

The privatisation of space: does NewSpace create companies or cults?

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For a few years now, ever since meeting the pioneering Australian space archaeologist, Alice Gorman, I've been interested in social and environmental justice in space activities. Lately, in response to any call for more ethical accountability when it comes to what humans do next in space, many mainstream space enthusiasts or industrialists say the same thing: *you're dreaming*. Those among us who are asking for an ethics of space use and exploration that is as complex and considered as humankind deserves are being written off as naïve, idealistic, irrational.

As a social anthropologist by training, I know enough about human history to understand that ethics almost always loses out to economics, though I still fervently hope one day that might change. Yet I think it's also important to point out that most of the grand *commercial* plans for space are in fact themselves naïve, irrational, emotional, fuelled by cosmological visions and private fantasies, and underpinned by myths. There are a bunch of megalomaniacal Captain Ahab's out there right now, chasing the elusive white whale of conquering space (and we all know how that ended for the troubled antihero of *Moby-Dick*).

I think the playing field might become more level once we can accept that this is not about NewSpace rational economics versus a warm-and-fuzzy delusion that we could peacefully and equitably share the

global commons of space. Any proposal for what we do next in space, at this moment in time, is equally nutty, speculative, aspirational. This is a liberating realisation, because it means no single narrative of a human future in space has yet become dominant, set in stone. It means that we still have time to understand that we are responsible for what we imagine — whether we dream it up in a science-fiction novel, or on the rocket-factory floor, or in the boardroom of a start-up incubator.

It means that we still have time to acknowledge what we have long known, and ignore at our peril: that ethics and justice do not sit *outside* of other human activities like science and economics. The theoretical physicist and feminist Karen Barad was one of the first to make the point that “ethics ... is being done right at the lab bench,” and that it's far too late to start thinking through the “ethical, social and legal implications of various new sciences and technologies after the fact.”¹

Let's consider some of the generalised irrationalities of the most powerful NewSpace companies. I don't need to mention them by name. You would know who I'm talking about, and their values trickle down within the NewSpace industry so that there's an element of their approach and worldview in even the smallest space start-ups.

1 Barad (2012).

Firstly, these companies are usually led by a charismatic, wealthy white man, who believes that he is single-handedly responsible for saving humanity by creating a backup civilization somewhere else. These leaders like to speak breathlessly of the spiritual value of gazing at Earth from space — the so-called “Overview Effect” — saying it will make us better people; while at the same time, they actively recruit the global 1% to buy into their company’s promises for the future, a future built on inequality in space as on Earth.

The leaders pour their own fortunes into their companies, diminishing their personal wealth in the process, like in a traditional potlatch ceremony, or cargo cult, where destruction of one’s own material wealth is the first requirement of being allowed to join, and is in fact a demonstration of one’s social prestige. They have even been known to make sacrificial offerings, like sending their own cherry-red Teslas into space. Secrecy and suspicion of outsiders is paramount: nothing is transparent; everything is done in “stealth mode.” There’s no outside consultation — even of the space science community — before hugely consequential actions, like releasing vast constellations of small satellites into low-Earth orbit, or deciding at the very last moment (and in complete secrecy) to stick some dehydrated tardigrades to a time capsule being sent to the Moon. The leaders may even ask their followers to agree to a suicide pact to prove their commitment to the cause, like a one-way trip to Mars.

Is it just me, or does all this sound a lot more like the workings of a cult than a company?

Even more cultish is the way that investors are hoodwinked into buying into a fan-

tasy rather than actually expecting a sensible return on investment. David Valentine, an American anthropologist, has been doing fieldwork for years in the American NewSpace industry. When you invest in NewSpace, Valentine writes, you are *not* expecting the usual return on investment — since there is no real exit strategy for investors as there would be on any other investment in a frontier economy. Instead, part of the return on investment they are promised is in the currency of intangibles.² On the angel investor Space Angels website, for example, is the company’s motto: “Explore-Invest-Ascend,” and a promise that space investing offers access to “adventure,” “meaning,” and “that lost sense of wonder.”³

This is not capitalism as usual. These are not rational economic actors. This is irrational investing. These companies, Valentine writes, are not only built around a profit motive. They have a cosmological, ideological underpinning. The U.S. Space Frontier Foundation, which coined the term “NewSpace,”⁴ admiringly describes the NewSpace industry as the “Vanguard of Human Civilization.”⁵

So: these companies are in fact not just exporting neoliberal capitalism to outer space. That would give them credit, at least, for being rational actors. What they are doing is, to me, much more chilling. They operate more like fledgling libertarian cults, sending missionaries who’ve drunk the Kool-Aid out to places they probably should not go.

2 Valentine (2012)

3 www.SpaceAngels.com (accessed 10 November 2019)

4 Valentine (*ibid*, 1053)

5 Valentine (*ibid*, 1060)

It's one thing to criticise these companies for wanting to turn a profit in space — with all the possible destructive and conflict-causing outcomes this may have. Yet, increasingly, I think that is missing the point. We should demand absolute transparency and regulated accountability from all NewSpace companies and their founders because they are planning to build new worlds from scratch out there, supposedly on our behalf. I don't know about you, but I find that super creepy.

Space is hard, right? We're told that all the time, but it's almost always meant in relation to the technicalities of getting there. Why do we embrace those technical challenges but find ourselves so often stumped by the other interesting challenges posed by space — the ethical, moral, philosophical, ideological ones? If we want to be our best selves out there — a dubious myth promoted by many with space ambitions — we should all feel empowered to question the cultishness of the NewSpace vision, and if they really are *doing it for us*, they shouldn't feel threatened by our questions and criticisms but should welcome them. If space is going to be the canvas on which we paint our greatest masterpieces as a species, we all should have a say of some kind in what our human future there looks like.

For further reading, see Dovey (2018 and 2019).

References

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