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Couch Potatoes Vs. Pioneers: The Real Debate About Mars

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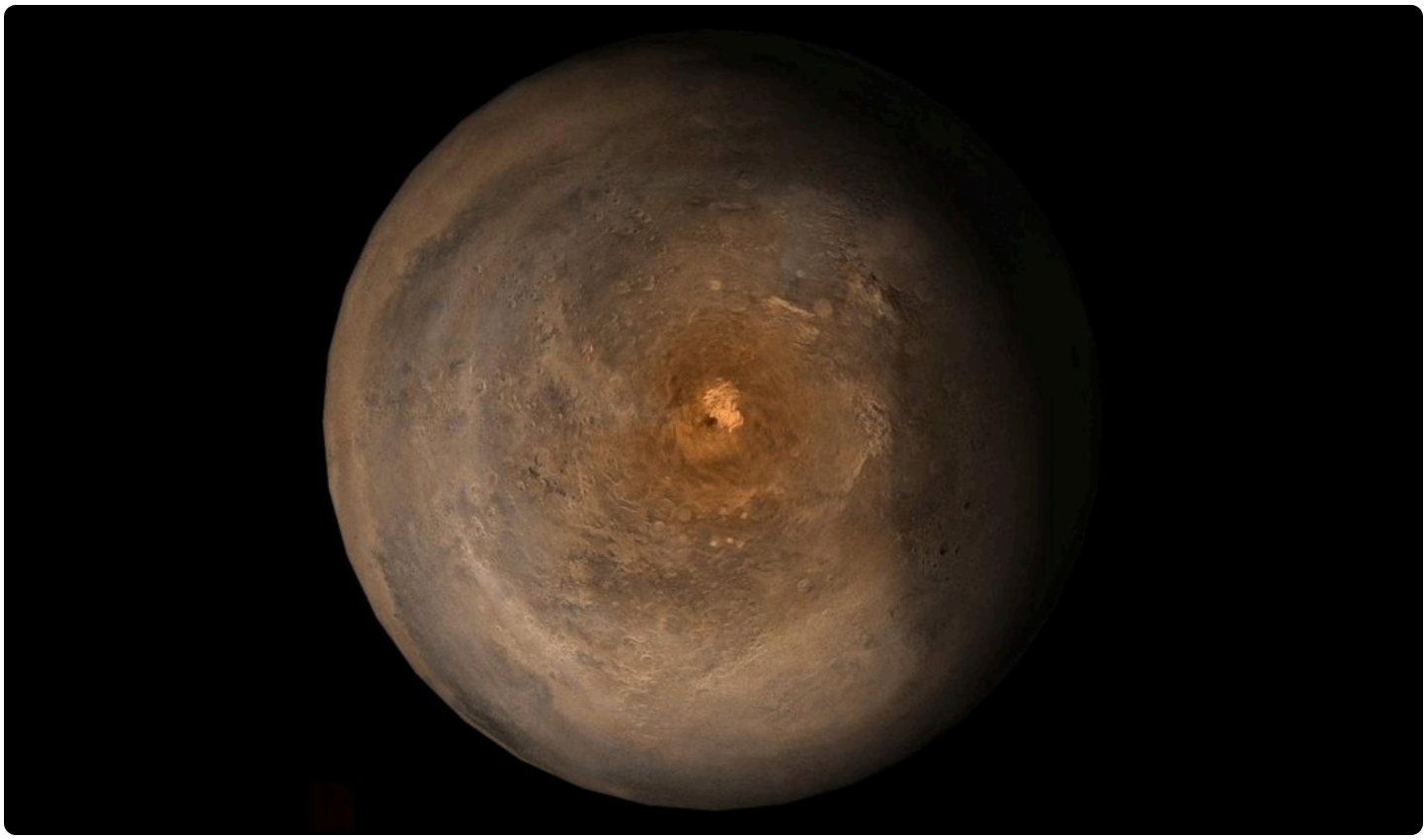

NASA/JPL/Malin Space Science Systems

In 2023, Kelly and Zach Weinersmith published a book titled *A City on Mars: Can We Settle Space, Should We Settle Space, and Have We Really Thought This Through?* For the Weinersmiths, concerns about colonizing Mars or other celestial bodies outweigh any potential advantages. They argue that while we might be able to think about space settlement sometime in the distant future, we are nowhere near that point yet.

Of the concerns they raise, some are worth considering, including unresolved questions as to whether humans can reproduce safely in low-gravity conditions and whether babies can develop normally in such environments. They do write, however, that the Chinese are already planning experiments in which monkeys will mate on their space station – so perhaps we will get our first answers soon.

want a definitive and foolproof plan that answers all conceivable questions before they will even begin to act. This stands in stark contrast to the mindset of the entrepreneur, who takes action and continuously solves new challenges as they arise.

Some of their fears are absurd, for example the idea that states might bombard each other with asteroids. Some of what they write is contradictory, such as when they present the idea that space settlement may not yield discernible economic benefits, while also portraying a grim scenario of nuclear conflicts arising over a scramble for territory on celestial bodies like the Moon or Mars.

The authors do, however, make some valid points: It is indeed unreasonable to believe that an environmental calamity will imminently annihilate all human life, requiring us to find a replacement planet. Even if this threat existed, they argue, it would be too late anyway. And they are also right to reject the idea that colonizing other celestial bodies would eliminate wars on Earth or lead to the creation of a perfect, utopian society.

But many of the points they raise create the impression that they simply wanted to assemble every conceivable reason why we shouldn't go to Mars. For example, they ask how surgery could safely be performed under microgravity conditions; whether couples would have to tether themselves to each other during sex in low gravity; how psychiatric care could be provided for people suffering from mental illness on Mars; whether a permanent stay on Mars would have a negative effect on the psyche, whether medication for mental disorders would be negatively affected by space radiation, and how the profits from asteroid mining could be distributed "fairly."

Countering the claim that "space exploration is a natural human urge," the Weinersmiths argue: "Most of us are not in fact famous explorers. Most of us prefer to vacation in places that have pastries and air-conditioning, not Mount Everest or the Amazon basin … If exploration is a natural human urge that must be satisfied, why are so many of us happy to sit on our couches?"

Ian Stoner makes a similar argument when he writes in the book *Terraforming Mars*: "It is far from clear that the drive to expand is part of human nature. Some people seem driven in this way, but many more are content to stay home."

average existence, who are different from the majority, who are more curious and perhaps also more adventurous than the masses.

An entrepreneur who, before setting up a business, thoroughly considered every single one of the hundreds of potential problems that could occur, as the Weinersmiths do when they raise myriad concerns against the colonization of space, would end up doing exactly what the authors recommend:

> We don't think this has to mean that space settlements should never happen. What we do think is that space settlements probably are, and ought to be, a project of centuries, not decades … we should take a 'wait-and-go-big' approach. Wait for big developments in science, technology, and international law, then move many settlers at once.

They would dawdle and delay – and never do anything at all. Just imagine: if the Weinersmiths had been around when our first human ancestors learned to make fire, they would have said: "Hold on! We need to wait until we've got a perfectly functioning fire brigade and precise plans on what to do if a fire gets out of control. You should wait until we've got every eventuality covered."

In her 2022 book *Astrotopia: The Dangerous Religion of the Corporate Space Race*, the American religious studies scholar Mary-Jane Rubenstein, who is better known for her work on environmental and gender issues, levels an even more fundamental critique of the ambitious plans of Musk and others. Rubenstein takes aim at what she terms "Western antimineralism," which she sees as "a tendency to value those rocks that have been removed, installed, carved, stacked, and shaped by human hands (and market forces) over those rocks that remain where and as geological (and ancestral) processes made them." She argues that we must not settle Mars because doing so would violate the inalienable rights of the rocks on Mars.

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