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SPACE POLICY, NEWSPACE AND THE THREAT OF SPACE SKEPTICISM

MILAN M. ČIRKOVIĆ¹

*¹Astronomical Observatory of Belgrade, Volgina 7,
11000 Belgrade, Serbia, mcirkovic@aob.rs*

ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed both a revival of space programs, largely propelled by the private sector’s growing interest (“NewSpace”), and the emergence of significant resistance to human space activities on multiple levels. This resistance is partly a manifestation of a broader counter-Enlightenment zeitgeist, evident in other areas of global culture and public life, and partly a reaction against the expanding role of private industry. Although it does not yet dominate discourse on space-related issues, space skepticism is a surprisingly widespread and decentralized phenomenon, bringing together a heterogeneous range of perspectives—from pro-Enlightenment liberals to radical “deep ecology” activists, philosophical pessimists, and antiglobalists of various orientations. So far, however, there has been little active opposition to this cultural trend.

While space engineers and entrepreneurs continue with “business as usual,” numerous risks are embedded in this cultural climate—especially if one adopts the oft-repeated (and rarely well-understood) maxim that “politics [and law] is downstream of culture.” An analogy with misguided skepticism toward nuclear power—which led to catastrophically poor decisions in the 1970s and 1980s, the consequences of which we are still grappling with today in the form of accelerated climate change, among other issues—will be analyzed in some detail. Important lessons for public outreach in the space sector will also be outlined.