

Our Billionaires Are Blasting Off. Good Riddance!

Could space become the ‘final frontier’ in the struggle for a more equal world?

By [Sam Pizzigati](#)

Global Research, July 20, 2021

inequality.org 17 July 2021

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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Three of the richest billionaires on Earth are now busily spending billions to exit our Earth’s atmosphere and enter into space. The world is watching — and reflecting.

Some commentators see our billionaire trio — Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk — as heroic heirs to the legacies of Charles Lindbergh and Sir Edmund Hillary, the first mere mortals to high jump the Atlantic alone and scale the world’s highest mountain.

Our billionaires racing into space, other charmed commentators are adding, aren’t just thrilling humankind. They’re uplifting us. The technologies that the space operations Branson, Bezos, and Musk “develop could benefit people worldwide far into the future,” [says](#) Yahoo Finance’s Daniel Howley.

But most of our commentators seem to be taking a considerably more skeptical perspective. They’re dismissing the space antics of Branson, Bezos, and Musk as the ego trips of bored billionaires, “cynical stunts by disgustingly rich businessmen,” as one British analyst [puts it](#), “to boost their self-importance at a time when money and resources are desperately needed elsewhere.”

“Space travel used to be about ‘us,’ a collective effort by the country to reach beyond previously unreachable limits,” [writes](#) author William Rivers Pitt. “That was the Cold War propaganda, anyway, and it had an unavoidable allure. Now, it’s about ‘them,’ the 0.1 percent.”

The best of these skeptical commentators can even make us laugh.

“Really, billionaires?” comedian Seth Meyers [asked](#) earlier this month. “This is what you’re going to do with your unprecedented fortunes and influence? Drag race to outer space?”

Let’s enjoy the ridicule. But let’s not treat the billionaire space race as a laughing matter. Let’s see it as a wake-up call, a reminder that we don’t only get billionaires when wealth concentrates. We get a society that revolves around the egos of the most affluent among us and an economy where the needs of average people go unmet and don’t particularly

matter.

Characters like Elon Musk, [notes](#) Paris Max, host of the *Tech Won't Save Us* podcast, are using “misleading narratives about space to fuel public excitement” and gain tax-dollar support for various projects “designed to work best — if not exclusively — for the elite.”

The three corporate space shells for Musk, Bezos, and Branson — SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic — have “all benefited greatly through partnerships with NASA and the US military,” [notes](#) CNN Business. Their common corporate goal: to get satellites, people, and cargo “into space cheaper and quicker than has been possible in decades past.”

Branson, for his part, is hawking tickets for roundtrips “to the edge of the atmosphere and back,” at \$250,000 per head. He’s planning some 400 such trips a year, [observes](#) British journalist Oliver Bullough, about “almost as bad an idea as racing to see who can burn the rainforest quickest.”

The annual UN Emissions Gap Report last year concluded that the world’s richest 1 percent do more to foul the atmosphere than the entire poorest 50 percent combined. That top 1 percent, the UN report [adds](#), would have to “reduce its footprint by a factor of 30 to stay in line” with the 2015 Paris Agreement targets. Opening space to rich people’s joyrides would stomp that footprint even bigger.

Bezos and Musk seem to have [grander dreams](#) than mere space tourism. They’re looking “to colonize the cosmos,” with Bezos pushing “artificial tube-like structures floating close to Earth” and Musk talking up the terraforming of Mars. They essentially see space as a refuge from an increasingly inhospitable planet Earth. They expect tax-dollar support to make their various pipedreams come true.

And how should we respond to all this? We should, of course, be working to create a more hospitable planet for *all* humanity. In the meantime, several egalitarian wags have been circulating online petitions that urge our terrestrial authorities not to let orbiting billionaires back on Earth.

“Billionaires should not exist...on Earth or in space, but should they decide the latter, they should stay there,” [reads](#) one petition nearing 200,000 signatures.

Ric Geiger, the 31-year-old automotive supplies account manager behind that effort, [is hoping](#) his petition helps the issue of maldistributed wealth “reach a broader platform.”

Activists like Geiger are going down the right track. We don’t need billionaires out to “conquer space.” We need to conquer inequality.

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Sam Pizzigati co-edits *Inequality.org*. His latest books include [The Case for a Maximum Wage](#) and [The Rich Don't Always Win: The Forgotten Triumph over Plutocracy that Created the American Middle Class, 1900-1970](#). Follow him at @Too_Much_Online.

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