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Lunar Lunacy: Competition, Conflict and Mining the Moon

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The discussion about mining the Moon resembles that of previous conquests: the division of territory; the grabbing of resources; language of theft and plunder. All of this is given the gloss of manifest destiny and human experiment. Such language is also self-perpetuating: the plunderer is only as good as the amount taken; success is dependent on constant replenishment and expansion.

A presentation from NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory sports the message that would sit comfortably with any empire builder in history. "Across history, human development has relied upon the finite resources of the Earth." An unfortunate state of affairs, but never fear: "the moon – a seemingly barren rock – may actually be a treasure trove of rare resources vital to Earth's future. And now, nations are looking upwards to a potential lunar gold rush."

Such NASA promotions tend to be tinselled with confidence and brio. They anticipate the Cassandras and naysayers who fear that humans are merely going to deplete the next resource, causing yet another catastrophe of incalculable proportions. "The moon has a mass of 73q tons," claims the colourful JPL presentation. After a few "back-of-the-envelope calculations" (always reassuring), taking one metric ton from the moon each day would take a mere "220m years to deplete 1% of the moon's mass." There would be no change of orbit, or to the gravitational force that affects the Earth's tides. Gradual predation never hurt anybody.

The Moon had been spared such proposed rushes at least till 2008, when the Chandrayaan-1 probe from the Indian Space Research Organisation crashed into the Shackleton Crater in the lunar south pole. It seemed to have discovered water-ice, a point confirmed by NASA in a 2018 publication that can barely conceal the delight of its authors. "These ice deposits might be utilized as an in situ resource in future exploration of the moon."

This has caused a rash of interest. The European Space Agency could only be encouraged, having already mentioned the idea of a Moon Village in 2015. "A Moon Village shouldn't just mean some houses, a church, and a town hall," explained the newly appointed Director General of ESA, Johann-Dietrich Wörner. "This Moon Village should mean partners from all over the world contributing to this community with robotic and astronaut missions and support communication satellites." Manifest destiny can also be collaborative.

With this has come the lure of private capital. Space agencies are hungry for sources other than the tax payer. Bidders are being sought for commercial payload deliveries; lunar bases are being touted as staging grounds for lucrative business, including mining asteroid belts. On the Moon itself, there is the promise of such metals indispensable in electronics: yttrium,

samarium and lanthanum. Helium-3, a gas for nuclear fusion, tantalises investors.

The incitement to aggressive competition and conflict, reminiscent of the wars fought between European powers over colonies and trade routes, seems inevitable. The US Space Command's "Vision for 2020", released in 1997 but still troublingly pertinent, notes that the rise of sea commerce saw nations building "navies to protect and enhance their commercial interests." The brutal conquest of the American interior (described with benign reflection as "the westward expansion of the continental United States"), saw the use of military outposts and cavalry to protect wagon trains, settlements and railroads. "Likewise, space forces will emerge to protect military and commercial national interests and investment in the space medium due to their increasing importance."

Last month, NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine announced that collecting moon material would form part of the agency's Artemis lunar exploration program established in 2019. The intention of that program is to land US astronauts on the moon by 2024 and enable them to "live off" it, as it were, a prelude to bigger and better things. Bridenstine insisted with testosterone fuelled confidence that NASA was "working aggressively to meet our near-end goal of landing the first woman and next man on the moon by 2024" with the aim of establishing "a safe and sustainable lunar exploration architecture."

These are the weasel words of this new exploration. Artemis will be "sustainable", while also being "innovative". It will also keep the budget watchers happy, as it will be "affordable". Specialists of space law will also be satisfied. The dream, then, is one of facilitating space capitalism. "We know a supportive policy regarding the recovery and use of space resources is important to the creation of a stable and predictable investment environment for commercial space innovators and entrepreneurs."

Companies, according to Bridenstine, are being solicited "to provide proposals for the collection of space resources." A nod to space law is made: that actions regarding these proposals will comply "with the Registration Convention, Article II and other provisions of the Outer Space Treaty, and all our international obligations." Companies will collect Moon "dirt" from any part of the lunar surface, furnish "imagery" to NASA of the collection process and the material, along with data on where the material was collected and "conduct an 'in-place' transfer of ownership of the lunar regolith or rocks to NASA." That material will become the property of NASA. But the agency promises to fork out for the "lunar regolith", with awardees receiving 10 percent at award, 10 percent upon launch and remaining 80 percent on completing the mission.

Such remarks have an express purpose: to douse the nagging suspicions of space entrepreneurs and devotees of commercial space endeavours. National space agencies have historically been seen as unwarranted shackles to boisterous space capitalism. The editor and publisher of *The Space Review*, Jeff Foust, puts it down to a stubborn "libertarian streak". Historically, such space advocates eschewed government influence over their space programs "often as part of broader political beliefs". Others feared a competitor in the form of the space agency, a threat to "private ventures, particularly in launch." Modern exponents of such thinking can be found in Peter Lothian Nelson and Walter E. Block's *Space Capitalism*, a libertarian work of such cranky polemic it even questions the space ventures of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson as unduly compromised by state involvement.

On Earth, capitalism as a system is being given a pasting by exponents of sustainability who

argue that it is doomed and dooming. The age of the Anthropocene, the outgrowth of human dependence upon fossil fuels, has proven to be, and is proving to be an experiment of calamitous consequence. But whatever the terrestrial changes to be made – be they to renewable infrastructure, adjustments in growth, or the development of ecological wisdom – the predatory streak of conquest and colonisation is obstinate. The lure of lunar mining, messy lunar conquest and lunar battles, is a very real one.

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