From Spaceship to Lifeboat: Artemis II and the Radicalisation of a Planetary Perspective

Steffen Roth, Excelia Business School, France, and University of Cambridge, United Kingdom. Email: sr2156@cam.ac.uk

Abstract: This article examines the semantic shift from *Spaceship Earth* to *Lifeboat Earth* in contemporary planetary discourse. Taking recent rhetoric surrounding the Artemis II mission as its point of departure, it argues that the description of Earth as a "lifeboat" marks a significant radicalisation of an older metaphorical field. Whereas the Apollo era helped naturalise the image of Earth as a closed, fragile, and governable spaceship, the lifeboat metaphor recodes planetary closure in the harsher language of scarcity, emergency, triage, and conditional inclusion. The article first reconstructs the semantic formation of *Spaceship Earth*, showing that it emerged not as a spontaneous by-product of astronautic experience, but as part of a broader political, scientific, and cultural preparation. It then revisits the argument that spaceship semantics are already structurally totalising before turning to Garrett Hardin's lifeboat ethics to show how lifeboat semantics radicalise the older spaceship imaginary from within. A final step situates this semantic mutation within a broader planetary theatre in which both *Earthrise* and contemporary Artemis discourse function less as innocent revelations than as powerful condensations of historically prepared ways of seeing and governing the planet. The article concludes that the re-emergence of lifeboat language signals a passage from planetary control to planetary selection.
Keywords: Carrying capacity, scarcity, triage, closure, Spaceship Earth, emergency governance.
Paper type: Perspective Article

"Earth was just this lifeboat hanging undisturbedly in the universe."
(Christina Koch, NASA astronaut and Artemis II crew member)

1. Introduction: From Apollo to Artemis

In December 1968, the crew of Apollo 8 photographed the Earth rising above the lunar horizon. Four years later, Apollo 17 produced the image that would become known as *Blue Marble*. These pictures have since been canonised as visual epiphanies of planetary fragility and unity. Yet the meanings attached to them were never simply spontaneous expressions of astronautic wonder. As earlier research has shown (Höhler, 2015; Potter, 2018; Roth, 2024; Selcer, 2018), they entered and reinforced an already well-tilled semantic field in which Earth was being redescribed as a closed, fragile, and governable vessel: *Spaceship Earth*.

More than half a century later, the Artemis programme appears to reactivate this symbolic repertoire. Once again, lunar missions are staged as occasions for reflecting on Earth as a whole. Once again, spaceflight suggests itself as privileged platform for observing the planet from without and for addressing humanity in the name of an encompassing shared condition. Yet the semantic register now seems subtly harsher. Where the Apollo era helped consolidate the metaphor of *Spaceship Earth*, recent Artemis rhetoric suggests a further step: Earth as "this lifeboat hanging undisturbingly in the universe", and humanity as its crew. This semantic shift matters because a spaceship, however enclosing and disciplinary, still evokes maintenance, shared mission, and the management of a common craft. A lifeboat, by contrast, evokes acute

scarcity, emergency, triage, and the possibility that survival may depend on command, exclusion, and sacrifice.

This article argues that this emerging metaphor of *Lifeboat Earth* radicalises rather than replaces the older semantics of *Spaceship Earth*. The point is not that spaceship semantics were benign. On the contrary, the very idea of Earth as a spaceship already concentrated an extraordinary programme: one habitat, one crew, one mission, one finite stock of provisions, and no meaningful outside. In this sense, *Spaceship Earth* was always more than a picturesque ecological metaphor. It condensed a logic of planetary closure, stock maintenance, behavioural discipline, and, potentially, comprehensive social control. The lifeboat metaphor intensifies these implications. If spaceship semantics tend towards planetary management, lifeboat semantics tend towards planetary triage.

This radicalisation is not merely of historical interest. The language of lifeboats has reappeared not only in allusions surrounding contemporary space missions, but also in recent crisis discourse on planetary boundaries, pandemic prevention, and economic transformation (Benvenisti, 2020; James, 2020; Mann, 2025; Scharenberg, 2026; Seitanidis and Gritzas, 2022; Uhlin, 2025). In such contexts, calls for or diagnoses of a transition to a 'lifeboat economy' (Ahmed, 2020; J. P. Morgan, 2022) indicate that the metaphor has never remained fully confined to Garrett Hardin's (1968; 1974a; 1974b) notorious interventions of the 1970s, but resurfaces in policy-adjacent debates on how humanity should respond to systemic ecological instability. The recurrence of this vocabulary suggests that the semantic shift at stake is not accidental. It resonates with a broader hardening of planetary crisis discourse in which stewardship is increasingly recoded in the language of emergency.

To develop its argument, the article proceeds in five steps. It first reconstructs the semantic formation of *Spaceship Earth*, showing that it emerged not as a naïve by-product of astronautic experience, but as part of a broader political, scientific, and cultural preparation. It then revisits the argument that spaceship semantics are already structurally totalising. Against this background, the article turns to Garrett Hardin's lifeboat ethics in order to show how the lifeboat metaphor radicalises the older spaceship imaginary. A subsequent section returns to the planetary theatre of Earthrise, *Blue Marble*, and overview discourse to argue that the reappearance of lifeboat semantics on the Artemis stage is unlikely to be semantically innocent, even if direct intentionality cannot be demonstrated. The conclusion diagnoses a shift from planetary management to planetary triage: from a total institution without exit to an emergency institution in which the legitimacy of selection, rationing, and exclusion becomes easier to assert.

The central claim, then, is straightforward. Artemis does not merely restage the visual and rhetorical grandeur of Apollo. It does so under altered semantic conditions. If Apollo helped naturalise the image of Earth as a spaceship, Artemis may now be helping to normalise its harsher successor: Earth as lifeboat.

2. Take-off: From *Earthrise* to *Spaceship Earth*

The now-canonical images of *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* have often been treated as if they revealed, almost instantaneously, the fragility and unity of the planet to itself (Kluzik, 2026; Luke, 2010). Yet such a reading mistakes semantic consolidation for semantic origin. The view of Earth as a closed and vulnerable whole did not begin with the astronauts' cameras (Potter, 2018). Rather, the photographs entered an already prepared field of "campaigns to cultivate planetary loyalty" (Selcer, 2018, p. 190) in which planetary closure, fragility, precarity, shared fate, and the need for new forms of management had long been under construction.

One important component of this preparation was the gradual displacement of frontier imagery by images of closure. In his classic essay on "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth,"

Kenneth Boulding (1966) described modernity as a transition from the "illimitable plane" of expansion to the "closed sphere" of a finite world. Against the open-ended "cowboy economy" of extraction and disposal, he proposed the "spaceman economy," in which the decisive concern was no longer throughput but "stock maintenance." In this formulation, Earth was no longer the setting for indefinite outward movement, but a materially constrained vessel whose internal balances had to be monitored and preserved.

Though foundational to ecological economics (Corsi et al., 2026; Costanza, 2020; Victor, 2015) and the concept of circular economy, this semantic shift was not confined to economics. As Sabine Höhler (2015) has shown, *Spaceship Earth* emerged in the environmental age as part of a broader reorganisation of global space, capacity, and control. The figure of the spaceship linked the growing awareness of planetary limits to technoscientific promises of management, survival, and design. It condensed fears of enclosure and scarcity, while simultaneously projecting confidence in science, engineering, and systems analysis as means of governing life within a finite habitat (Selcer, 2018; Kluzik, 2026). In this sense, *Spaceship Earth* was never merely a metaphor of fragility. It was also a programme of capacity calculation, environmental maintenance, and future-oriented intervention.

The same point can be made with regard to the visual culture of planetary consciousness. Long before Apollo 8 and Apollo 17 produced their iconic images, authors and activists had already anticipated the political and emotional force of seeing Earth from outside. As early as 1946, Arthur C. Clarke (1946) had already suggested that seeing Earth in its "true perspective as a single small globe among the stars" would undermine the more extreme forms of nationalism and transform humanity's self-understanding. Fred Hoyle (1950) famously predicted that once a photograph of Earth from space became available, a new idea "as powerful as any in history" would be let loose. Stewart Brand's later campaign for a whole-Earth image, as well as Buckminster Fuller's popularisation of *Spaceship Earth*, show that the desire for such a planetary image was itself part of a pre-existing cultural script. The photographs did not invent the script; they supplied it with an image of extraordinary persuasive power.

The same applies to the wider moral and political rhetoric surrounding the spaceship. Barbara Ward's (1966) call to view humanity as "the ship's crew of a single spaceship" transformed interdependence into a matter of common survival and rational discipline. Fuller's (1969) "Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth" similarly suggested that the planet required forms of expert guidance adequate to its new condition as an integrated and vulnerable system. By the time the astronauts began to speak in the language of fragility, unity, and planetary care, the relevant semantics had therefore already been elaborated across environmental thought, systems discourse, development politics, and popular culture.

What *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* achieved was thus less the discovery than the naturalisation of *Spaceship Earth*. They condensed and globalised a way of seeing that had already been conceptually, politically, and affectively prepared. The decisive point for the present argument is that the Apollo images did not simply show a planet. They helped stabilise a form of planetary observation in which closure, fragility, interdependence, and governability appeared self-evident. Once this semantic field had been normalised, further radicalisations could build on it. Popularised by Garrett Hardin (1974a; 1974b), the metaphor of *Lifeboat Earth* would be one such radicalisation.

3. Lock-in: The totalitarian potential of spaceship semantics

The move from *Spaceship Earth* to *Lifeboat Earth* can be understood only if the older spaceship semantics are first stripped of their residual innocence. For all its benevolent overtones of care, unity, and shared responsibility, the metaphor of *Spaceship Earth* was never politically neutral. It implied from the outset a world imagined as one enclosed habitat, one

crew, one finite stock of provisions, and one overriding problem of survival (Selcer, 2018). In this sense, the metaphor condensed not merely an ecological intuition, but an entire programme of closure, discipline, measurement, and control (Höhler, 2015; Kluzik, 2026).

The strongest way to grasp this programme is to read *Spaceship Earth* as a planetary total institution. Total institutions are defined by enclosure, the breakdown of boundaries between spheres of life, the subordination of all activities to a single rational plan, and the presence of a central authority equipped to maintain discipline. In this sense, Roth (2024) argued that *Spaceship Earth* fulfils these criteria with unusual consistency. Unlike other institutions, it admits no meaningful outside. There is no external environment into which one might withdraw, no harbour at which one might disembark, and no leakage that would relativise its encompassing claims. This is precisely what makes it, in principle, more total than prisons, monasteries, barracks, or ships in the ordinary sense.

This totality is not only spatial, but also functional. Once Earth is redescribed as a single vessel with limited carrying capacity, all domains of life begin to appear as variables of one integrated maintenance problem. Economy becomes stock maintenance rather than frontier expansion. Health becomes planetary health (Roth and Valentinov, 2023). Politics becomes crisis management on behalf of collective survival (Roth, 2021). Moral and behavioural deviations become threats not merely to local orders, but to the integrity of the ship itself (Ward, 1966, p.18). What had previously been distributed across different institutions, roles, and forms of life is thus re-coded as part of one overarching mission. The result is a powerful tendency towards the suspension of polycontexturality (Roth, 2021; Roth and Valentinov, 2023): the plurality of social perspectives gives way to the increasingly forceful claim that all relevant action must now be oriented to the preservation of one shared life-support system.

It is precisely here that the authoritarian potential of spaceship semantics becomes visible (Hansson, 2026). If the ship is fragile, if resources are finite, if the crew is vulnerable, and if survival depends on correct operation, then demands for guidance, monitoring, correction, and compliance readily become intelligible. Barbara Ward's call for rational behaviour as a condition of collective survival, Fuller's confidence in expert and computational control, and later programmes of planetary accounting, therapeutic intervention, and behavioural steering all belong to this broader semantic tendency. The issue is not that such measures must culminate in total control, but that the metaphor itself lowers the threshold for imagining ever more comprehensive forms of intervention as not only legitimate, but necessary.

This is why *Spaceship Earth* should not be mistaken for a merely holistic or poetic figure. It is a metaphor of compulsory inclusion. Every single individual within the "single, vulnerable human community" (Ward, 1966, p. 3) is on board. Everyone is implicated. "Everyone has a role to play" (which still is recurring theme of, inter alia, World Economic Forum initiatives). Under such conditions, rights are easily reframed as privileges, autonomy as irresponsibility, and dissent as sabotage. The semantics of the spaceship therefore already point towards a world in which surveillance, discipline, and moralisation can be justified in the name of planetary equilibrium (Roth, 2024; Roth and Valentinov, 2023). What the lifeboat metaphor adds is not enclosure itself, but a harder grammar for governing within enclosure. If *Spaceship Earth* implies planetary management, *Lifeboat Earth* implies that management under intensified conditions of scarcity and emergency.

4. From spaceship to lifeboat: a semantic radicalisation

If *Spaceship Earth* already implies a structurally totalising horizon, then the shift to *Lifeboat Earth* does not mark a departure from enclosure, but a hardening of the rules for governing within it. Garrett Hardin's (1974a; 1974b) essays on lifeboat ethics are decisive here because they do not merely add a new metaphor to an existing repertoire. They explicitly oppose one

metaphorical morality to another. Hardin even begins from the claim that difficult collective problems are often approached "through the door of metaphor" and that one must therefore "pit one metaphor against another." In this sense, his lifeboat is not an incidental image, but a deliberate semantic counter-model to the environmentalist language of *Spaceship Earth*. Environmentalists, he argues, had used the image of Earth as a spaceship to promote fair sharing within a common planetary habitat. The problem, in his view, was that such idealists "confuse the ethics of a spaceship with those of a lifeboat."

This distinction matters because the lifeboat does not simply restate the spaceship under more dramatic circumstances. It recodes the entire situation. A spaceship still suggests a shared craft whose maintenance depends on discipline, expertise, and cooperation. A lifeboat, by contrast, foregrounds limited capacity, safety margins, and the constant possibility of swamping. Hardin's famous thought experiment makes the point with brutal clarity. A lifeboat built for sixty cannot simply admit everyone in the surrounding water without sinking; even admitting a few more passengers destroys the "safety factor" on which survival depends. Under such conditions, the relevant moral question is no longer how to organise a common mission, but whom to exclude, on what grounds, and with what justification (Höhler, 2014). The decisive issue is no longer common stewardship alone, but the preservation of reserve under conditions of emergency.

The semantic radicalisation at stake can therefore be described in almost morphological terms. The spaceship metaphor remains compatible with a rhetoric of stewardship, stock maintenance, and common responsibility. The lifeboat metaphor shifts the emphasis to emergency, triage, and selection. Whereas the spaceship still allows a vision of universal inclusion, however disciplinary its practical implications may be, the lifeboat begins from the premise that inclusion has become materially impossible. The spaceship may justify surveillance in the name of equilibrium. The lifeboat justifies vigilance in the name of survival. The spaceship may already appear as a paternalistic total institution (Roth, 2024), but the lifeboat is more easily authoritarian because command and total control, once scarcity is rendered acute, appear no longer optional or limited to those "go mad or get dead drunk (…) and run for the controls (…) of our spaceship" (Ward, 1966, p. 18) but must existentially necessarily be applied to all.

Hardin (1974b) sharpens this point further by linking the lifeboat not only to scarcity, but also to sovereignty. For the metaphor of a spaceship to be correct, he argues, the aggregate of people on board would have to be under some form of unitary sovereign control. A true ship has a captain, or at least some authoritative mechanism capable of binding all on board. Earth, however, has no such captain. The United Nations, in Hardin's view, is "a toothless tiger," which is why the language of shared spaceship rights remains misleading unless it is matched by enforceable spaceship responsibilities. This is where the lifeboat metaphor becomes, for Hardin, more realistic than the spaceship metaphor. Humanity does not in fact inhabit one governable vessel governed by one sovereign centre. It inhabits, as he puts it at the end of the essay, "a number of sovereign lifeboats." The movement from spaceship to lifeboat is therefore also a movement from universalist imagery to a fractured world of bounded and competing survival units.

Hardin's lifeboat argument also radicalises a deeper grammar already present in his earlier work. In "The Tragedy of the Commons," Hardin (1968) had already insisted that the population problem has "no technical solution," that the world available to human beings must be treated as finite, and that "space is no escape." In the same text, he argued that "freedom to breed will bring ruin to all" and that the only way to preserve other freedoms is by relinquishing this one through forms of "mutual coercion." The 1974 lifeboat essays should therefore not be read as isolated provocations. They are better understood as the semantic condensation of a longer-standing finite-world logic: once the world is closed, once growth exceeds carrying

capacity, and once no technical escape is available, politics is redescribed as a problem of enforced, not voluntary limits (Kallis, 2021) and morally defended exclusion (Höhler, 2014).
In this regard, Hardin's lifeboat does not negate the spaceship so much as correct it from within. His complaint is precisely that the ethics of sharing attached to the spaceship image remain too soft for a crowded world. What is missing, in his view, is an insistence that rights and responsibilities must go together. Where *Spaceship Earth* still carries traces of universalism, the lifeboat strips these away. What remains is a survival craft in which rationality is defined by the preservation of capacity, the maintenance of reserve, and the refusal of claims that would compromise the craft's viability. This is why the lifeboat metaphor lends itself so readily to the languages of safety factors, carrying capacity, and guarded borders. It does not merely imagine a world under pressure. It imagines that world as already deep into a condition where selection has become a virtue and generosity without corresponding control appears as a path to collective ruin.
The broader machinery of Hardin's argument reinforces this point. His discussions of world food banks, migration, and humanitarian aid all turn on the claim that apparently compassionate measures may act as ratchets that intensify rather than relieve crisis. The lifeboat metaphor thereby does more than dramatise scarcity. It converts exclusion into prudence, reserve into responsibility, and refusal into a morally defended strategy of survival (Meisinger, 2022). It also places special weight on posterity: to admit too many into the lifeboat is, in this view, not merely to burden the present, but to consume the safety margin owed to future generations. Lifeboat ethics thus presents itself not simply as harsh realism, but as stewardship for those not yet on board.
Sabine Höhler's (2015) reconstruction of the "lifeboats of human ecology" usefully sharpens this point. As she notes, lifeboat ethics shifted the dominant imagery from "one boat" and "sinking ship" to the lifeboat, thereby stressing not hope or unity but limited capacity. In her reading, the lifeboat metaphor foregrounds strict principles of selection, rational allocation of provisions, and even the disposal of dead weight. "How many people could the world support, who should live, who should decide, and how—these were the questions population ecologists concerned themselves with." (Höhler, 2014, p. 101f). The key point here is not only that this logic is harsh. It is that it appears harsh in a specifically rationalised way: triage, exclusion, and the unequal valuation of lives are redescribed as objective procedures demanded by the conditions of survival.
Seen from this perspective, the movement from spaceship to lifeboat is not simply a change in tone. It is a semantic radicalisation with major political consequences. Under spaceship semantics, the planet appears as an enclosed system that requires management or stewardship. Under lifeboat semantics, that same enclosed system is recoded as a site of scarcity so acute that rationing, exclusion, and emergency legitimacy come to seem not regrettable exceptions but the very grammar of realism. If *Spaceship Earth* already tended towards planetary control, Lifeboat Earth tends towards planetary triage.
This shift also clarifies the significance of recent rhetoric around Artemis II. Upon her return from the mission, astronaut Christina Koch described Earth as a "lifeboat," a formulation that does not yet amount to a full endorsement of Hardin's ethics but does resonate with precisely this harder semantic field. Once the planet is named not as a spaceship but as a lifeboat, the imagery of common fate is subtly but decisively altered. The crew remains, but the horizon is no longer primarily one of maintenance and shared mission. It is one of limited capacity, emergency discipline, and the latent question of who or what can still be kept aboard.

5. Planetary theatre: the comeback of lifeboat semantics

If the passage from *Spaceship Earth* to *Lifeboat Earth* is to be understood as more than a chance rhetorical variation, then the question arises of how planetary metaphors gain their force in the first place. The answer suggested by the preceding analysis is that they do not simply emerge from immediate perception. They are cultivated, prepared, and staged. This was already true of the earlier spaceship semantics. The iconic images of *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* did not create planetary consciousness ex nihilo. They entered a cultural field in which the relevant expectations, desires, and interpretations had already been prepared in advance. As earlier work has shown, the script existed before the image: what the photographs provided was not a new world-view in pure form, but a uniquely powerful visual condensation of an already available semantics of closure, fragility, unity, and governability.

This point is crucial because it shifts attention from revelation to mise-en-scène. As mentioned earlier, Arthur C. Clarke (1946) and Fred Hoyle (1950) had anticipated the emotional and political force of an external image of Earth long before the Apollo missions, predicting that once such a photograph became available, a new idea "as powerful as any in history" (Hoyle, 1950, p. 9f) would be released. Systematic campaigns for a whole-Earth image and a popularisation of *Spaceship Earth* likewise indicate that the desire to see the planet from outside was itself embedded in a wider cultural project. The astronauts did not simply discover the proper meaning of Earth by leaving it. They stepped into an already prepared theatre in which the planet had been cast as a single fragile object of observation, attachment, and control.

The same logic applies to the broader politics of planetary representation. To represent Earth as one vessel is never merely descriptive. It is to position humanity as one crew, to privilege the view from outside over those from within, and to translate plurality into the image of an integrated whole. Planetary images of this kind therefore do not just show a world; they organise it. They reduce competing contexts to one overarching frame, making closure appear self-evident, interdependence morally binding, and coordinated management historically necessary. This is how the theatre of *Spaceship Earth* cast a maximally isolated and therefore highly contingent perspective on the human condition into a paradoxical fusion of intimately direct and universally shared perception.

From this perspective, the reappearance of lifeboat semantics on the Artemis stage is unlikely to be semantically innocent. This is not to claim that Koch's wording proves a consciously orchestrated attempt to relaunch Hardinian politics. Such a claim would outrun the evidence. The point is more modest and more important. Once one recognises that the earlier shift from Earth to *Spaceship Earth* was mediated by prior semantic preparation, one can no longer treat the present shift from spaceship to lifeboat as if it were merely an accidental phrase. Koch's formulation resonates with a wider field in which planetary emergency (Roth, 2021), planetary health (Roth and Valentinov, 2023), and even the "lifeboat" semantic itself (Mann, 2026; Scharenberg, 2026; Seitanidis and Gritzas, 2022; Uhlin, 2025) have already begun to circulate again. What appears in the Artemis context as a striking metaphor thus also appears as part of a broader hardening of crisis semantics.

The significance of Artemis, then, lies less in providing original content than in offering a stage of exceptional symbolic authority. Just as Apollo once supplied an image-world through which *Spaceship Earth* could be naturalised, Artemis may now be helping to normalise a harsher variant of planetary self-description. The programme revives the visual grammar of lunar return, Earth observation, and species-level address, but under altered semantic conditions. The old message of closure remains intact, yet it is increasingly inflected by the language of scarcity, resilience, emergency, and survival. The result is not the abandonment of planetary mission semantics, but their intensification.

This is why the issue is not whether the lifeboat metaphor was deliberately inserted into public discourse by some identifiable centre of calculation. The more interesting sociological point is that such metaphors become available, plausible, and resonant only within a historically prepared semantic reservoir (Andersen, 2010; 2011; Neisig, 2024; Sohn, 2021). In this sense, the Artemis stage is not the source of the new metaphorical register so much as one of its amplifiers. It lends visibility, legitimacy, and affective force to a planetary rhetoric that had already begun to harden elsewhere.

If *Earthrise* and *Blue Marble* helped stabilise the image of Earth as a spaceship, then Artemis may now be contributing to the stabilisation of a more severe self-description. The argument, to repeat, is not one of proof of intention, but of patterned resonance. Once the genealogy of planetary metaphors is reconstructed, the current reappearance of lifeboat language is better understood not as an isolated slip of speech, but as a symptom of a broader semantic mutation.

6. Conclusion: from planetary control to planetary triage?

This article has argued that the contemporary return of lunar mission rhetoric does more than restage the visual and symbolic grandeur of the Apollo missions. It also reactivates, under altered conditions, a longer history of planetary metaphorization. If the Apollo era helped naturalise the image of Earth as a spaceship, recent Artemis rhetoric suggests a further semantic step: from *Spaceship Earth* to *Lifeboat Earth*. The significance of this shift lies not in the mere substitution of one vessel for another, but in the transformation of the political and moral horizon that each vessel implies.

The point is not that *Spaceship Earth* was ever innocent. As the earlier sections have shown, the spaceship metaphor already condensed a programme of closure, stock maintenance, behavioural discipline, and potentially comprehensive social control. It imagined the planet as one finite habitat, one shared craft, and one integrated problem of survival. In this sense, the metaphor already carried a structurally totalising potential (Roth, 2024). Yet it still allowed the rhetoric of common mission, stewardship, voluntary alignment, and universal inclusion to persist (Kallis, 2021), however strained those ideals may always have been in practice.

The lifeboat metaphor radicalises this horizon. It retains enclosure, but hardens its operative logic. Under lifeboat semantics, the central problem is no longer simply how to maintain a common vessel, but how to preserve it under conditions of acute vulnerability, emergency, and scarcity. The grammar of planetary observation is thereby altered. Stewardship gives way to triage. Shared mission gives way to emergency discipline. Inclusion becomes conditional. Reserve capacity becomes a moral imperative. Selection, rationing, and exclusion become easier to justify as the unavoidable realism of survival.

The broader implication then is that the dominant metaphor through which humanity imagines its planetary condition is never politically trivial. Metaphors such as *Spaceship Earth* and *Lifeboat Earth* do not merely describe a shared world; they prestructure the range of responses that appear rational, necessary, and legitimate within it. If Earth is a spaceship, then control, coordination, and discipline become plausible options. If Earth becomes a lifeboat, then these options become imperative, and the threshold lowers for the legitimation of triage, sacrifice, and exclusion. The passage from one metaphor to the other therefore marks more than a stylistic shift. It marks a mutation in the acceptable semantics of planetary order.

The central diagnosis of this article can therefore be stated succinctly. What is emerging is a passage from planetary control to planetary selection: from the semantics of a total institution without exit to those of an emergency institution in which the right to remain on board can no longer be taken as unconditional. Whether this shift will consolidate further remains to be seen. But once the metaphor of the lifeboat has entered the planetary stage, it becomes harder to pretend that humanity is still merely speaking the language of shared stewardship.

References

- Ahmed, N. (2020). Biden must Transition to a 'Lifeboat Economy' to Avoid Empowering the next 'Trump', *Global Policy*, 30 November 2020 (University of Durham, globalpolicyjournal.com).
- Andersen, N. Å. (2010). The semantic analytical strategy and diagnostics of present. In *Die Methodologien des Systems: Wie kommt man zum Fall und wie dahinter?* (pp. 161-180). Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Andersen, N. Å. (2011). Conceptual history and the diagnostics of the present. *Management & Organizational History*, *6*(3), 248-267.
- Benvenisti, E. (2020). The WHO—Destined to fail?: political cooperation and the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Journal of International Law*, *114*(4), 588-597.
- Clarke, A. C. (1946). The challenge of the spaceship: Astronautics and its impact upon human society). *Journal of the British Interplanetary Society*, *6*(1), 66-81.
- Corsi, G., Guarino, R., Muñoz-Ulecia, E., Grande, U., Buonocore, E., Sapio, A., & Franzese, P. P. (2026). Has "Ecological Economics" betrayed its roots? Revealing its state, internal tensions and evolution through a multi-level and multi-scale bibliometric assessment. *Ecological Economics*, *240*, 108845.
- Costanza, R. (2020). Ecological economics in 2049: Getting beyond the argument culture to the world we all want. *Ecological Economics*, *168*, 106484.
- Fuller, R.B. (1969). *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*. New York: Pocket Books.
- Hansson, E. (2026). Green eyed sailors: Allegories of authoritarian envy: E. Hansson. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, *31*(1), 190-201.
- Hardin, G. (1968). The tragedy of the commons: the population problem has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension in morality. *Science*, *162*(3859), 1243-1248.
- Hardin, G. (1974a). Lifeboat ethics: The case against helping the poor. *Psychology Today*, *8*(4), 38-43.
- Hardin, G. (1974b). Commentary: Living on a Lifeboat. *BioScience*, *24*(10), 561-568.
- Höhler, S. (2015). *Spaceship earth in the environmental age, 1960–1990*. London: Routledge.
- J.P. Morgan (2022), *The lifeboat economy: Implications of a fracturing world order,* Strategic Investment Advisory Group, J.P. Morgan Asset Management, September 2022.
- James, P. (2020). Engaged Ethics in the Time of COVID: Caring for All or Excluding Some from the Lifeboat?. *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, *17*(4), 489-493.
- Kallis, G. (2021). Limits, ecomodernism and degrowth. *Political Geography*, *87*, 102367.
- Kluzik, V. (2026). From Malthus to planetary boundaries: the genealogy of 'carrying capacity'as a political technology. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 1-18.
- Luke, T. W. (2010). Ephemeralization as environmentalism: rereading R. Buckminster Fuller's operating manual for spaceship earth. *Organization & Environment*, *23*(3), 354-362.
- Mann, I. (2026). From survival cannibalism to climate politics: Rethinking Regina vs Dudley and Stephens. *Global Constitutionalism*, *15*(1), 143-168.
- Meisinger, N. (2022). A tragedy of intangible commons: Riding the socioecological wave. *Ecological Economics*, *193*, 107298.
- Neisig, M. (2024). The role of management science in forming next era semantics. *Systemic Practice and Action Research*, *37*(3), 297-307.

- Potter, C. (2018). *The Earth Gazers*. Pegasus Books.
- Roth, S. (2021). The Great Reset. Restratification for lives, livelihoods, and the planet. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, *166*, 120636.
- Roth, S. (2024). Spaceship Earth. A total institution. *Ecological Economics*, *223*, 108243.
- Roth, S., & Valentinov, V. (2023). Health beyond medicine. A planetary theory extension. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, *45*(2), 331-345.
- Scharenberg, A. (2026). Aboard the 'Commonist Lifeboat': Metaphor, custom, materiality: Response to Itamar Mann Agora. *Global Constitutionalism*, *15*(1), 169-175.
- Seitanidis, S., & Gritzas, G. (2022). Hardin's legacy as a need for a 'commoning turn'in planning. *Planning Theory*, *21*(4), 354-379.
- Selcer, P. (2018). *The postwar origins of the global environment: How the United Nations built Spaceship Earth*. Columbia University Press.
- Sohn, Y. (2021). Four pillars of Luhmann's analytical apparatus: Applications for communication research. *Studies in Communication Sciences*, *21*(2), 207-224.
- Uhlin, G. (2025). Lifeboat films: cinematic responses to resource scarcity. *Screen*, *66*(1), 61-79.
- Victor, P. A. (2015). The Kenneth E. Boulding memorial award 2014: Ecological economics: A personal journey. *Ecological Economics*, *109*, 93-100.
- Ward, B. (1966). *Space Ship Earth*. London: Hamish Hamilton.