

The Space Merchants

Escaping the Iron Cage of Rationality by Rocket to Venus

Bryan Fanning

The Space Merchants by Frederik Pohl and C.M. Kornbluth was first published in 1953.¹ I read it around the same time as I first encountered George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. I had been schooled to regard both Orwell and Huxley as literature. That *The Space Merchants* was pulp fiction seemed clear. I read a lot of science fiction in my teenage wasteland years. Books read at fifteen are never quite the same when revisited decades later. I must have revisited Orwell and Huxley a dozen times but not *The Space Merchants*. Its scenario now seems hackneyed but prescient. Its power to shock has been eroded by the global neo-liberalism that it anticipated as by the widespread exposure of the marketing techniques of cigarette and fast food conglomerates that are central to its plot. The blurb on my 1960 Digit paperback is succinct: "An overcrowded world is dominated by giant corporations, who struggle violently with each other. Mitch Courtenay, a Madison Avenue copywriter, has been given the job of selling the idea of emigration to Venus. He has rivals. Conflicts develop". I quickly forgot the name of Pohl and Kornbluth's protagonist. Yet the contours of their dystopia and Mitch Courtenay's trials and tribulations stayed with me and remained, in their own way, as compelling as those in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World*.

Pohl and Kornbluth, like Orwell and Huxley, wrote about individual autonomy beleaguered by totalitarian mass cultures. All were connoisseurs of contemporary anxieties about modernity. There were, it must be said, many distinct anxieties to choose from and hence differences between their respective fictional dystopias. In particular, *The Space Merchants* shared some themes with the work of Herbert Marcuse and other Frankfurt School émigrés to the United States who viewed technology and the industrial society primarily as instruments of domination and social control.² Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*, argued that the inner autonomy of the individual had been whittled down by technology: "Mass production and mass distribution", he wrote, "claim the entire individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory."³ Somewhat similarly, Theodor Adorno maintained that erosion of individual autonomy under fascism was being replicated by individual surrender to the repetitive formulae of mass culture.⁴ This was determinist stuff and *The Space Merchants* was similarly pessimistic on the question of future individual autonomy.

Near the end of his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the sociologist Max Weber struggled to explain his theories about how the systems of modernity could encroach upon human lives. The image he came up with, or, more precisely the one used by his translator Talcott Parsons, was that of "the iron cage of rationality". Weber described the inmates of this "iron cage" as specialists without spirit.⁵ To illustrate his argument better than he could do so himself, he referred his readers to Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Illyich* just as many writers about twentieth century modernity have done so using Orwell or Huxley.⁶ Sometimes social theorists must cede to fiction, and to science fiction, to explain their preoccupations.

Mitch Courtenay is something of a pulp Ivan Illyich. In the words of his wife, he is contriving and Machiavellian; he pretty much introduces

himself as such in the opening sentence of the book: "As I dressed that morning I ran over in my mind the long list of statistics, evasions, and exaggerations that they would expect in my report." He is a careerist, conformist star-class copywriter for Fowler Schocken Associates whose accounts include India (all of it) and Starrzelius products. Their rival Taunton Associates holds the Universal account. Their common enemies are the Consies, wild eyed conservationist zealots who pretend that modern civilisation is some way plundering the planet. Nonsense, Mitch assures us in first person narrator mode, science is always a step ahead of the failure of natural resources. After all when red meat got scarce it provided soya-burgers. When the oil ran out it came up with the pedecab. Science, he explains, would not have come up with ascorbic acid if 'Nature' had intended humans to eat fresh vegetables. Pohl and Kornbluth allow their readers to see through Mitch's glibness at the Fowler Schocken briefing that kicks off the plot:

"Ben Winston stood up and baritone'd: 'Speaking for Industrial Anthropology, no! Listen to today's progress report - You'll get it in the noon bulletin, but let me brief you now: according to the midnight indices, all primary schools east of the Mississippi are now using our packaging recommendation for the school lunch program. Soyaburgers and regenerated steak' - there wasn't a man around the table who didn't shudder at the thought of soyaburgers and regenerated steak - 'are packaged in containers the same shade as Universal products. But the candy, ice-cream, and Kiddiebut cigarette rations are wrapped in colourful Starrzelius red'."

Mitch gets promoted but is rejected by his doctor wife Kathy who we later find out is a Consie. He takes over the Venus contract, the job making palatable the nightmare of colonising Venus, a world of 500mph winds and liquid formaldehyde, "embalming fluid" as put by Jack O'Shea, a "midget", and the only astronaut they could send there and bring back alive. Mitch brags to Jack about the prowess of star-class copywriters. He points out that O'Shea wears Starrzelius Verily clothes and shoes and uses Starrzelius Verily luggage. "It means we got you." O'Shea threatens to switch to Universal products. "I wouldn't dream of stopping you", Mitch retorts smugly:

"It means more business for Starrzelius. Tell you what you're going to do: you'll get your complete set of Universal luggage and apparel. You'll use the luggage and wear the apparel for a while with a vague, submerged discontent. It's going to work on your libido, because our ads for Starrzelius - even though you say you don't read them - have convinced you that it isn't quite virile to trade with any other firm. Your self-esteem will suffer; deep down you'll know that you're not wearing the best. Your subconscious won't stand up under much of that. You'll find yourself 'losing' bits of universal apparel. You'll find yourself 'accidentally' putting your foot through the cuff of your universal pants. You'll find yourself overpacking the Universal luggage and damning it for not being roomier. You'll walk into stores and in a fit of momentary amnesia regarding this conversation you'll buy Starrzelius. Bless you."

Mitch takes a business rocket trip to Antarctica. He is mysteriously knocked out and wakes up on the labour freighter *Thomas R. Malthus* robbed of his star-class identity. He has somehow become a lowly consumer indentured to the Chlorella Corporation. No sooner has he landed at the

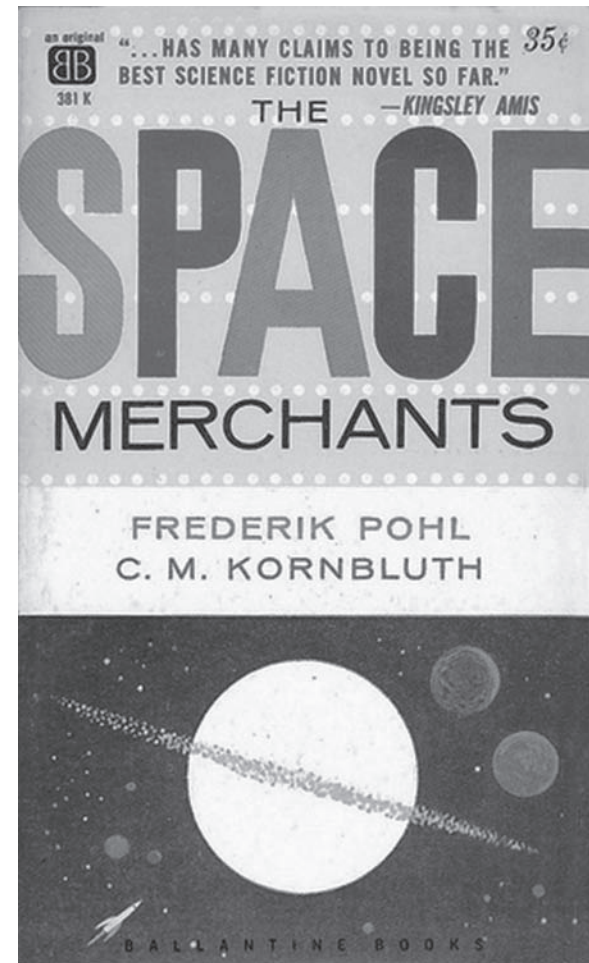
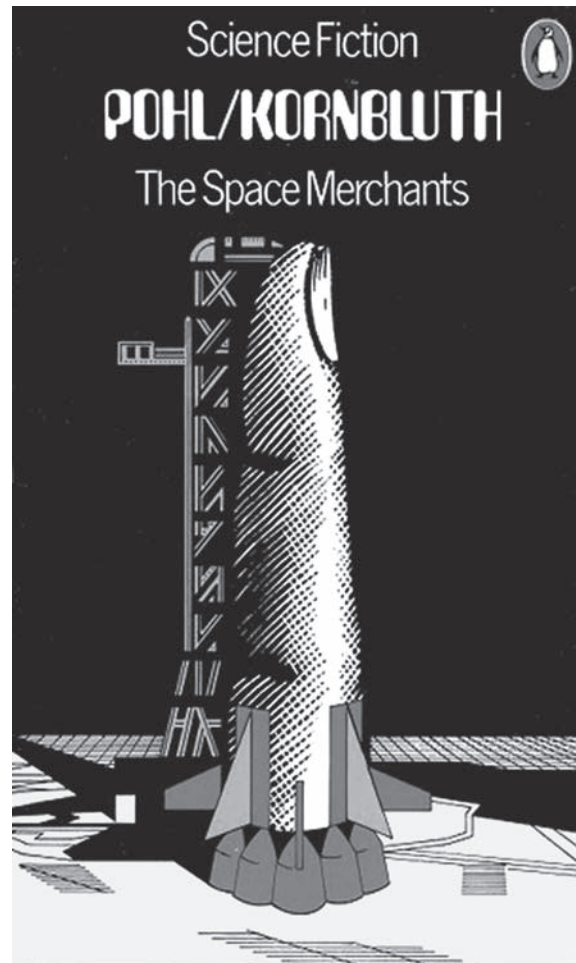
Chlorella plant in Costa Rica than he finds himself signing chits against his first pay check. He must pay bribes not to be assigned a bunk twenty-six floors below his workstation without access to an elevator. He must pay extra for a safe bed ("They'd like a nice young man in Dorm Twelve. My, yes! But you could carry a knife or something"). He is welcomed to the ranks of the United Slime-Mould Protein Workers of Panamerica, Unaffiliated, Chlorella Costa Rica Local. Cue further extortion.

The pattern of exploitation quickly becomes clear. "You never got out of debt. Easy credit was part of the system, and so were the irritants that forced you to exercise it." Workers ended their contracts in debt and had to sign a contract renewal. The food at Chlorella didn't help. Mitch comes off shift dehydrated, buys squirts of Popsie from the fountain and Crunchies from the canteen on easy credit. The Crunchies kick off withdrawal symptoms that can only be quelled by another two squirts of Popsie. And Popsie kicks off cravings that can only be quelled by smoking Starr cigarettes, which make him hungry again for Crunchies. I was becoming, Mitch thinks, "the kind of consumer we used to love. Think about smoking, think about Starrs, light a Starr. Light a Starr, think about Popsie, get a squirt. Get a squirt, think about Crunchies, buy a box. Buy a box, think about smoking, light a Starr." Yet Mitch remains a loyal consumerist. He is as preoccupied with the Venus project as with his own immediate predicament. He ruefully studies the declining effect of the Fowler Schocken ads on his fellow consumers. It becomes clear that his copy-smith rival Matt Runstead is messing up. The word "Venus" drifts out of the advert induced small talk. The new reference points amongst consumers for the Venus space rocket are 'radiation poisoning', 'taxes' and 'sacrifice.'

Mitch is down but not out. Social Darwinism is, after all, his stock in trade. He studies the local power structure and befriends Herrera, the labour aristocrat of Dorm Twelve. Herrera, after ten years, has worked his way up to Master Slicer. He toils in an underground concrete vault harvesting Chicken Little, a mutated lump of heart tissue some fifteen yards wide that has been growing for decades. Herrera, it turns out, is a Consie who seeks to recruit Mitch. For Mitch, the World Conservationist Association literature Herrera gives him is wild distortion but worse than that, the dullest piece of copywriting he has ever seen. He thinks about selling out Herrera but recalls that denouncers of Consies were brain-burned on the sensible grounds that they had been contaminated.

So he offers his services as propagandist. Start a rumour, he suggests, that they've found a way of making cheap new protein taste like roast beef. Suggest that it will be launched in three days. Then when the three days are up and no announcement appears plant wisecracks like 'what is the difference between roast beef and Chicken Little?' Answer: 'A hundred and fifty years of progress'. Three days, Mitch knew, was the optimum priming period for a closed social circuit to be triggered with a catalytic cue-phrase. As he anticipated after three days there was bubbling discontentment in the mess hall with consumers saying things like; 'I wish I was born a hundred years ago'.

Mitch's cell members are elated. They organise his promotion and he rotates to New York. Once there he plots his corporate comeback still none the wiser about why he was abducted to Costa



Rica in the first place. His efforts to make contact with Fowler Schocken fail. He is briefly captured and tortured by Taunton Associates and framed for murder. With the help of his former secretary he books passage to the Moon on the spaceship *David Ricardo* in a further effort to get a personal audience with Schocken. On the Moon he meets his 'bereaved' Kathy who is vacationing with Jack O'Shea. Kathy admits that she is a kingpin Consie. She had had him put on ice in Costa Rica to give him a taste of consumer life whilst Runstead, revealed also as a Consie, manipulated the Venus project. Subsequently, Kathy goes underground. Mitch hits the corporate comeback trail, rebuilds his relationship with Schocken and emerges in charge of the firm after Schocken is murdered by Taunton. He becomes obsessed with finding Kathy. He tracks her down and they reconcile when it becomes clear to her that Mitch has now renounced everything he has stood for. He agrees to Kathy's plan for a rigged Fowler Schocken lottery to pick Consies as Venus colonists. It emerges that the Consies believe that the human race needs Venus. Mitch and Kathy escape with the colonists to a new life.

The Space Merchants is at face value a tale of two dystopias. The first is a rancid Social Darwinist capitalism now common enough in science fiction. Examples include subsequent Pohl novels such as *Gateway* (1976), and *Neuromancer* (1984) by William Gibson. The second is Venus, a cynically advertised prospective gulag with hermetically sealed cabins:

"On the screen the picture dissolved to a specious suburban roomette in early morning. On the screen the husband folding the bed into the wall... Over the breakfast juices and the children's pabulum (with a steaming mug of Coffiest for each, of course) they spoke persuasively to each other about how wise and brave they had been to apply for passage in the Venus rocket. And the closing question of their youngest babbler ('Mommy, when I grow up kin I take my littul boys and girls to a place as nice as Venus?') cued the switch to a highly imaginative series of shots of Venus as it would be when the child grew up – verdant valleys, crystal lakes, brilliant mountain vistas."

At first glance, Mitch and Kathy's escape – the novel ends with a romantic clinch on the Venus rocket – rings false. The sentimental ending lacks the knowing counterpoints to Mitch's self-delusion that punctuate most of the story. The real space merchants are the Consies. They have manipulated the selling of Venus for their own purposes. Mitch buys in for the sake of love but also, it is implied, because of the repugnance he now feels for his former life. His conversion, if that is what it is, has a clear rationale even if it is somewhat fudged by Pohl and Kornbluth. It is apparent that life on Venus will be harsh for decades, harsher than life

on earth. The Consies are not environmentalists. They would, after all, abandon Earth. Rather they are ascetic rebels against an otherwise inescapable consumerist modernity. Pohl and Kornbluth's protagonists would flee the blandishments of the world on a rocket. However, even science fiction characters bring their problems with them. The reader would not be on safe ground, given the determinism of *The Space Merchants*, that, whatever else transpired, children on Venus could avoid Coffiest with their breakfasts.

Yet, Pohl and Kornbluth's rebels are ascetic ones in the tradition of the Puritan protagonists of Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. They willingly forsake the relative comforts of earthly existence for what, it must be presumed, will be a harsh but independent future. Weber, when positing the iron cage of rationality, contrasted the Puritan ascetic with the modern materialist who was trapped by the strictures of rational systems. What the Puritans had going for themselves, in Weber's view at least, were the inner spiritual resources to cast aside the cloak of materialism. Marcuse's metaphor of a one-dimensional existence described a rationalised world where such resistance was improbable. More so than Weber he emphasised the centrality of language to this modernity's systems of domination. Language and the mass media were central to the Pohl and Kornbluth's system of domination. Resistance was not so much futile as difficult to conceive. George Orwell's equivalent to Mitch Courtenay, Winston Smith, works for a totalitarian Ministry of Truth rather than on Madison Avenue, altering history and destroying words that might express dissent rather than manipulating them to sell products.⁷ Yet, Winston Smith is, from the outset, a dissident from the official reality he is a propagandist for. Mitch Courtenay speaks knowingly about consumer manipulation but remains one-dimensionally beguiled by the web he works to spin. The system of domination portrayed by Orwell resembles somewhat the mechanics of domination described by Marcuse. However, crucially, their understandings of free will and human agency differed. In *The Space Merchants* a one-dimensional existence can only be resisted, if at all, by literally exiting the world and forsaking all earthly goods.

Notes

1. Frederik Pohl and C.M Kornbluth, *The Space Merchants* (New York: Ballantine, 1953)
2. Douglas Kellner, Introduction to Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers Volume One* (London: Routledge), p.5
3. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, (London, Abacus, 1964), p.23
4. Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994)
5. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, Scribner's Press, 1958), p.182
6. Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Illyich and Other Stories*, translated by Rosemary Edmonds (London: Penguin, 1960), pp.99-163
7. The job of newspeak, *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* language of total administration, was to destroy words capable of expressing unorthodox thought. Newspeak's vocabulary was constructed so as to give exact and often subtle expression to Party orthodoxy while excluding the possibility of arriving at all other meanings. Part of this involved the generation of specific words. Another part involved stripping words of unorthodox meanings. A dog could be free from lice or a field free from weeds but in newspeak the word free could not apply to thought because political and intellectual freedom no longer existed even as concepts. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1949).

