

For All Humankind? The Continuation of Mid-Century US Space Goals

Written by Natalie B. Treviño

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NATALIE B. TREVIÑO, OCT 4 2023

The most prevalent rhetoric in justifying the exploration of space is that space exploration is for the benefit of all humankind and is done for only peaceful purposes. This is stated in both NASA's foundational policies and in the United Nations' Outer Space Treaty (OST). Most recently, we hear these phrases repeated in the discourse surrounding the Artemis Accords, the United States attempt to reaffirm the OST while simultaneously electing itself as world leader of the new space age. Such a grand vision for the future appears just what this conflicted and brutal world needs, a vision of peace where all nations come together for a single purpose, the exploration of space. Yet one of the most prominent aspects of space exploration is the use of inclusive rhetoric and technology that masks how it continues to reinforce colonial conditions. For as much as space discourse involves peace and humanity, the actuality of who benefits and who is ignored follows colonial lines.

Multi-use technology and space related spin-offs are often used to justify the exploration of space. While lofty language and otherworldly images are used to inspire people to join the cause—or in most cases, get a STEM degree to join the space industry, this conception of inspiration is limited as it seeks only to reproduce capitalist constructions of space exploration. How many times have we heard of the wonderful technologies that have come out of this exploration? From landmine removal to memory foam mattresses, space exploration produces more than just rockets and spacemen. But those spinoffs so prized by NASA are not the only thing to come out of the US exploration of space. While NASA is the civilian side of space, the US has long been working with military contractors to produce a different vision of space. And while many spin-off technologies are incredibly useful, one can ask: why not just focus on solving those issues rather than wait to see if space exploration might offer a solution? Why not just invest in those technologies directly?

Yet space exploration has always had two sides: the silver Space Age optimism, and its ugly underbelly, the use of stolen land for launch sites, Nazi affiliations, and its ties to the military industrial complex. Both the wonders and the horrors are conditions of coloniality. Coloniality, first theorised by sociologist Anibal Quijano, describes the continuous impact of European colonisation on social orders and forms of knowledge, mostly impacting Indigenous people and marginalised Black and Brown peoples from around the world. Thus, the exploration of space for the West has always also been about the exploitation of space following the logic of coloniality. The very establishment of NASA was founded upon the US government's attempts to fully exploit space, whether that be for political, cultural, or material gain. The exploration of space is essentially for the exploitation of space. And this is the first clue that the peace in 'peaceful' may not be as it seems.

To fully understand this relation let us return to the 1950s United States, the land of racism, and soon-to-be rockets. One of the most clear articulations of coloniality and the lack of 'peace' in 'peaceful' can be found in a memo dated February 1958 from the director of the Institute for Astronomical Science, entitled *The Preliminary Observations for the Organisation for the Exploitation of Space*. This memo details the organisational possibilities for the United States to venture into space. More than just an organizational chart and a structure that would become NASA, the memo sets the orientation for outer space that remains the guiding principle for almost all US space policy.

Exploitation equals exploration plus control. For the exploitation of space, the US must first explore it, then control it.

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This of course, at the time of the writing of this memo, mostly referred to nation states, and now we can see it also referred to private companies. In my own research, I refer to this as the Killian formula, a formula that fits the colonial matrix of power as it expresses the core elements of coloniality. It articulates the relationship between nature and humanity as nothing more than a resource and an exploiter. To assume that outer space is for exploitation means to totalise it and regulate it to the category of resource.

We see this formulation expressed again and again in different US policies over the course of the 20th and into the 21st century. From the *Introduction to Outer Space* in 1958—which was a functional document that served to introduce space to all the peoples of America—that gave four reasons to go into space: defence, prestige, technology and, quote, “[t]he urge of man to explore, and thrust of curiosity to go where no one has gone before.” These initial justifications fit with the imperialistic structure of the American nation state by producing a mission-based motivation: space exploration for the benefit of mankind through defence, prestige, and technology.

Of course, during the Cold War this was a form of soft power: the ability for the United States to show its technological superiority so that the so-called “Third World” would know that democracy and capitalism were superior to Soviet communism. Of course, these two structures are imbued with militarism and labour practices under capitalism that work to reinforce what decolonial theorist Nelson Maldonado-Torres calls ‘modernity as the paradigm of war.’ Modernity has normalised violence so much that it can be ignored. And the normalised violence is essential for the functioning of modernity, the production of technoscience, and the nation state.

This is how the ‘peace’ within ‘peaceful’ is not peaceful at all. This is the peace of modernity, i.e., normalised violence. Normalised violence is expressed in many forms, from racialised violence by state actors, like the police or the military, to homelessness, inhumane labour practices, and white supremacist historical revisionism. Something like the telling of manifest destiny, rather than calling it what it was, genocide. Both the UN and NASA proclaim peace without accepting the inherent violence of the current world system, NASA even going so far as to push for the continuation of the capitalist economy in the future on the Moon.

And in the space industry, these forms of violence can be found through the astronomy community’s assault on Indigenous sovereignty in Hawaii, the rejection of non-Western epistemologies and ontologies, race and gender-based harassments at all levels in many, many, many institutions, as well as the use of stolen land for launch sites, and the re-emergence of theories reinforcing eugenics.

Thus, when we think of dual use, we must think beyond LASIK and artificial limbs, to capital gain on the backs of marginalised people from around the world. After all, the humankind that will or has benefited from space exploration are primarily those in the Western capitalist nations and those who have already been accepted in those systems. The constant affirmation of the nation state and the capitalist economy renders the promises of peaceful purposes and the benefits for all humankind null. Behind the rhetoric of peace and benefits lies the belligerent reality of modernity/coloniality. Such peace actually represents the normalisation of violence under coloniality and capitalism.

As Maldonado-Torres reminds us, war-like displays of violence become normalised in their repetitiveness. We see it so much we stop seeing it. The repeated assurance that space will be used for peaceful purposes rings hollow as it affirms an already violent system; that of the nation state and of capitalism. The violence of capitalism is an ongoing war against all peoples around the world and against nature itself. This is normalised in a variety of ways, including space policy, national narratives, and structural inequalities. US space policy often seeks to ensure its own supremacy using colonial language.

What all of this seems to indicate is that the humans that benefit from space technology and the humans that are violated through space technology follow the logic of coloniality. After all, if the exploration of space were to be for the benefit of all humankind than it would not be commercialized, rather it would be distributed. And if it were only for peace than there would be no Space Force, no history of militarization, and no use of satellites for military purposes. Who gets to benefit and who has militarized space used against reveals we have not come that far from coloniser and colonised. Rather, that this duality is now reinforced through the cosmos. And while the Artemis Accords reinforces this war-ish peace and current economic and political structures, there is much to be hopeful about the

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future in space. If US domestic and international space policy follows the Killian formula, violence, exploitation, and unnecessary rivalry will be central to space exploration. No partnership will be equal, as with the Artemis Accords, states must recognize US leadership, the bolstering of private enterprise for resource extraction, even while unrestrained resource extraction on Earth has reinforced ecocide, racial capitalism, as it follows colonial logics.

The most recent photos of the universe, and those photos taken by Artemis-I of the moon and Earth, do not move people to think to themselves, “Gosh! What value the stakeholders will gain through the exploitation of the moon!” Rather, those photos strike a different chord. We remember that the universe is vast, beautiful and that even through all this brutality, we can relate to and engage with the universe, not as exploiters, but as conscious beings finding our way. Space is an opportunity, an opportunity to explore ourselves; how different people can live together, how we might move towards earthly and heavenly justice, and how-to live-in relation, not antagonism.

Contemporary hegemonic space exploration is founded upon violence, while multiplicity in space exploration can lead to liberation. More than commercial ventures, or nation-states trying to hold power or abstract notions of inspiration, space has the potential to force systems and structures to grow, adapt and change. Without confronting the reality of coloniality, the continuation of colonial violence, perpetuated against peoples and nature will move from earth and into space. Right now, the space industry’s priorities of ‘peace and benefits’ are actually militarization and commercialization. In this, globally, the space industry continues to follow the Killian formula, even if it is unintentional. What could the exploration of space be if it were meant to challenge current social and political norms of the international system?

About the author:

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