

The Impossibility of Humanity as a Political Concept

Reflections on *Battlestar Galactica*

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(1) **Introduction** – The third season of *Battlestar Galactica* began with accusations from outraged fans that the show had taken an ‘anti-American’ turn in the season premier due to the somewhat sympathetic portrayal of suicide bombers. To an extent, the train of thought followed by these fans is quite understandable: the Humans represent ‘good,’ America and liberal democracy; the robotic Cylons represent ‘evil,’ al-Qaeda, and genocidal terrorism. That is, the good guys – the Humans – want to be left alone to their own devices enjoying the fruits of triumphant post-historical liberal democracy. The bad guys – the Cylons – want nothing but to destroy the human way of life. How then, these outraged fans ask, could the ‘Americans’ be portrayed as the absolute of contemporary evil: the insurgent suicide bomber? Put another way, these outraged fans could not picture *themselves* in a situation where suicide bombing appeared as a reasonable course of action. These fans really did identify with apolitical post-historical liberal democracy.

Catching wind of this controversy convinced me to look further into this show, which I had not yet seen. While the third season premier really annoyed a number of Americans, I was surprised to discover that during the second season, a large number of Christian fundamentalists lent their support, not to the supposedly ‘good’ Humans, but to the ‘evil’ Cylons. The reason why the Christian fundamentalists cheered for who was clearly intended as the ‘bad guys’ was also quite interesting: the Humans are polytheists (their religion being roughly equivalent to a space-version of ancient Greco-Roman religion) while the Cylons are monotheists (their religion

being roughly equivalent to the three great monotheistic religions). Not only did the robotic Cylons believe in what they called “the One True God,” they also legitimated their war against Humanity on the basis of their religion. That is, the Christian fundamentalists, unlike the post-historical liberal democrats, could imagine themselves in, and therefore identify with, a holy crusade whereby the complete destruction or conversion of the infidel enemy was the only possible conclusion.

Having an abiding interest in political theology, the relation between political and theological concepts, my interest was piqued and, thus, I promptly headed out to the Smiths Falls Wal-Mart to purchase the first season of the show on DVD. Unfortunately, I have not yet had the opportunity to catch up on the show having only made it through the pilot ‘mini-series’ and the first season. All the same, I won’t let this prevent me from pontificating on what has quickly become my favorite television show – tied, of course, NBC’s version of *The Office* and *Boston Legal*.

(2) **In Short** – As we all know, this format – the panel presentation – is quite limited in a number of ways: it isn’t particularly conducive to making detailed arguments, especially detailed *theoretical* arguments. In place of a detailed argument, I’ll make a pitch or, perhaps, an advertisement: why should a social or political theorist bother to watch *Battlestar Galactica*?

My attraction to the show is not only that it is clearly the most ‘political’ show on television – and do keep in mind that *Battlestar Galactica*’s run has overlapped with *The West Wing*, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* – but that it is also the most ‘theoretical’ show on television. Let me explain: *The West Wing* ended with a scene of the President’s office, including a shot of his bookcase with a copy of Michel Foucault’s *Society Must be Defended* on it. There was no reason to believe (and this is pure conjecture: I never watched *The West Wing* and my account here relies exclusively upon what I’ve read online) that the President had ever opened the book; rather, if we

were to take anything from the shot, it was that the fake President on *The West Wing* read books – including intellectual ones written by Frenchmen – unlike the real President in the real White House. (This was before the real President announced that he read Albert Camus’ *The Stranger* during his summer vacation.) Or, again, the point of that shot could merely have been the title as a slogan: ‘society must be defended’ – but from ‘what’ it must be defended remaining unsaid. Either way, the actual content of Foucault’s book – racism, sovereignty, biopower, etc – was not the point in *The West Wing*. In contrast, *Battlestar Galactica* gives the impression that its writers and producers are familiar, not only with Foucault, but also a whole range of contemporary social and political theory: Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, My comments – or, should I say, my advertisement for the show? – will be limited to an outline of a single theme from the first season: the idea that humanity is impossible as a political category – both on our own Earth and in an imaginary space.

(3) **Overview of *Battlestar Galactica*** – For those who have not yet had the opportunity to watch the show, a brief overview might be helpful. First it must be said that the present incarnation of *Battlestar Galactica* – the so-called ‘reimagined’ series – has little to do with the original series broadcast in 1978-1979 or with, and for this we should be thankful, the disastrous *Battlestar 1980* series, which was mercifully short-lived. What the current, ‘re-imagined’ show has in common with the original series is quite limited: many of the character names are preserved – even if their race and gender changes, such as the case of the ace starfighter pilot, Starbuck, who, in the original series was a black man, but is a white woman in the ‘reimagined’ series – and the primary conflict, the war between the robotic Cylons and the Humans, remains the same.

Battlestar Galactica is premised upon a common trope in science fiction: the very technology that we create will lead to our own downfall and destruction. Such a theme, especially in relation

to robots created to fight on our behalf, has been quite prevalent in the past twenty years: one merely need to think of *Blade Runner*, the three *Terminator* movies, and the three *Matrix* movies. However, such an idea has an older pedigree than the mid-1980s, of which *I, Robot* is an example. Unlike these other movies – perhaps with the exception of *I, Robot – Battlestar Galactica* begins with, but does not end with, the problem of the ‘rise of the machines.’

Forty years ago, we are told, the machines did, indeed, rise, triggering a violent and destructive war between Humans and their former robot slaves, the Cylons. The war concluded with an armistice that saw the Humans remain on their own worlds and the Cylons leaving to find a new one for themselves. As the pilot begins – I’ll pick this thread up again momentarily from the perspective of the Humans – the Cylons have initiated a new pre-emptive war of total annihilation against the Humans. The significant difference between the Cylons now and what they were forty years ago is that they have managed to seamlessly combine the organic and the mechanical. The Cylons consider themselves to be alive as Humans in the exact same way that we humans consider ourselves to be alive. However, for the majority of the pilot – a full four hours of television – the Humans do not yet know that the Cylons now look like and are, in fact, indistinguishable from, Humans. The very first scene of the pilot brings us to Armistice Station, constructed in accordance with the treaty, as a diplomatic post which has gone un-used – save for a single Human officer assigned to the station each year – since its construction. Upon arriving at the station, the human officer prepares his desk reviewing his briefs on the Cylons. Two Cylons – resembling the Cylons from the original series and hence roughly in accordance with what the officer expected – walk into the room. Shortly thereafter, another person walks into the room: a blonde woman – a Cylon in human form – who promptly asks the officer, as the Station is being destroyed, if he is alive. Cylon, “Are you alive?” The officer, confused, replies, “Yes” To which the Cylon says, “Prove it.” With this, the Cylon genocide of Humans begins and the rest unfolds

according to genre, this time in the register of the post-apocalyptic: the Cylons are almost completely successful in their attack, destroying most of the human worlds with devastating nuclear weapons, leaving only a rag-tag bunch of misfits to not only preserve humanity as a species, but also to defeat the Cylons.

(4) **Humanity** – Pre-figuring Reagan’s question to Gorbachev at their first meeting in 1985 by about fifty years, Carl Schmitt, approximately two-thirds of the way through *The Concept of the Political*, evokes a plot device frequently found in science fiction: what happens when aliens invade Earth? Schmitt writes, “Humanity as such cannot wage war because it has no enemy, at least not on this planet. The concept of humanity excludes the concept of the enemy, because the enemy does not cease to be a human being – and hence there is no specific differentiation in that concept” (Schmitt 1996[1932: 54). The point here is that so long as humans are limited to earth and have no contact with alien species, humanity cannot become a political concept because humanity as a whole could not confront an enemy and thus act politically or even find itself in a political situation. Schmitt’s comment follows from an earlier argument he makes: the political as such cannot disappear because it is a relation that always creates more than one. That is, a universal state comprising all of humanity and the political cannot co-exist in effect because there would be no ‘outside’ to form the ‘inside.’ If the political persists, then, of necessity, there must be more than one political entity. However, if there is only one universal state, then the political cannot exist. Schmitt comments, “What remains is neither politics nor state, but culture, civilization, economics, morality, law, art, entertainment, etc” (1996[1932]: 53). The very moment at which humanity becomes universal, that activity which is specifically human – i.e., politics – disappears. We are thus reminded of a comment made by Aristotle: humans are animals with the capacity for politics. Thus, when humanity is universalized and the political

disappears, humans cease being human and once again become mere animals. This point is fully recognized and, indeed, is the very content of the first half of the ‘mini-series’ pilot, this time from the perspective of the Humans. The famous warship, the Battlestar Galactica, is to be decommissioned and turned into a museum; its commander, a hero of the first Cylon War, William Adama, is also to retire. Adama and the warship he commands are relics of a previous age: they remember and participated in politics in Schmitt’s sense. The transformation of the Battlestar Galactica into a museum is precisely the transformation of politics into culture. Meanwhile, Adama, a man who once participated in politics, is to retire and, with him, politics as well. This is underscored by what becomes, after the Cylon invasion, Adama’s civilian counterpart, the Secretary of Education, who, we later learn is quite removed from politics being 43rd in line of succession to the office of the Presidency and who only entered government out of personal loyalty to the President. The Secretary of Education, mockingly called a schoolteacher by Adama, is the government’s representative at the retirement/decommissioning ceremony. When each finally hear that war has begun, Adama immediately seizes command of all remaining military assets in order to begin a counter-attack; Roslin, the Secretary of Education turned President, wants an immediate and unconditional surrender.

Obviously, as the Humans are ritually destroying the remnants of the political, the Cylons begin their pre-emptive nuclear war of extermination. The action that subsequently unfolds explores the rebirth of the political and how a confrontation with the political transforms the participants. Neither Humans nor Cylons know what it is to be alive, hence the opening scene – “Are you alive?” “Yes” “Prove it” – repeats itself a number of times throughout the first season. The result is that politics rapidly transforms from policy and government (and, in this sense, the war of extermination is little more than a carrying out of policy – albeit a divine policy) into, to borrow Nik Rose’s phrase, “the politics of life itself.” For the Cylons, eradication transforms into

the attempt to discover the difference between Human and Cylon life by attempting to cross-breed Humans and Cylons thus proving Cylons are as alive as Humans. Meanwhile, for the Humans, politics becomes the attempt to articulate the difference between Human and Cylon so as to develop means of distinguishing between Humans and Cylon at the biological level. Where the biopolitical leads to an existential crisis for the Cylons, for the Humans it leads to the destruction of humanity as a universal concept as the survivors are increasingly decomposed into factions supported by the gradual erasure of the difference within humanity between civil and military authority. As Nietzsche says somewhere, a caged animal soon turns on itself.