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My major research project extends my interest in imagination and human futures (developed in my earlier research on the category "transgender") by focusing on commercial outer space entrepreneurs where I am investigating the social consequences of imagining the human species transformed by permanent settlement off world. I have been doing pilot research since 2009, and will continue the project in a five year longitudinal study ending in 2014 (the latter three years have been supported by an NSF grant).

What I know

I know very little about "sustainability" and less about the Maya, but I was invited to join the symposium in order to give my perspective on this issue from the point of view of my research on commercial outer space entrepreneurs. There are two elements that I think will contribute here: (a) theoretical and methodological approaches to framing the future; and (b) the utilization of space resources that space entrepreneurs see as a fundamental reason for settling outer space. I’ll say more about this below.

What I want to know

What I seek is to put the discourse of resource utilization, themes of scarcity and abundance, and utopian and dystopian narratives of the future into the context of research on and attitudes toward sustainability.

Current research

Since 2009 I have done research among entrepreneurs, scientists, engineers, and advocates who seek to radically transform human futures by proposing and actively working toward human settlement of outer space, a movement they see best conducted by private enterprises. While their visions may sound bizarre, there are billions of dollars of private and public funds being invested in commercial space enterprises or, as they are often collectively termed, Newspace enterprises (to differentiate themselves from state-led, centrally-controlled space programs). The central argument for space settlement among Newspace proponents is that without expansion into the cosmos, the human species (and other terrestrial life) is doomed either because of resource depletion on Earth or because of anthropogenic disasters (e.g. climate change) or cosmic catastrophes (e.g. an asteroid strike such as the one responsible for the extinction of dinosaurs in the K/T event, 65mya). As such, Newspace is a highly productive site for thinking about the ontologies of humanness and even life itself; and for thinking about the possibilities and constraints on sustainable human and terrestrial futures.

Newspace proponents are diverse, both demographically and politically, though older, white, US-born men and right libertarian political perspectives are in the largest number. Broadly shared among Newspace proponents, no matter their political affiliation, is the presumption that a legal regime for property rights in space is a necessary first step to enable space settlement. Space advocates were central to derailing the US’s signing on to the Moon Treaty in 1979 since they opposed the central claim in that treaty that space is “the common heritage of all mankind,” language that they saw opposed to the idea of space property rights. While the US is a signatory to the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 (which explicitly forbids states’ claiming of sovereignty over space objects or territory), its terms are vague enough to allow for private entities to have use-rights to space resources, though not to claim bodies or territory itself.
This context of space property rights is key for my informants because they see the settlement of outer space as underwritten by the use of space resources by individuals and corporations. Among my informants are people who have been active in the field of space policy and politics for decades and they bring with them long experience of engaging questions about sustainability and the environment. But “sustainability” is differentially positioned in these contexts. On the one hand it is understood as an essential part of their own plans, in a capitalist idiom of a sustainable business. In order to succeed, space programs and vehicles must be sustainable, that is, business plans and technologies (whether they be for transportation to low earth orbit, mining asteroids, or establishing a Mars colony) must show a sustainable path toward both profitability and the larger goal of getting large numbers of humans off planet. On the other, when in the context of Earth’s resources, “sustainability” is seen as a dangerous code-word that is tied to a “Limits to Growth” environmentalism (such as that encoded in the Moon Treaty) that they oppose because it could be (and increasingly is) extended beyond Earth’s biosphere and is opposed to what they see as essential for combating Earth’s resource crises, which is, precisely, “growth.” Concomitantly, they argue that it is access to space resources that will enable life on Earth to be sustainable, moving manufacturing and mining off-planet, accessing cheap, clean, and plentiful energy from outer space via space-based solar power satellites, and ending concerns about the availability of basic mined resources. Indeed, for many of my informants, it is by going to space that we will protect and regenerate Earth.

Fundamentally, my informants argue that the goals of a retrenching, environmentally-focused “sustainability” are both anti-technological and in the end, anti-humanist because they confound what they see as a basic human imperative to create, expand, and transform their own environments. Two key recent texts which make this case are Robert Zubrin’s *Merchants of Despair* (2012) and Peter Diamandis’s *Abundance* (2012). Both authors are key space advocates; both frame the notion of sustainability in this register as a form of artificial and harmful retrenchment of human capacities to meet the challenges they face through technological innovation; and both critique the assumption that Earth is a closed-loop biosphere that does not interact with its broader cosmic environment, an environment they see as feasible for human occupation. While there is a powerful awareness among Newspace proponents of the problems of human technologization of the environment historically, they make a claim that the context of space is radically different; and that its resources will be positively transformative for Earth itself.

My initial analyses of this material so far have been two-pronged (Valentine 2012, Valentine entrepreneur al 2012). On the one hand, I draw on a critical literature which queries the utopian and optimistic vision of technologically-conferred salvation from human resource extraction and over utilization (e.g. Harvey 2000). On the other, however, I ask what it would mean to take these visions seriously in their own terms and recognize not only the technological but also the ontological challenges that face us in thinking about space as a realm for human activity and for engaging the question of sustainability. I seek an engaged conversation that doesn’t simply draw these narratives into an account of enhanced or intensified capitalism and resource exploitation, but that can also take seriously the existential, epistemological, and ontological challenges that they propose to us as we think about sustainability in the broadest terms.

References


