lie safely “beneath” human rule. By virtue of being in the solar system, in contrast, ETs might have vastly superior intelligence, literally “above” human rule, and thus be sovereign deciders in their own right. To our knowledge no ETs have shown themselves, which means the UFO is not unambiguously subjective (either), but the failure of science to justify ruling out the ETH leaves open the possibility, and that clearly does threaten anthropocentrism. As potential subject, then, the UFO radically relativizes modern sovereignty, disturbing its homologous character with the threat of unimagined heterogeneity, the sovereignty of the fully alien (non-human) Other.

In short, the UFO poses threats to modern rule on both poles of the object–subject dichotomy that constitutes its undecidability, making a decision in favor of one or the other intrinsically problematic. These threats are metaphysical in the sense of raising epistemological and ontological doubts about the whole anthropocentric idea of modern rule, not just its realizations in actually existing states—and it is the absolute taken-forgrantedness of that idea upon which the ability to mobilize modern power depends. From the standpoint of modern rule, therefore, the threat of the UFO is not unlike that of the Christian’s Second Coming, a potential materialization of the metaphysical.

It is the triple threat of the UFO that explains states’ very different response to it compared to other disruptions of modern norms. By calling into question the very basis of the

⁶⁴ Bernard Baars, “Subjective Experience is Probably Not Limited to Humans: The Evidence from Neurobiology and Behavior,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 14 (2005): 7-21.

⁶⁵ Raymond Corbey, *The Metaphysics of Apes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

modern sovereign's capacity to decide its status as exception, the UFO cannot be acknowledged as truly unidentified—which is to say potentially ET—without calling into question modern sovereignty itself. Thus, far from being a *deus ex machina* that, through the decision, intervenes miraculously to safeguard the norm, modern sovereignty is shown by the UFO to be itself a norm, of anthropocentrism—and behind this norm no further agency stands. In this way the UFO exhibits not the standard undecidability that compels a decision, but what might be called a “*meta*”-undecidability which precludes it. The UFO is both exceptional and not decidable as exception, and as a result with respect to it the modern sovereign is performatively insecure. The insecurity is not conscious, but operates at the deeper level of a taboo, in which certain possibilities are unthinkable because of their inherent danger. In this respect UFO skepticism is akin to denial in psychoanalysis: the sovereign represses the UFO out of fear of what it would reveal about itself.⁶⁶ There is therefore nothing for the sovereign to do but turn away its gaze from—to ignore, and hence be ignorant of—the UFO, making no decision at all. Just when needed most, on the palisades, the sovereign is nowhere to be found.

Governmentality and the UFO Taboo

To this point we have concentrated on the question of “why?” the UFO taboo, in response to which we have offered a structural answer about the logic of anthropocentric sovereignty. However, there is a separate question of “how?” the taboo is produced and reproduced, since structural necessity alone does not make it happen. It takes work—not the conscious work of a vast conspiracy seeking to suppress the truth about UFOs, but the work of countless undirected practices that in the modern world make the UFO “known” as not-ET. Bringing our argument full circle, this is the work of modern governmentality, upon which the normalization of the UFO is thrown back by the absent sovereign. Yet this work too is problematic, because modern governmentality usually proceeds by making objects visible so they can be known and regularized, which in the UFO case would be self-subverting. Thus, what are needed are techniques for making UFOs known without actually trying to find out what they are.

⁶⁶ Carl Jung, *Flying Saucers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978). This invites a Lacanian reading of the UFO as “the Real.”

One might distinguish at least four such techniques: (1) authoritative representations, like the U.S. Air Force's claim that UFOs are "not a national security threat,"⁶⁷ the portrayal of ufology as pseudo-science, and the science fictionalization of UFOs in the media; (2) official inquiries, like the 1969 Condon Report, which have the appearance of being scientific but are essentially "show trials" systematically deformed by *a priori* rejection of the ETH;⁶⁸ (3) official secrecy, which "removes knowledge" from the system;⁶⁹ and finally (4) discipline in the Foucauldian sense, ranging from formal attacks on the "paranoid style" of UFO believers as a threat to modern rationality,⁷⁰ to everyday dismissal of those who express public interest in UFOs, which generates a "spiral of silence" in which individuals engage in self-censorship instead.⁷¹

Much could be said from a governmentality perspective about these techniques, which are amply documented in the ufological literature, but we lack the space to do so here. Instead, we have focused on explaining why all this anti-UFO work is necessary in the first place, which goes to the fundamental puzzle with which we began our argument: given the many reasons to study UFOs, why *aren't* they taken seriously? To answer this question the specific techniques by which the UFO is normalized can be a distraction, since ignorance is multiply realizable at the micro-level. Notwithstanding the importance of governmentality to a critical theory of anthropocentric rule, it is to the performative insecurity of modern sovereignty that one must look first.

⁶⁷ Dolan, *UFOs and the National Security State*, 193-203.

⁶⁸ See note 12 above.

⁶⁹ Peter Galison, "Removing Knowledge," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2004): 229-43. On UFO secrecy, see especially Dolan, *UFOs and the National Security State*; and, for the official view, Gerald Haines, "CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-1990," *Intelligence and National Security* 14 (1999): 26-49; and Charles Ziegler, "UFOs and the US Intelligence Community," *National Security* 14 (1999): 1-25.

⁷⁰ For introductions to this literature, see Dean, *Aliens in America*; and Jack Bratich, "Making Politics Reasonable: Conspiracism, Subjectification, and Governing Through Styles of Thought," in *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality*, ed. J. Bratich, J. Packer, and C. McCarthy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 67-100.

⁷¹ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Resistance

We have called ours a “critical” theory, in that it rests on a normative assumption that the limits of modern rule should be exposed. In the present context this means that human beings *should* try to know the UFO. Although we believe the case for this presumption is overdetermined and overwhelming, it is not a case we can make here. Nevertheless, it seems incumbent upon us to follow through on the practical logic of our theory, so taking its desirability as given, in conclusion we address the question of resistance to the UFO taboo.

The structuralism of our argument might suggest that resistance is futile. However, the structure of the UFO taboo also has aporias and fissures that make it—and the anthropocentric structure of rule that it sustains—potentially unstable.

One is the UFO itself, which in its persistent recurrence generates an ongoing need for its normalization. Modern rule might not recognize the UFO, but in the face of continuing anomalies maintaining such nonrecognition requires work. In that respect the UFO is part of the constitutive, unnormalized outside of modern sovereignty, which can be included in authoritative discourse only through its exclusion.

Within the structure of modern rule there are also at least two fissures that complicate maintaining UFO ignorance. One is the different knowledge interests of science and the state. While the two are aligned in authoritative UFO discourse, the state is ultimately interested in maintaining a certain regime of truth (particularly in the face of metaphysical insecurity), whereas science recognizes that its truths can only be tentative. Theory may be stubborn, but the presumption in science is that reality has the last word, which creates the possibility of scientific knowledge countering the state’s dogma.

The other fissure is within liberalism, the constitutive core of modern governmentality. Even as it produces normalized subjects who know that “belief” in UFOs is absurd, liberal governmentality justifies itself as a discourse that produces free-thinking subjects who might doubt it.⁷² It is in this context that we would place the recent disclosure by the French government (and at press time the British too) of its long-secret UFO files (1,600 reports), including its

⁷² Bratich, “Making Politics Reasonable.”

investigations of selected cases, of which the French acknowledged 25 percent as unexplained.⁷³ Given that secrecy is only a contingent feature of the UFO taboo, and that even the French are still far from seeking systematic knowledge of UFOs, this disclosure is not in itself a serious challenge to our argument. However, the French action does illustrate a potential within liberalism to break with authoritative common sense,⁷⁴ even at the risk of exposing the foundations of modern sovereignty to insecurity.

The kind of resistance that can best exploit these fissures might be called militant agnosticism. Resistance must be agnostic because by the realist standards of modernity, regarding the UFO/ET question neither atheism nor belief is epistemically justified; we simply do not know. Concretely, agnosticism means “seeing” rather than ignoring the UFO, taking it seriously as a truly unidentified *object*. Since it is precisely such seeing that the UFO taboo forbids, in this context seeing is resistance. However, resistance must also be militant, by which we mean public and strategic, or else it will indeed be futile. The reproduction of UFO ignorance depends crucially on those in positions of epistemic authority observing the UFO taboo. Thus, private agnosticism—of the kind moderns might have about God, for example—is itself part of the problem. Only breaking the taboo in public constitutes genuine resistance.

Even that is not enough, however, as attested by the long history of unsuccessful resistance to the UFO taboo to date.⁷⁵ The problem is that agnosticism alone does not produce knowledge, and thus reduce the ignorance upon which modern sovereignty depends. For a critical theory of anthropocentric rule, therefore, a *science* of UFOs ironically is required, and not just a science of individual cases after the fact, which can tell us only that some UFOs lack apparent conventional explanations. Rather, in this domain what is needed is paradoxically a systematic science, in which observations are actively sought in order to analyze patterns from which an

⁷³ See www.cnes-geipan.fr. The 25 percent figure is comparable to the 30 percent unexplained cases acknowledged by the Condon Report.

⁷⁴ In terms of the taxonomy of ignorance developed by Tuana in “The Speculum of Ignorance,” the French and British actions might move them into the category of “knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know.” That is progress insofar as it enables subsequent knowing, but whether it will remains to be seen.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Ann Druffel, *Firestorm: Dr. James E. McDonald's Fight for UFO Science* (Columbus, NC: Wild Flower Press, 2003); and, *inter alia*, Dolan, *UFOs and the National Security State*.

intelligent presence might be inferred.⁷⁶ That would require money, infrastructure, and a long-term commitment of the kind that to date has been possible only for epistemic authorities, or precisely those actors most resistant to taking UFOs seriously. Still, given the potential disjunction of interest between science and the state, it is possible here for science to play a key role for critical theory. Whether such a science would actually overcome UFO ignorance is unknowable today, but it is only through it that We might move beyond the essentially theological discourse of belief and denial to a truly critical posture.

Modern rule and its metaphysics are extraordinarily resilient, so the difficulties of such resistance cannot be overstated. Those who attempt it will have difficulty funding and publishing their work, and their reputations will suffer. UFO resistance might not be futile but it is certainly dangerous, because it is resistance to modern sovereignty itself. In this respect militant UFO agnosticism is akin to other forms of resistance to governmentality; however, whereas sovereignty has found ways of dealing with them, the UFO may reveal an Achilles heel. Like Achilles, the modern sovereign is a warrior whose function is to protect—in this case, from threats to the norm. Unlike conventional threats, however, the UFO threatens humans' capacity to decide those threats, and so cannot be acknowledged without calling modern sovereignty itself into question. To what extent that would be desirable is a large normative question which we have bracketed here.⁷⁷ But taking UFOs seriously would certainly embody the spirit of self-criticism that infuses liberal governmentality and academia in particular, and it would, thereby, foster critical theory. And indeed, if academics' first responsibility is to tell the truth, then the truth is that after sixty years of modern UFOs, human beings still have no idea what they are, and are not even trying to find out. That should surprise and disturb us all, and cast doubt on the structure of rule that requires and sustains it.

⁷⁶ For example, Scot Stride, "An Instrument-Based Method to Search for Extraterrestrial Interstellar Robotic Probes," *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society* 54 (2001): 2-14.

⁷⁷ The ethical opening we take to be profound, pointing on one hand toward the UFO as faceless Levinasian Other that demands a radical acknowledgement of human limits in practicing an ethics of responsibility and on the other toward dialogical possibilities with nonhuman Nature that the Levinasian perspective does not suggest.

Authors' Note: We are grateful to an unusually large number of people for written comments that improved this article significantly: Hayward Alker, Thierry Balzacq, Tarak Barkawi, Michael Barkun, Jens Bartelson, Andreas Behnke, Janice Bially Mattern, Corneliu Bjola, Aldous Cheung, Arjun Chowdhury, Pam Cuce, Jodi Dean, Kevin Duska, Nancy Ettlinger, Eric Grynviski, Ayten Gündoğdu, Todd Hall, Eugene Holland, Bonnie Honig, Peter Katzenstein, Sean Kay, Tahseen Kazi, Oded Lowenheim, Ramzy Mardini, Jennifer Mitzen, Nuno Monteiro, Homeira Moshirzadeh, John Mowitt, Daniel Nexon, Irfan Nooruddin, Dorothy Noyes, Jonathan Obert, Fabio Petito, Trevor Pinch, Sergei Prozorov, Mark Rodeghier, Diego Rossello, Keven Ruby, Jacob Schiff, Allan Silverman, Frank Stengel, Michael Swords, Alexander Thompson, Srdjan Vucetic, Ole Waever, Jutta Weldes, Hans Wendt, Rafi Youatt, and two anonymous reviewers. The article also benefited from presentations at the University of Chicago, Northwestern University, the Ohio State University, Ohio-Wesleyan University, Princeton University, and the 2007 annual convention of the International Studies Association in Chicago. The research assistance of Dane Imerman and Lorenzo Zambernardi is also acknowledged. The article was inspired by a video of John Mack.