



Selling space colonization and immortality: A psychosocial, anthropological critique of the rush to colonize Mars

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ABSTRACT

Extensive media coverage regarding the proposal to send four people to Mars by 2025 has exploded recently. Private enterprise has taken the reins to venture into space, which has typically only been reserved for government agencies. I argue, that with this new direction comes less regulation, raising questions regarding the ethics of sending people into outer space to colonize Mars within a decade. Marketers selling colonization to the public include perspectives such as biological drives, species survival, inclusiveness and utopian ideals. I challenge these narratives by suggesting that much of our desire to colonize space within the next decade is motivated by ego, money and romanticism. More specifically, I will examine the roles that fear and stories of immortality play within selling space and how those stories are marketed. I am passionate about space and hope that one day humanity will colonize other worlds, but the rush to settle is dangerous and careless. I assert that humanity should first gain more experience and knowledge before colonizing outer space, using this research to mitigate the risk to astronauts and proceed with careful consideration for the lives of potential astronauts.

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1. Introduction

Everything seems to be in place. Research from several different sectors has been conducted and applied to make the journey to Mars possible: engineering, medicine, psychology, physics, law, biology, geology, chemistry, business, anthropology, linguistics, economics, mathematics, architecture, and military, among others. Humans appear to be ready to head to Mars! When colonists do arrive on Mars, little by little over time, people will be living and working there. The idea is to become self-sufficient: growing their own food, raising families, and creating a life for humanity permanently on another planetary body. What could possibly go wrong?

The journey to Mars will not only impact those who will live there, but also the lives and societies of people here on Earth. Planning to land on Mars by 2025, the company Mars One is proposing to start a human colony and market the event as a reality television show. However, the newly proposed Mars One mission is fraught with problems, such as how they are selling colonization to the public. The romanticism of space that is being sold must be looked at with objectivity and clarity. Hopefully through a more rational lens, those with the power to make decisions about settling in outer space will go forth with the least possible negative impact, while respecting the safety of human lives. Space can be an easy or hard sell depending on who the buyer is. If you are an astronomer or space enthusiast, then looking out into the cosmos or thinking about what is out there may be a daily occurrence. For the non-expert, space might be interesting, but the problem of buying into the space agenda is an “out of sight, out of mind” phenomenon. Consequently, the lack of support for outer space issues

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from the general public can also equate to a lack of funding. This lack of public support is being fought by space advocates such as The Mars Society, who want to colonize Mars within a decade.

Communications researcher Linda Billings has suggested some themes for space advocacy in general when she says, “the rhetoric of space advocacy exalts those enduring American values of pioneering, progress, enterprise, freedom, and rugged individualism, and it advances the cause of capitalist democracy” [11:484]. American space agendas and stories were prominent through the 1960s and 70s, having been popularized by President Kennedy’s speech to “conquer space” against the Soviets [72:84]. Today, the nation versus nation space race continues, except that the threat to American pride is not only from the Soviets, but also from the Chinese. Engineer and multi-millionaire Dennis Tito says that his ambitious Inspiration Mars mission for a fly-by around Mars, will inspire Americans to “get there” before the Chinese [50]. However, this two-person mission will not actually be landing on the Mars surface. Space Advocate Rhawn Joseph [53] concurs, “...the ESA, China, Russia, Japan, and other nations are already planning on making it to Mars in the next two decades”. He maintains if The United States of America does not join in, “the American people, and American business will be the big losers” [53]. Thus, we can see that nationalism plays a large role in the motivation to get to Mars, as it did for getting to the Moon in the 1960s.

Addressing the challenges of sending humans to Mars by the year 2030 is what the Humans2Mars (H2M) Summit is all about, run by Explore Mars, Inc. During the H2M event, Panel moderator, Richard Phillips recognized space nationalism within a generational context. Phillips stated that the Apollo generation (1968–1972) has an “America first” view, whereas young people now see space exploration from a more global perspective [49]. Narratives such as cultural inclusion and utopia are also used by several space advocates, which will be explored further as selling points for humans to colonize space. Political Science Professor Taylor Dark suggests that “[s]upporters of Mars colonization believe that the long-term project of developing a human civilization on Mars will promote social cohesion and economic growth on Earth, and create a new branch of civilization that will rival in its accomplishments anything that mankind has done previously” [31:559]. People like Dennis Tito, feel as though the pioneering spirit of old has been lost, and humanity needs to regain that past sense of exploration, which he hopes to accomplish via the Inspiration Mars mission proposal for a 2-person crew fly-by that will reach about 100 miles over the surface of Mars. During the [31:559]Inspiration Mars press conference [50] in Washington, D.C., Tito talks about how he does not want to wait, for he and others his age have “waited long enough.” The opening speech of the press conference, led by Journalist Miles O’Brien, presents the following statement:

“[i]f we don’t seize the moment, we may miss the chance to become a multi-planet species, and sooner or later, humanity will cease to exist. There are always

reasons not to do it, we can talk about the cost, the risks, the rationale, Columbus or Magellan would never have left the harbour if they dwelled on these worries. Sometimes you just have to weigh anchor and shove off, and that’s what Inspiration Mars is all about” [50].

For the purpose of this paper, I focus on stories of this type that advocate for humanity’s survival as a species, and how the content of these stories is being marketed and to whom. Using earlier explorers such as Columbus and Magellan within space narratives will also be addressed. Both explicit and implicit motives are at play with those who wish to colonize Mars within a decade.

The rush to settle is driven by several high-status space advocates and organizations such as Mars One and The Mars Society. The Mars Society is a space advocacy group founded by Aerospace Engineer Robert Zubrin. Despite all the evidence that suggests humanity is not ready for such a leap, people are still eager to get to the red planet. Several questions are raised when exploring the idea of colonizing other worlds. What is the evidence that humanity is ready (or not) to colonize extraterrestrially? What might be the possible subconscious drives pushing people to colonize outer space? Are people’s reasons simply repeating the rhetoric and fantasy that is being sold to them? Internally, what is driving them? Externally, what is being sold to them by particular space organizations? These are some of the questions that I explore in this essay in order to shed some cognitive light in the contemporary Mars Space Race. Consequently, I will examine and critique the stories and motivations behind the postulated need for humanity to survive through colonization, the importance of fear and marketing, and ultimately how humans should proceed to colonize space.

2. Biology

“Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell” – Edward Abbey

A common story for our need to survive as a species comes from the idea that we have a biological drive, or hard-wired desire to expand into the universe. As Carl Sagan once said, “[w]e’re the kind of species that needs a frontier—for fundamental biological reasons” [95:230]. Moreover, Billings suggests, “In the twenty-first century, advocates continue to promote spaceflight as a biological imperative and a means of extending U.S. free enterprise, with its private property claims, resource exploitation, and commercial development, into the solar system and beyond” [11:495]. Over time, people have looked back upon the first explorers as evidence to support the biological drive idea. Taylor Dark offers a different perspective

...claims that humanity is programmed to explore the universe fall prey to the fallacy of composition: just because *individuals* like to explore does not mean that the larger group of which they are a part (in this case, the human race) has a need to *collectively* explore. As some space advocates themselves point out, history is full of examples of human societies that decided to stay put, choosing to remain within a viable local habitat

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