

Who is the 'Space Future' for? 'Decolonization' and the 'Final Frontier'

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A common mantra of the space sector is that space is for everyone. Key space actors from both the public and private sector promise they are opening access for all and building a 'multiplanetary future' for 'humanity.' This is a promise arguably built into the Outer Space Treaty which begins by "[r]ecognizing the common interest of all mankind in the progress of the exploration and use of outer space", and goes on to boldly proclaim that outer space "shall be free for exploration and use by all States without discrimination of any kind" and "shall be carried out for the benefit and in the interests of all countries". However, this promise of a space future 'for all' exists in tension with the realities of state and imperial dominance over the 'final frontier', the colonial worldviews embedded in 'astrofuturism', and the exploitative neoliberalism of commercial NewSpace.

Discussions of the need to 'decolonize' space advocacy and space research are not new (the Decolonizing Mars conference in 2018, for example), and garnered considerable attention in the wake of the racial justice protests of 2020, but amid a backlash against 'EDI', talk not only outstrips action but is at significant risk of being undone.

There are big picture questions that remain unresolved, starting with the extent to which the dominant 'vision' of the space future remains a colonial project. This extends beyond the mere objection to terminology such as 'colonize' or even 'decolonize' but delves into the foundational ideas of space from the early space age, particularly efforts to frame expansion into outer space as a 'natural' next step for the American conquest of the 'frontier'. The increasing pace of space activity requires an urgent re-evaluation of the global power imbalances inherent in the international system and global capitalism as they extend their reaches beyond Earth. But just as urgent is the need to question the dynamics of gender, race and disability within the space sector. How can space be 'for all' when one needs the 'right stuff' (or lots of money) in order to have access to space? What role do initiatives such as ESA's Para-astronaut Feasibility Study or AstroAccess play in addressing this? Additional questions get to heart of the conduct of space research itself, such as does analogue space research perpetuate colonial narratives about 'extreme' environments? And how do we ensure that space governance includes the voices of those states that are not able to participate in space activities? Finally, these questions should also extend to the study and teaching of Astropolitics? How do we challenge the narrative of the superpower dominated development of space governance? How do we work to ensure that those who work in and study Astropolitics reflect the 'humanity' of the future? How do we prevent space from becoming the final frontier?

Track Classification: Astropolitics Working Group