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Extraterrestrials

The great taboo of our time

A special case in cultural theory

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Preface

While the daily bombardment of more or less disturbing news reports about the financial markets, economic uncertainty and political affairs rains down upon us, the question of humanity's place in the universe goes largely ignored. Shrugging our shoulders, we consign the question of intelligent extraterrestrial life to the realm of metaphysics and bracket it out of our everyday experience. But are we right to do so?

In July 1999 French scientists published a study in which they concluded that the Earth may be subject to extraterrestrial visitation (COMETA 1999). The international press gave the story no more than a casual nod, while in academic circles the publication was ignored entirely. If we wanted to make sense of all this in retrospect, there are just two possible readings available to us: either a few researchers have slightly overstretched the limits of their academic freedom (given that plainly no incontrovertible proof of extraterrestrial visitors exists), or else the hypothesis of extraterrestrial visitors must be so shocking that neither the scientific community nor the general public are able to deal with it. The present book takes a closer look at the latter supposition and takes seriously the possibility that extraterrestrials may be present on Earth. The reader is invited to understand this confrontation with the 'radically Other' as a thought experiment: what would it mean for us and for our self-image as human beings to even merely concede the possibility of extraterrestrial visitors? This question constitutes a challenge for the sociology of science, cultural theory and sociology alike. And, as we shall see, the answers are anything but trivial. Nobody should feel obliged here to leave the solid ground of certain knowledge. Rather,

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this book sees itself as an invitation to scholars to begin appreciating the heuristic utility of questioning our anthropocentric world view. Getting to grips with the radical Other ultimately means getting to grips with ourselves.

The interested lay reader may read this book as an entertaining introduction to several key areas of social philosophy, such as: is there such a thing as objective reality or is reality created by people themselves? Is science based on observations or on theories? How do scientific revolutions come about? What is a taboo and which areas of life are especially affected by them? Why are people afraid of what is different, strange or unfamiliar to them? Why are conspiracy theories and belief in UFOs on the rise in our rationalistic world? Is scholarly research always strictly rational or does it have its own set of myths?

The idea of extraterrestrial visitors has the potential to generate a host of new conceptual categories in the humanities. The answers offered by some of the great thinkers in the West to the questions posed above give pause for thought. And perhaps the picture these answers paint is suited to enable the hypothetical 'what if..?' to grow into a discomfoting doubt. And isn't doubt, after all, a fundamental principle of scientific inquiry?

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The concept of taboo is used in sociology to describe cultural prohibitions relating to certain topics, acts or views. It is difficult to provide a universally valid definition of the concept due to the fact that the word 'taboo' has become an integral part of our everyday language. Because of this, the term has come to be deeply infused with individual life-world associations, and this poses an obstacle to establishing a standard scholarly understanding of it. A taboo is not only commonly understood to refer to culturally specific moral prohibitions but can also be used to undergird political standpoints. For example, during the political debate in Germany over raising the age of retirement to 67, both introducing the measure itself as well as (later) possibly revoking it was described in terms of breaking a taboo. In this instance, the reference to a more fundamental cultural prohibition is effectively used as a way of declaring an arbitrary decision to be unavoidable. The original, sacred meaning of the term has since been diluted by these kinds of everyday usages.

The word 'taboo' has its etymological roots in Polynesia, where it was described by maritime explorer James Cook in its original context: 'When dinner came upon table, not one of them would sit down or eat a bit of any thing that was served up. On expressing my surprise on this, they were all *taboo*, as they said' (Cook and King 1821: 348, emphasis in original). For the Polynesians there was something magical about certain places and objects, so that eating or even touching these things was out of the question. They believed that any violation of the taboo would be punished by the forces that inhered within the place or object itself. Anthropologist Northcote W. Thomas noted in this regard: 'A violated taboo will exact its own

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revenge. If ideas about gods and demons related to the taboo are also present, then punishment is expected to come automatically from the power of the divinity' (Thomas, quoted in Freud 1922: 27).

The concept of taboo was popularized by Sigmund Freud at the beginning of the twentieth century. Taboos are especially interesting to the psychoanalyst as they seem to exist independently of the system of norms and values in a society, thus enabling comparisons with subconscious processes. 'The taboo restrictions are different from religious or moral prohibitions. They are not traced to a commandment of a god but really they themselves impose their own prohibitions; they are differentiated from moral prohibitions by failing to be included in a system which declares abstinences in general to be necessary and gives reasons for this necessity. The taboo prohibitions lack all justification and are of unknown origin. Though incomprehensible to us they are taken as a matter of course by those who are under their dominance' (Freud 1919: 30). It is doubtful whether or not taboos really do generally emerge as arbitrarily as Freud claims in relation to tribal societies, rather than being closely interwoven with the contexts of meaning that exist in a given culture. In China eating rabbits is taboo, while in the West eating dogs is taboo. Ethnological studies would doubtless help in reconstructing the process by which the dog has come to be considered 'man's best friend' in Western cultures.

While taboos take different forms in different cultures, it is possible nonetheless to identify certain areas of life that are affected by taboos in all cultures. These are the domains of sexuality, death, bodily functions (belching, passing wind, defecating), of food consumption (fasting, vegetarianism, cannibalism) as well as all forms of the sacred or the demonic. This list alone illustrates that taboos always emerge when humans come up against existential boundaries. These are areas

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that elude rational human control. This is particularly clear in relation to urge-driven, animalistic sexual desire: 'Erotic or sexual urges are experienced as something overwhelmingly powerful that disturbs the peaceful order of clear consciousness and should therefore be suppressed by corresponding prohibitions. (Indeed there is no known culture in which sexuality is not limited by certain prohibitions)' (Gerlach 1978: 174). The physical aspect of our existence with all its inadequacies, failings and frailties contradicts the modern self-image of humans as rational beings as well as the idea of technological control, and so it is to be banished as far as possible from our everyday consciousness. The need to defecate is generally not yielded to in public. Being 'desperate' refers to metaphysical desperation.

The greatest universal taboo on Earth is undoubtedly that of death. It is what distinguishes humans from animals: humans know that they will die. The Biblical creation myth tells us what price is to be paid when we eat from the Tree of Knowledge: we know that we will die. We try to push this knowledge as far as possible away from our everyday experience. This is because – paradoxically – it reminds us that we are not purely rational beings but that our mind is encased in a mortal animal shell. There are few things that shatter human sensibilities as much as the sight of a corpse. In town plans, graveyards are marked out as separate areas. Dying people are often left to die alone, surrounded by the sterile machinery of intensive care wards. The taboo penetrates every part of society, and even in more liberal artistic circles the project proposed by German installation artist Gregor Schneider to display a dying person provoked a veritable furore in spring 2008. At the heart of the many different taboos dealing with death is the confrontation with human limitations, with the 'radically Other': 'Perhaps it is not so much the deathbed with all its physical pains than the fear of the 'radically Other', of the 'mysterium tascinosum et tremendum' (Rudolf Otto) that is being

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suppressed here' (Ströbel 1978: 35). An additional aspect comes into play here: Hardly anything demonstrates so dramatically to us the limits of technological progress as death. Despite having the most up-to-date medical equipment, death remains unconquerable. As a result, fundamental doubt is cast on the belief in the technical superiority of modern civilization.

The self-image of humans as rational beings is nurtured not only by distancing ourselves from our animal antecedents; it is also done by marking ourselves off from the supernatural as found, for example, in the cult of witchcraft. While witches are firmly implanted in our cultural memory, particularly in their role as scapegoat in the early modern era, we encounter them today above all as a component of an occult subculture. The image we have of them remains a dubious one: anyone in league with the devil is operating at a magical, irrational level. 'By definition, witches are – as ethnological comparisons prove – people who pose a threat to a certain social or moral order, and the more pronounced the notion of a certain world order is, the more frequent and extreme is the image of the witch as an opposing figure of this very order – thus itself becoming a taboo' (Gerlach 1978: 173f.). As irrational as belief in witches may seem to be, it finds its socially legitimated counterpart in the Christian religion. The taboo of the resurrected Jesus Christ is considered to be the cornerstone of Christianity: 'Noli me tangere' means literally: 'Touch me not'. The Roman word 'sacer' meant not only 'holy' but also 'taboo'.

The supposition that taboos always emerge whenever humanity's existential limits are transgressed and thus become visible suggests that extraterrestrials must also be affected by them. As an incarnation of the radically Other and yet as beings possessed of reason, extraterrestrials become the manifestation of a deep-seated existential uncertainty. Taboos tend to emerge especially in those domains

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where humans are confronted with the radically Other. 'The radically Other characterizes boundary phenomena such as sleep, intoxication, eros and death which, despite constantly being subject to cultural interpretation, are yet never tamed by culture' (Waldenfels 1997: 72f.). And every culture faces the challenge of dealing with these boundary experiences: 'As Merleau-Ponty notes, this points to a *région sauvage* within our own culture, a blank space via which we are connected to cultures different from our own' (Waldenfels 1997: 73, emphasis in original). According to Waldenfels we always encounter the alien/the Other in distinction to an existing order which is called into question by this Other. This being so, a humanity confronted with extraterrestrials finds itself in a similar situation to that of the Polynesians: 'Anything that goes beyond the usual and everyday in the primitive imagination, anything that destabilizes the existing order – or even just seems to threaten it – is feared or avoided as a taboo, as a phenomenon possessed with supernatural power' (Gerlach 1978: 173). And just like death, which cannot be conquered either by ever more advanced medical equipment, extraterrestrial spaceships demonstrate clearly to us that our technologies can be regarded as highly developed only by human standards. When placed in relation to them, the presence of extraterrestrials would catapult us back to the technological level of Stone Age humans: 'Taboos also support the dominance of a utopia in which technology and progress have taken on quasi-religious features' (Ströbel 1978: 58).

However, it is not only being confronted with the radically Other that renders extraterrestrials taboo for humans; it is above all humans being confronted with themselves. Unlike animals, humans are not equipped with drives that enable them to survive in a given environment. They are not innately programmed to adjust automatically to the vagaries of the days and the seasons. Instead, humans are responsive and open to external influences (*weltoffen*).

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The lack of a dominant genetic programme allows us as humans to adapt to different environmental conditions. Accordingly we are also the only more highly developed species that has settled in almost every land-based habitat on the planet. At the same time, our human responsiveness confronts us with the problem of not having any naturally available standards by which to guide or judge our actions. 'Our tremendous openness towards all kinds of sensory perceptions that have no innate signal function undoubtedly constitutes a considerable burden' (Gehlen 1966: 35). We humans have found a solution to this problem by developing culture. This 'self-spun web of significance', as anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls it, enables humans to structure their everyday actions in a dependable way. More than this, though, culture constitutes the entire social order of human societies. 'Being left to their own devices as a "non-fixed animal", humans find themselves forced to establish meanings and to create orders' (Waldenfels 1998: 246). The rules that govern our co-existence in society appear so natural to us that we pay no attention to them at all while we are busy applying them. Normally we only become aware of these rules when they are called into question, such as happened with traditional gender roles in industrialized societies during the 1960s. However, nothing is capable of challenging the validity of cultural patterns quite so powerfully as the encounter with extraterrestrials. When we come face to face with the radical Other the foundations of social order that had appeared so normal and natural to us are revealed to be completely arbitrary: 'Work must pay', 'Progress means technological progress first and foremost', 'Women are generally more emotional than men' – all these are examples of absolute truisms that circulate within our social order; any and all of them could be completely different. Indeed, in all probability all of them will be completely different in an extraterrestrial civilization. The economic model based on paid work that is so fundamental to our society will be nowhere to be seen among extraterrestrials, and

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neither will international automobile shows or traditional gender roles. In fact, perhaps 'woman' and 'man' will not even exist at all. The arbitrary nature of the fundamental things we take for granted in our social order will suddenly become apparent when we are confronted with extraterrestrials and will thus be revealed as pure possibility. We will become strangers to ourselves. When this happens, our patterns of orientation begin to lose their binding quality and the social order is threatened with collapse.

The philosophy of the social sciences describes the notion of alternatives that are always present in the background as 'contingency'. The reader is encouraged to make a mental note of this term because it will accompany us from this point on in the book. Contingency refers to the fact that social order ultimately cannot be legitimated. It is, as it were, the 'vacuum energy' of the discipline. It is the experience of contingency that suggests to us that everything could be different than it presently is. We come across it in diluted form in the melting pot of the city and in our encounters with other cultures. We try to suppress as far as possible the uncertainty we experience in such encounters: 'The dissolving power of contingency is held in check by sticking to *necessary* conditions of order and accepting the lack of adequate rationales for order' (Waldenfels 1998: 21, emphasis in original). In the face of extraterrestrial visitors, though, rationales for order are suddenly called into question. Social and political systems are placed under considerable pressure to find new modes of legitimacy.

Society has developed mechanisms that help it to protect itself from contingency. In liberal-democratic societies it is thoroughly legitimate to hold different opinions. Indeed, controversy is a part of the system itself. But regardless of how deep-seated the conflict between orthodox and heterodox opinions may be, it never casts doubt on the

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fundamental principles of the social order. Quite the contrary: when issues are publicly debated, the *impression* is given that no areas of discussion are excluded. Yet despite this impression certain ordering principles are always unquestioningly taken as given: 'It is by reference to the universe of opinion that the complementary class is defined, the class of that which is taken for granted, doxa, the sum total of the theses tacitly posited on the hither side of all inquiry' (Bourdieu 1977: 168). Bourdieu uses the term 'doxa' to refer to all the orthodox and heterodox opinions that exist in a given society. (This term will also accompany us henceforth; it can be taken to mean the '(known) discursive universe'.) Doxa mark the boundaries of what is capable of becoming an object of discourse. The discursive universe must necessarily remain limited: without a cultural order, the things human beings understand as *meaningful* would be completely random. Meaning can only unfold in the context of an unquestioned cultural order. If extraterrestrials were to appear on the scene, the arbitrariness of this order would be exposed and humans would be confronted with an unbearable space empty of meaning. The most crucial point in this is that the experience of contingency begins not only at the point of encounter with extraterrestrials; it already begins the moment we seriously consider the possibility of alien visitors on Earth. All human thinking is based on hypotheses, and there is no qualitative difference between the truth claim 'This object is a table' and that of 'UFOs are alien spaceships'. And if we additionally bring in the factor of the observer at this point and thus speak of *potential* alien spaceships, then of course tables become *potential* tables. Readers who may find this comment somewhat overstated can be assured that different cultures can, quite rightly, have divergent ideas about which objects function as tables. Whether or not something becomes an 'actual' reality depends simply on the models of reality the members of a society impute to one another. The constructivist perspective is crucial for describing the process of social negotiation

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in which extraterrestrials go from being a 'fiction' to a 'reality'. *The very formulation of the ETH makes the arbitrariness of our cultural framework of orientation transparent.* What is more, the popular counter-strategy of appropriating the other fails in the face of humans' assumed technological inferiority. This is one of the foremost reasons why UFOs and extraterrestrials constitute such a far-reaching taboo. All debate about whether they might exist is banished from the discursive universe. While anyone can claim that the Earth is subject to extraterrestrial visitation – according to a Roper poll, nearly half of all Americans believe that 'UFOs' have already visited the Earth (Ailleris 2011: 4) – they will find it difficult to gain a hearing (sympathetic or otherwise) in either the public or scientific debate.

The powerful nature of taboos is manifested in the way linguistic devices serve to conceal the issues in question. In German-speaking countries, for example, a sexual partner is not described as such but rather as a 'friend'. In many English-speaking countries, death is not spoken of directly, either. It is widely referred to as 'eternal rest', while in parts of Britain dying is sometimes referred to flippantly as 'popping one's clogs' or 'kicking the bucket'. Similarly, the terms UFO (Unidentified Flying Object) and UAP (Unidentified Atmospheric Phenomenon) are phrased negatively. So far no one has been heard to refer to a PAS (Potential Alien Spacecraft). What seems at first glance to be merely a linguistic gloss on all things extraterrestrial actually has an impact on the entire discourse. Let us recall: the term 'unidentified' signals academia's categorical refusal to formulate hypotheses about the UFO phenomenon. At a single stroke, then, an entire area of research is rendered inaccessible to critical and rational scholarly study. The names we give to things decide what can be part of the discursive universe and thus count as doxa: 'Because any language that can command attention is an 'authorized language',

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invested with the authority of a group, the things it designates are not simply expressed but also authorized and legitimated' (Bourdieu 1977: 170). Since extraterrestrial visitors are not part of the doxa, ufology is forced to avoid using the phrase and to address the issue under the heading 'UFO' instead. As a result, the dominant order is reproduced, as it is impossible to do scholarly research without formulating hypotheses. Accordingly, ufology has still not managed to find a place within mainstream academia and continues instead to eke out a meagre existence at its margins.

Of course, it is also possible for some topics that were originally banished from the discursive universe to suddenly become a legitimate subject for debate. This was the case with gender roles in the 1960s, for example. A movement that achieves such change does so by destabilizing the dominant order for a while until the relevant social institutions have adapted, e.g. by offering child care to enable mothers to go out to work. With extraterrestrial visitors, however, it is a different matter. They do not merely extend the discursive universe at certain points; rather, they call into question the entire discursive universe itself. This makes it even more necessary to banish them from the doxa. Thus the notion of doxa has a dual function in the present context: it both describes how the idea of extraterrestrials is banished from the universe of discourse and it explains why the idea of extraterrestrials threatens that universe in its entirety.

Those who give serious consideration to the ETH sometimes refer to the encounter with extraterrestrials as a 'close encounter of the third kind', a phrase that was coined by UFO researcher Allen Hynek. It seems that this phrase distances the speaker or writer sufficiently from the concept of extraterrestrials to have enabled it to enter everyday language. The creation of a linguistic taboo around extraterrestrials is a little reminiscent of the way it used to be

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commonplace to avoid using the word 'devil' (substituting, say, 'Lucifer' or 'Beelzebub' instead). Military strategist Nick Pope, who was responsible for investigating UFO sightings within a department of the British Ministry of Defence between 1991 and 1994, refers to the way language was used in this regard: 'Nothing was said openly, but when conventional explanations for some of the most compelling UFO cases were eliminated, fingers were pointed suggestively upward. And whenever the question of who was operating these UFOs was mentioned, the marvellous phrase "these people" was used' (Kean 2010: 174).

This mode of describing the purported operators of a UFO ('these people') illustrates two things: First, the taboo-free designation 'extraterrestrials' is avoided. This is because the very notion that such beings may exist calls into question our entire social order. Second, the beings referred to – which are most probably anything but human-like (cf. Gato-Rivera 2004) – are humanized by the term 'these people'. It seems that it is easier to speak about extraterrestrials if the conceptual chasm that lies between us and what is totally unknown to us is concealed, at least linguistically. It is initially of little import here whether extraterrestrials exist in 'reality' per se or only in Nick Pope's reality. To be able to talk meaningfully to one another at all, any two conversation partners have to assume that the other one shares certain ideas about reality. In the present context it is obvious that extraterrestrials have at least become a communicative reality, which immediately brings the conversation participants directly up against an intolerable experience of contingency: 'No matter the extent to which taboo-based behaviours are variously transformed and adapted, they arise nonetheless from one and the same basic idea: avoid what is not tangible (and is thus not comprehensible); avoid what is "radically Other"' (Ströbel 1978: 32f.).

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Sociologist Michael Schetsche has also faced the problem of how to describe extraterrestrials if one is not speaking about them in purely fictional terms but is rather considering them seriously as an explanation for a particular phenomenon. An article of his entitled 'Of terrestrial victims and extraterrestrial perpetrators' (*Von irdischen Opfern und außerirdischen Tätern*) contains the E-word in its very title. In this context it can still be understood in purely fictional terms in the sense that to claim one has been abducted by aliens is nothing more than a story. However, in listing various hypotheses for the abduction phenomenon, the author is seeking to not completely rule out the possibility that the interpretation given by those concerned may actually be true: 'Possibilities might include unusual states of mind, spiritual experiences, an encounter with an unknown physical anomaly – or possibly even indeed an encounter with radically different entities' (Schetsche 2008a: 172). The designation 'extraterrestrial' in the article's title is suddenly replaced at a decisive point by the term 'radically different entities'. Surely it is only extraterrestrials that the author can be referring to here – where else are such 'entities' supposed to come from, if not from another planet or – purely hypothetically – from another dimension? The author solves the problem of voicing a taboo by choosing a highly abstract term. The Free Online Dictionary defines the term 'entity' as follows: '1. Something that exists as a particular and discrete unit [...]. 2. The fact of existence; being. 3. The existence of something considered apart from its properties.' It seems that when they are denied specific properties, extraterrestrials become a little less terrifying.

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Glossary

Academic research	Research conducted at universities or other tertiary education institutions
Ancient astronautics	A popular science theory according to which humanity had contacts with extraterrestrials in previous eras
Anthropocentrism	A worldview that places man at the centre of all things
Contingency	An experience of the possibility that a given order can be different than it currently is
Critical Rationalism	A tradition of thought in which humans are assumed to be fallible. On this basis it is not permissible in the natural sciences to derive general laws from observations. Instead scientists should seek to investigate hypotheses systematically by means of observations
Culture	A system of meanings created by humans
Doxa	The sum total of all that is available for discussion within a culture

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Empirical	Relating to the acquisition of certain knowledge through experience
Environment	The complementary term to that of 'system'. Examples: The system of academic scholarship is part of the environment of the system of journalism (and vice versa). This book is part of the environment of the reader's mental system
Hypothesis	A precisely formulated assumption
Myth	A narrative scheme of interpretation of the world shared by those belonging to a particular (sub-) culture
Ontological	Relating to the study of fundamental existence
Paradigm	A set of basic scientific assumptions
Radical Constructivism	A tradition of thought developed in the social sciences which assumes that the human brain is unable to observe its environment directly. This being the case, people must necessarily develop models of reality and assume that other people share those models
Theory	A set of hypotheses

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