

The Sky is Not the Limit: The Billionaires' Space Race Read Through Buen Vivir

Written by Heloísa Traiano

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HELOÍSA TRAIANO, AUG 8 2022

As the effects of climate change and a global pandemic made increasingly clear that the planet was in serious trouble, much of the world enthusiastically turned its eyes to three internationally famous billionaires joining a space race. They promised to turn off-Earth tourism into a new industry for their fellow superrich; to create “a future where millions of people are living and working in space for the benefit of Earth” and “to move industries that stress Earth into space” (Blue Origin 2021, para. 1). The intense international press coverage of the efforts of Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk in 2021 became a central site for the discursive production of fierce competition among white, middle-aged, male entrepreneurs in their pursuit of extra-terrestrial power, glamour, and new sources of capital.

They have been taken to be not only extraordinarily wealthy but also the ultimate image of the successful, individualistic neoliberal *self* defined by Dardot and Laval (2013), thriving in the contemporary capitalist society while notably (re)producing the modern assumption that humans hold sovereignty over all elements on Earth (Wendt and Duvall 2008). Remarkably, the discursive account of the space race has been much personalized in the names of the businessmen behind the private spaceflight companies involved, as they were made the protagonists of their endeavours to reach space (Rincon 2021; Kluger 2021). These same personal projects, however, were supposedly aimed at inaugurating a new era for humankind, particularly in its relationship with nature. It follows that one of the central factors allowing for the spectacularization of the billionaires' space race is the value posed to specifically Western conceptions of subjectivity underpinning the ideas of what is the role of humans on Earth and, particularly, of how an individual supposed to be unlimitedly powerful would act towards nature and other humans.

The power assigned to these businessmen may be argued to be mainly enacted in two dimensions: first, through a drive for control over nature as a way of expanding humanity's reach beyond Earth and further manipulating natural elements so that human hegemony is not defied; secondly, through a highly exclusionary logic within human societies in which only extreme economic power might grant one the opportunity to escape the current dangers to existence faced by humankind in this planet. Both elements have been increasingly garnering attention from commentators, such as Bruno Latour (2018), and finding their way into the social imagination through discourse, e.g., reports by the worldwide media on anecdotes of the superrich and their strategies to survive apocalypse over the past years (O'Connell 2018; Megia 2020).

Whereas a critical analysis of this case could be performed through a variety of frameworks – most prominently the post-human turn in political theory and its intersections with the critique of neoliberal values and practices (Zolkos 2017), this work will do so by benefiting specifically from indigenous contributions to International Relations labelled under the name of Buen Vivir (or Living Well) as a critical ethical framework. As they entail a radically different conception of the place of an individual and their subjectivity, such ideas directly reflect on what is taken to be humans' ethical relationship to nature and one another.

By sourcing from ancestral ideas and practices (Acosta 2017; Lightfoot and MacDonald 2017), Buen Vivir provides valuable and historically overlooked foundations if humans are to reposition themselves and face the environmental challenges caused by capitalist modes of production, consumption, and control over nature. According to Acosta

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(2017), these perspectives are attractive for that purpose in as much as they resist capitalist dominance and stand for a communal way of life, instead of a highly anthropocentric, individualistic, and utilitarian one. Buen Vivir's alternative conceptualizations of subjectivity are of particular interest for this work, since they assume that "human beings are not isolated individuals, as we form part of both a social and a natural community" (Acosta 2017, 2605) expected to live in harmony with each other and nature as well.

By looking at the case of the billionaires' space race, this work will critically examine the two above-mentioned dimensions (drive for control over nature and social exclusion among humans), through which Western notions of subjectivity cultivated through modernity and contemporality are (re)produced. One by one, it will first present how they are enacted in the selected case while seeking to demonstrate the contrast between their normative premises and Buen Vivir's understanding of what an ideal individual is and how one relates to nature and other human beings in a community. The overarching goal is to show in which ways the concepts of Buen Vivir, and particularly the notion of harmonious life, might be deployed to produce a critique of the billionaires' race to space. The latter is taken to be a representation of how modern subjectivity, and its contemporary enactment by the neoliberal *self* in Western capitalist societies, is a central factor to account for the current hegemonic understanding of what is the human position on this planet.

Manipulating and taming nature: the ultimate power of the modern man

In a time when virtually anything can be turned into a spectacle, it may come as no surprise that the promises of three billionaires to reach space by their own means would be followed just as a reality show. In July 2021, worldwide media turned its attention to the launches of two spacecraft boarded by Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos within nine days, while Elon Musk's efforts to reach space were equally kept under the spotlight.

The flights might have served as marketing campaigns by Branson's Virgin Galactic and Bezo's Blue Origin aimed at increasing the popular appeal of a new luxury tourism business. However, the alleged purpose of all three billionaires engaged in the current space race is to expand humans' grip beyond Earth in ways that might give them the ability to manipulate elements of nature in space and even build new forms of life (Hiltzik 2021). Indeed, Blue Origin lists as two of its central goals to create "a future where millions of people are living and working in space for the benefit of Earth" and "to move industries that stress Earth into space" (Blue Origin 2021, para. 1), whereas Bezos himself reportedly held the view that "Earthly civilizations are headed for an energy-supply crisis that can only be solved by harnessing extraterrestrial resources" (Wattles 2021, para. 7).

The plausibility of these projects is not to be considered by this work, as its interest lies in the normative premises and implications of the discourse they advance. It is argued here that billionaire space racers are assigned power through their ability to fulfil a personal and collective drive for control over nature. Consequentially, they become celebrated for their potential ability to expand humanity's reach beyond Earth and further manipulate non-human elements in a time when the planet's health poses major challenges to current modes of production and consumption. Such human desire for control and manipulation as it is enacted by billionaire space racers may be understood through the Western subjectivity that has risen in modernity and is continuously enacted in contemporality.

Wendt and Duvall (2008) famously argued that scholars have largely overlooked the fact that modern sovereignty is taken to be exclusively anthropocentric, meaning that humans are thought of as the sole holders of cognitive capacity and subjectivity, in opposition to non-human elements such as animals and nature. Although this might seem at first like an almost obvious assumption resulting from common sense, the authors refute that understanding and hold that anthropocentric sovereignty is historically contingent on a human-centred project that defines the practices of our time, particularly as to how we conceptualize knowledge and constitute practices of governmentality. It follows that humans are given power through their placement at the very centre of modern rule (Wendt and Duvall 2008).

It turns out, however, that such a privileged, powerful position occupied by humans in modern thought is being increasingly brought into question by the effects of its own practices, particularly by anthropogenic climate change, as Leduc (2014) argues. This disempowering shift has not only brought feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, but it has also been challenging the modern assumption that humans are separated from the rest of nature and hold control

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over it (Leduc 2014). Building on the work of Latour, Leduc (2014) writes that we are being taken back to a place of fragility and, consequently, being challenged to change the way we think and live with nature.

However, the efforts of billionaire space racers seem to point in the opposite direction. They defy the constraints being imposed on anthropocentric sovereignty by taking human control over nature to a next level or even assuming that space's ownership might be claimed by humankind. By reaching control over Earth and beyond, these businessmen take the lead in safeguarding humans' supposed interests, which might also simply be translated into the maintenance of current modes of capitalist production and consumption. Branson has indeed written that "space belongs to all of humanity" (Branson 2021) and that "exploring space will provide humanity with an entirely new perspective of our precious planet" on Twitter (Branson 2019). Bezos, in turn, has predicted a future where humans would establish colonies in space by living in cylinders where Earth conditions would be artificially recreated, allowing millions of people to live and be born (Ma 2019; Hartmans 2021). Along a similar vein, Musk has become famous for his ambitions to set up a colony of a million people on Mars by the 2060s (Drake 2016) while arguing that

"the future of humanity is fundamentally going to bifurcate along one of two directions: either we're going to become a multi planetary species and a spacefaring civilization, or we're going to be stuck on one planet until some eventual extinction event."

Drake 2016, para. 7

The above-described discourse may be read as a somewhat extreme form of anthropocentrism that sees no limits to human-led growth, thereby reproducing a specifically modern understanding of progress fueling capitalist societies. This is the rationale that several alternative ways of thinking, including the broad set of ideas from Latin America gathered under the name of Buen Vivir, have targeted by proposing different views of what is the relationship between humans and Nature, as well as among humans themselves. In that sense, Acosta (2017) argues that Buen Vivir becomes an attractive alternative to capitalist dominance as a highly anthropocentric and utilitarian system, one that entails a limited understanding of development based on materialist values.

Even though Buen Vivir serves as a label for multiple indigenous ideas sourced from different places and communities in Latin America, the philosophies that fall under the term are brought together by a few ethical perspectives on development (Gudynas 2011, 445). One of the most prominent of them is its proposed replacement of anthropocentrism for biocentrism. As explained by Gudynas (2011), it consists in envisioning humans and nature as members of one single community that must cohabitate in harmony. Therefore, living by Buen Vivir's values would mean "re-establish[ing] our connection with Nature, based on a relationship of respect, responsibility and reciprocity, and the basic principle of relationality" (Acosta 2017, 2610). Building on the work of sociologist Simón Yampara and his understanding of the concept of *suma qamaña*, which may be translated as Buen Vivir's essential paradigm, Gudynas (2011) writes:

"Yampara understands that the *suma qamaña* is not restricted to material well-being, as expressed in the ownership of property or consumption at the heart of capitalist societies, but is a harmonious balance between material and spiritual components, which is only possible in the specific context of a community, which is social but also ecological. This social and ecological conception of community is linked to the Andean concept of the *ayllu*, where well-being encompasses not only persons, but also crops and cattle, and the rest of Nature. The classical Western dualism that separates society from Nature vanishes under this perspective, as one contains the other, and they are not separable."

Gudynas 2011, 444

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It follows that Buen Vivir's ethical framework establishes that humans owe their responsibility to all members of their communities, notably including elements of nature. Nature then is given an intrinsic value and granted the status of a subject (Gudynas 2011), stripping human beings of their sovereignty as described by Wendt and Duvall (2008). By taking this perspective into account, one may name the logic behind the billionaire space racers' discourse as not only anthropocentric but also highly self-interested and oppressive towards the ecological component of their communities: not only is nature seen as an object that has been historically managed and exploited by human beings, but it is also one to be tamed by powerful individuals who promise to replicate life-enabling conditions elsewhere if Earth is to become unliveable by humans. That is framed essentially as a strategy to reverse the constraints imposed by nature on the endless ambitions for growth supposedly held by humankind as a whole — and, consequently, to objectify nature even further to capitalism's best convenience, instead of changing human behaviour into a more sustainable way of existing on the planet. It is precisely such instrumental and manipulative rationality that Buen Vivir moves away from by rejecting "the modern stance that almost everything should be dominated and controlled, either persons or Nature, to become a means to our ends" (Gudynas 2011, 445).

Buen Vivir's approaches are usually quite locally bounded as to what concerns the relationship between humans and their territories, but they also entail a spiritual understanding of the planet as Pacha Mama, or Mother Earth (Acosta 2017; Gudynas 2011). Socio-ecological communities are expected to live in harmony and, therefore, in a complementary relationship with Pacha Mama, as put by Acosta (2017). What is found in the billionaire space race is, in turn, a globally oriented rationale, according to which humans already have the entire planet as an object of their possession that fits their hands. Humans are now, so the story goes, entering a new age that will raise even further the number of elements of nature to be manipulated by them. There is, however, no ethical position towards nature itself in the above-described discourse, but only to human existence (yet a highly selective one, as the next section will argue) and, even more importantly, to the maintenance of capitalist modes of production and consumption.

Whereas Buen Vivir takes a cosmological approach and interprets life as a human-nature continuum through spirituality, the modern neoliberal rationality instead deifies the economy as the means to deal with environmental issues and sustain life (Acosta 2017). In the case studied here, we may see that enacted through the celebration of privately owned, highly profitable technology as a tool to safeguard human sovereignty. Furthermore, the supposed path towards progress and development is meant to be guided by individuals who embody the ideal neoliberal *self* par excellence, as this paper is yet to argue. The idea of harmonious life among humans and non-humans, as it is conceptualized in Buen Vivir, is then subverted in the billionaire space race by a radical form of coercive management of nature, one that is aimed at serving historically contingent purposes re(produced) by neoliberal capitalism's practices and discourses.

'You guys paid for all this': the perks of personifying the neoliberal *self* on Earth

A second dimension through which billionaire space racers are assigned power is through their upper position on a supposed planetary-level social hierarchy. As the owners of private corporations with global reach the billionaire's space race is critiqued as being exclusionary and individualistic (resulting from Western subjectivities) with the ethical framework of Buen Vivir — or, as the story goes, companies about to achieve an even larger scale through space flying — these individuals may be said to not only embody the above-described Western modern subjectivity but also to personify its hegemonic contemporary form, the neoliberal *self*. Besides being extraordinarily wealthy, they are seen as successful men thriving in contemporary capitalist societies. They become the ultimate winners of worldwide market competition and, therefore, reproduce Dardot and Laval's (2013) neoliberal reason. Their consecutive victories and extreme economic power grant them the legitimacy to lead the way towards a new radical step for human progress and the opportunity to escape the current dangers to existence faced by humankind on Earth.

Dardot and Laval (2013) describe contemporality as the site of a new subjective norm in which society is conceived as an enterprise made up of enterprises. They argue that the discursive and institutional practices of the twentieth

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century have built a conception of individuals as enterprises living in constant competition with each other. In that account, the neoliberal *self* is thus expected to be constantly taking risks and pursuing his self-interest to maximize desired outcomes, thus behaving as an entrepreneur of himself. The enterprise is taken to be a site of individual flourishing and self-realization where the boundaries between the private and market spheres become blurry (Dardot and Laval 2013).

Entrepreneurial rationality produces a single discourse that connects all power relations in neoliberal societies, rendering itself capable of reaching all aspects of social and individual existence (Dardot and Laval 2013). It's in that sense that one may look at the case of the billionaire space race and its engendered discourse on three white, middle-aged, male entrepreneurs seeking extra-terrestrial power, glamour and new sources of capital. The space race serves as a celebration of neoliberal subjectivity, as it is a globally spectacularized competition taking place exclusively among Bezos, Branson, and Musk as highly powerful individuals embodying their businesses. They become seen as ideal individuals who, after undertaking risks and collecting victories throughout their lives and careers in a neoliberal setting, are now engaging in an ultimate adventure that defies natural forces and constraints imposed on humans by nature.

The above-described image of self-made, competitive, brave, resourceful men may be argued to provide billionaire space racers with the makings to be recognized as successful manterpreneurs (Dardot and Laval 2013). After successfully pursuing their self-interests, they become rightfully empowered to keep doing it even further – and, ultimately, to lead the path towards a new age on behalf of humankind. There's no indication that this path, however, is intended to equally benefit all humankind, but only a selected share of superrich people who may afford the opportunity to escape the dangers experienced on Earth in the future. At present, such exclusionary logic is performed by the celebration of the neoliberal *self* represented by superrich men. They stand economically and socially above the working classes and supposedly get to enormously profit from this workforce because they have made their way through the liberal market. Famously, Bezos thanked Amazon's employees and customers in an interview shortly after landing back on Earth by saying "you guys paid for all of this" (as cited in Gilbert 2021, para. 2), in a reference to a space trip estimated to have cost hundreds of millions of dollars (Gilbert 2021).

Buen Vivir's perspectives bring to the fore the problematic exclusionary, individualistic stance embedded in the neoliberal subjectivity described above. Its philosophies are built on collective experience (Acosta 2017) and consider that well-being can only be achieved through the community (Gudynas 2011). Humans are supposed to live in harmony with each other within a community just as much as communities, peoples and nations are expected to find harmony among themselves. As put by Acosta (2017), this is an ethical framework in which caring for oneself and others becomes a strategy to reach a balance that prioritizes the reproduction of life over the reproduction of capital.

This conception of life, in which relationality plays an overarching role, suggests an endless flow of complex interactions and exchanges. Living Well is premised on giving and receiving, in an ongoing process of reciprocities, complementarities and solidarities. In other words, it takes the form of an ethical perspective which must govern human life. (Acosta 2017, 2605)

Whereas Acosta (2017) points out the relational aspects of Buen Vivir's understanding of human relations, one must observe the lack thereof in the billionaires' space race. Although the discourse of Bezos, Branson and Musk conveys the message they can change life for all humankind, the neoliberal reason assumes that individuals will have to conquer their way into a social position from which reaching for space is possible. Once more, the ethical framework of billionaire space racers becomes narrow, self-serving and exclusionary for considering they may rightfully thrive *despite* the suffering experienced by those around them. Or, perhaps more precisely, that thriving may be achieved *because of* the exploitation imposed on others in socially unequal settings.

While reflecting on Buen Vivir's contribution to International Relations' thought and practice, Acosta (2017) argues it's imperative to turn technology into a resource aimed at serving communal needs and demands, instead of keeping it as a tool of capital accumulation. Such a narrow conception of development, after all, has brought the world to a critical place regarding social and ecological matters. Buen Vivir centres its criticism around this very same axis. In

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the billionaires' space race, the idea of a harmonious life is pushed away to be replaced by a competitive life ruled by neoliberal reason and discursively celebrated by its practices and discourses. The stakes of such competition are taken to a multiplanetary level through a radically individualistic use of technology by those who can afford it. The entrepreneurial rationality is extended to environmental discourse – and possibly to how we come to imagine the future of humankind as it deals with a major threat to its survival.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to illustrate how the alternative, indigenous contributions from Buen Vivir may be deployed as a critical ethical framework for reflecting on specific conceptions of subjectivity made prevalent throughout modernity and contemporality in Western thought. By entailing a radically different understanding of what is the place of an individual and their responsibilities towards others and elements of nature, Buen Vivir stands in opposition to the modern anthropocentric sovereignty critically conceptualized by Wendt and Duvall (2008) as well as to the neoliberal *self* described by Dardot and Laval (2013).

The billionaires' space race has been presented and interpreted as a radical stance through which these two modes of subjectivity become enacted and celebrated. Therefore, it provides valuable insight into how their values are translated into practice and discourse at present – particularly, in this case, on how individuals are expected to behave towards nature and others if granted virtually unlimited power. The protagonists of this case are rendered powerful through two dimensions. First, for their success in fulfilling a personal and collective drive for control over nature. Taming non-human elements is taken to be in humankind's best interest and required to safeguard modern human sovereignty in front of the constraints imposed by nature, such as shortage of energy supply or the effects of climate change. Secondly, billionaire space racers become celebrated for their status of winners in a competitive life ruled by neoliberal rationality, to be then considered legitimate holders of the privilege of leading the way towards the conquer of off-Earth territory and of enjoying the perks resulting from it.

Buen Vivir provides a resourceful critique of the above-described premises and implications resulting from Western conceptions of subjectivity through its overarching concept of harmonious life. Through its biocentric approach, it grants nature intrinsic value and the status of a subject of its own (Gudynas 2011) integrated into the social-ecological communities where humans coexist, instead of a mere object to be manipulated and tamed by human beings. Humans are expected to live in harmony with non-human elements of their surroundings and, more abstractly, with Pacha Mama (Acosta 2017). The philosophy of Buen Vivir, therefore, strips humans from their modern anthropocentric sovereignty and allows one to see the logic behind the space race as self-interested and oppressive towards the objectified ecological elements on Earth.

Furthermore, Buen Vivir's relational character brings to the fore the ethical problems of the exclusionary, individualistic logic of neoliberal subjectivity and its entailed understanding of individuals as enterprises constantly seeking to maximize their personal outcomes. Well-being can only be achieved through the community, and all members must care for each other to reach a balance that allows life to flourish over capital (Acosta 2017). In the billionaires' space race, however, the neoliberal reason assumes that individuals will have to conquer their way into a social position from which reaching for space becomes possible — which would indeed leave out most of humankind. The logic of giving and receiving are suppressed by winning and taking, while harmonious life is replaced by competitive life.

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