

Socialism Has Never Worked Anywhere on Earth, So Why Should It Work in Space?



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Some left-wing ideologues reject space exploration altogether—especially private space exploration—while others dream of a planned economy in space or even socialism. We should not underestimate the danger of such ideas. They have already caused enormous harm on Earth. Around two dozen socialist experiments have failed over the past 100 years. Every single one. Without exception. Yet the failed ideas of central planning and socialism have become popular once again.

In his 2022 book “Space Ethics”, Brian Patrick Green, one of many “space ethics experts,” insists: “However, commercial and industrial access to space... should not be a free-for-all. Instead, these private organizations still need to be regulated and still need state guidance... it is the duty of the public sector – governments, states, and international bodies like the UN – to regulate the private sector for the sake of defending the common good for all on Earth and in space...”

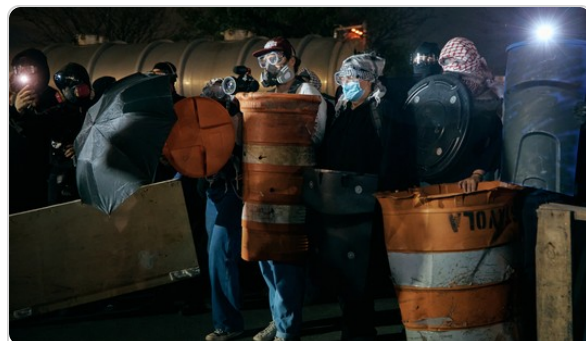
There is nothing fundamentally wrong with regulation, but unfortunately many of those who vehemently advocate it do not have the creation of a clear legal framework for competition in mind; they want something completely different. James S. J. Schwartz, another prominent “space ethicist,” outlines his vision for a potential regulatory mechanism to govern mining in space. He calls for an international body—a scientific panel—to be convened by the UN to oversee access to celestial bodies and areas thereof. Proposals for mining, he argues,

would first have to be submitted to the panel for approval. If approval were granted and resources extracted, Schwartz explains, these resources would then have to be distributed fairly by the panel, or any revenues from the exploitation of those resources taxed.

His second suggestion relates to the use of any extracted resources, namely in support of what he calls ethically defensible projects, and not ethically indefensible ones. As a thought experiment to justify his claim, Schwartz states: “Suppose that an incredibly wealthy space entrepreneur wanted to sculpt a 1-km-tall likeness of their person out of lunar water ice.” Even if that entrepreneur were to pay in order to contract the necessary exploitation, and this massive amount of money were distributed “equitably” to all states, Schwartz objects that there must also be a mechanism in place to stop the pilfering of such an incredibly rare resource for a frivolous purpose. Hence Schwartz’s calls for committees and panels. Just as on Earth, statisticians believe that politicians and civil servants know better than millions of entrepreneurs and consumers.

When I read about the ideas “space ethics experts” come up with, I am filled with apprehension about the future of space exploration. We cannot afford to underestimate the influence of statist and egalitarian ideologies, which have already wrought havoc on Earth, largely because their critics dismiss them as absurd and mistakenly play down the potential damage they and their proponents can do.

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The bestselling authors Kelly and Zach Weinersmith cite the Moon Agreement as a model in their book “A City on Mars”: “The Moon Agreement would have set up the solar system as a particularly communal form of res communis, known in international law as ‘common heritage of mankind’ or just ‘CHM’ ... a commons collectively owned by all of humanity. If the Moon were under a CHM framework and you wanted to use Moon water, you would have to compensate all of humanity by some means.”

They envision something like a large international planning authority to regulate how the proceeds are distributed: “An international regime to oversee exploitation ... a big entity established by states that were parties to the Moon Agreement looking over things, and in particular making sure developing nations got a fair cut.” This international regime would regulate both “where people are allowed to set up shop and what they’re allowed to do with the local resources once they get there. It wouldn’t be dynamic, it wouldn’t be like a science fiction novel, and frankly it would be very slow and bureaucratic and boring.” In this vision, there would be no room for private companies, no room for the formation of fair prices in the market, no room for entrepreneurial ingenuity. It is space socialism, doomed from the start.

On Earth, only capitalism has worked, but for a few decades, socialist systems without private property were also able to survive, albeit at the cost of widespread poverty, authoritarian rule, and famine. Eighty percent of the people who died in famines during the twentieth century perished in Stalin’s

socialist Soviet Union and Mao's China. In space, where the challenges are immensely greater and living conditions infinitely harsher, socialism would be doomed from the outset.

Even “democratic socialism,” as proposed by Chris Hajduk in his book “Terraforming Mars”, won't work on Mars. He writes: “It is expected that within this design the colonists will naturally evolve into some form of Direct Democratic Socialism.” No, democratic socialism, even with private property rights, has never worked anywhere in the world and certainly won't work on Mars.

Today, the 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibits states from claiming ownership of celestial bodies. Whether this prohibition also applies to private companies and individuals remains disputed among space law scholars, since the treaty is silent on this question.

But the question of whether establishing private property rights on celestial bodies will be possible, and whether Martian settlers will opt for a capitalist or socialist system, is essentially the same as asking whether colonization is possible at all. Even if Martian settlers were initially prohibited from establishing private property rights and introducing a capitalist system, they would inevitably have to do so sooner or later, because they simply could not survive on the Red Planet otherwise.

The best solution would be to allow companies that are willing to take the risk and invest the capital required to reach asteroids and begin mining them to claim ownership of those asteroids and list them on the stock market as Real Estate Investment Trusts. That would allow anyone to become a shareholder—and, indirectly, an owner. The same principle should apply to land on the Moon and Mars. Only such a system would create sufficiently strong economic incentives for the next stage of humanity's expansion into space.

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of the book “[New Space Capitalism](#).”