What's Wrong with Outer Space Colonialism?

https://www.e-ir.info/2024/01/12/whats-wrong-with-outer-space-colonialism/

ALINA UTRATA, JAN 12 2024

In October of 2023, the *New York Times* published an article entitled: "Maybe in Your Lifetime, People Will Live on the Moon and then Mars". NASA landed on the Moon for the first time over half a century ago, and by 2040 they plan to return—this time, to stay. Outer space colonialism is usually believed to belong to the world of science fiction. But there are very real projects currently underway to ensure that both astronauts and civilians can survive for lengthy periods on the Moon, and thus begin the process of settling space. This includes, for instance, developing 3D printers that could construct homes with the capacity to withstand conditions on the Moon—such as temperatures upwards of 600 degrees, a "vicious combination of radiation and micrometeorites", and Moon dust "so abrasive it can cut like glass . . . [which] swirls in noxious plumes and is toxic when inhaled" (Kamin 2023).

As I detail in my article in the *American Political Science Review* (Utrata 2023), there are many reasons why one might object to colonies on the Moon. These include the enormous emissions in the midst of the climate catastrophe (Rubenstein 2022; Utrata 2021); the continued dispossession of indigenous lands and displacement of vulnerable communities for rocket launch sites (Sammler and Lynch 2021) and entrenchment of coloniality and colonial relationships (Trevino 2020; Bawaka Country et al. 2020); or the risk of geopolitical conflict and militarization of space (Deudney 2020). However ill-advised colonizing outer space might be, it is often assumed to be fundamentally different from earthly colonialism for one key reason: outer space is actually empty. As Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2022, 158) puts it:

Corporate space enthusiasts insist that the game is different this time because the lands they're aiming for aren't inhabited… when it comes to space… we can finally feel good about frontierism because we've finally got an empty frontier.

In this article, I want to draw out one aspect of my critique about outer space colonialism and its claim to have found genuinely "empty space", both for what it suggests about the ethics of settling space as well as what it reveals about terrestrial colonization.

The problem with colonialism—whether in outer space or on Earth—cannot simply be reduced to a matter of whether spaces are or are not "empty". Calling something empty presupposes a certain conceptualization of relating to that space, and already begins the process of legitimating and imposing certain forms of (territorially-based) political rule.

Space colonies, as David Valentine (2017, 187) has noted, are often purported to offer "a libertarian hope that conscious effort and free enterprise in places where—as I have frequently heard said—"there are no natives" will fix things so that humans can do a more equitable job of colonialism this time around". For its Silicon Valley supporters, outer space is something of a "technological solution" (to borrow Morozov's 2013 term) to the ethical issues of colonialism. If new technologies can allow humans to reach lunar lands which are genuine *terra nullius,* or empty spaces—then what's wrong with colonizing outer space?

Imagining outer space as an "empty frontier", however, is a conceptual invention: it relies on the process of territorialization—or imagining space as geospatial plots of territory which can be claimed as territorial property. Notably, this conceptual transformation also underpinned earthly colonialism and indigenous dispossession.

As Robert Nichols (2018, 14) has argued in his phenomenal work *Theft is Property!*, indigenous dispossession can be understood as "a process in which new proprietary relations are generated but under structural conditions that demand their simultaneous negation". Many indigenous communities, as Nichols points out, did not and do not think that land can be owned as territorial property; yet they still contest that their lands were stolen, a form of theft that presupposes a property right. Nichols explains that dispossession can be coherently understood as a simultaneous transformation and transfer of property. In other words, earthly colonizers transformed land into geospatial plots of territory *at the same time* that they claimed it for themselves.

We can see this conceptual transformation occurring in real time in the night skies. Currently, for instance, the Moon is often conceptualized as a form of light. As light, no individual is understood to exclusively own it. All communities on Earth make use of the Moon's light, whether they be astronomical researchers, celestial navigators, animals or any person gazing at the night sky. When satellites or cities obscure this light from the skies, all communities have the right to object to "light pollution" because no one is understood to have a greater or exclusive property claim on natural light.

However, in 2022, a report from the Adam Smith Institute called for the establishment of a homesteading system to allocate "plots of Moon land" in an effort to preempt a celestial land rush (Lowe 2022). In this conception of the Moon, the celestial body is no longer understood as light—but as territory. While this may seem an innocuous or indeed even logical suggestion, it in fact relies on a fundamental reconceptualization of outer space which structures and imposes political relationships.

As Morris Cohen (1927, 12) noted: "a property right is a relation not between an owner and a thing, but between the owner and other individuals in reference to things… dominion over things is also imperium over our fellow human beings". Thus, a transformation of how space ought to be conceptualized—as light or as land—implies and imposes a certain understanding of property and political rule. As owners of territorial property, individuals have the right to exclude others from its use. This will almost certainly require or depend on the coercive force of states, corporations, or settlers to enforce.

Inventing territory thus has political consequences. It constructs both what rights individuals or communities are understood to have over spaces—and therefore one other—as well as formulating the political authority and structures which uphold and enforce those rights, such as states.

Would-be space colonists argue that outer space, unlike indigenous lands, is truly empty. However, space is only empty if we understand it to be a potential site of territory. To call outer space an "empty frontier" is thus to already impose a territorial conceptualization of property onto that space—and to begin the process of colonialism.

However, this is not the only way to conceptualize spaces. For instance, many communities also consider the Moon to be a person, a spiritual or divine being, an ancestor or relative (Rubenstein 2022; Bawaka Country et al. 2020). Māori indigenous communities consider natural entities on Earth such as the rainforest Te Urewera, the volcanic mountain Mount Taranaki, and the river Whanganui to be persons, who in effect exercise a form of self-ownership (Nichols 2020). These different conceptualizations change the way human communities relate to these spaces and thus construct different political relationships in determining how to treat them. Currently, for instance, Te Urewera, Mount Taranaki, and Whanganui are cared for by shared guardianship between Māori tribes and the government of New Zealand (ibid).

Outer space colonialism is not without its wrongs and will not be without its harms. Violence and coercion are fundamental to how territorial property relations are structured and upheld, whether on Earth, the Moon, or Mars. While the invention of rocket ships and 3D printers that can build houses on the Moon may further solidify and catalyze these settler processes, they are underpinned by conceptual, political, and legal inventions about how we ought to relate to these spaces. The empty frontier must be invented. But it's possible to imagine something else.

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