

The Space Race Is Over by Paul Kingsnorth

Paul Kingsnorth examines the collective fear of the future and the progressive concept of space colonization. He urges us to deflect the delusions created by our techno-industrial society.

It was perhaps most popular in the 1950s, as a new consumer society began confidently rolling off the production line, and the age of literary science fiction arguably reached its peak. It was particularly popular with children, who read about it in comics with titles like *Fantastic Adventures* and *Planet Stories*. But many adults were equally sold on the promise offered. It was assumed fairly widely that by the year 2000 the promise would have been kept, and that humanity would benefit greatly.

It didn't take long for this optimism to abate, and for a few decades the idea seemed to disappear from the popular consciousness. But I've noticed that in the last few years that old promise has resurfaced in the popular consciousness. This time around, though, it has a different taste to it. This time around, it seems more like a threat.

I'm talking about the human colonization of other worlds. It seems eccentric even to write the words, but there's no doubt that a belief in humanity's need - perhaps its destiny - to colonize the moon, or Mars, or other worlds known or unknown, is making a strange kind of cultural comeback. No matter that it is no more practical now than it was in the 1950s. No matter that it doesn't look likely that it could happen within the lifetime of anyone alive today, if ever. The practicalities are not the point: it is a fantasy, a motif. It is a means of salvation.

Back in the optimistic 1950s, with the promise of material abundance everywhere, the space race beginning, and much of the population of the Western world still excited about the possibilities offered by new technologies and a beneficial, authoritative science, the idea of humans some day extending their reach to other worlds seemed simply an inevitable progression. I remember believing it myself at school in the late 1970s and the early 80s. This was the future, and it looked great. I consumed Isaac Asimov novels at a rate of knots. I was looking forward to it.

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Today, the world is a different place. The popular faith in science and technology has drained away, to be replaced by a widespread, if often unspoken, fear. From biotechnology to geoengineering, from unmanned drones to internet surveillance, the democratic promise of technology has been transmuted into an authoritarian threat. Meanwhile, that vision of science-fueled progress has done as much damage as it has offered improvement. With the climate changing, with the sixth mass extinction well underway, with the ocean swimming in our industrial refuse, with our own chemical backwash in our breast milk and bloodstreams, it's a harder world for techno-optimists to find a voice. We have opened the box and seen where our ambition leads, and though we might quickly close it again and look away, it is too late in the day for any kind of innocence.

I think it is precisely this fear of the future, this sense of a looming apocalypse, this feeling that we have unleashed a monster that is now beyond our control, that has given rise to the latest outburst about the colonization of other worlds. This time, the idea is not buoyed on a tide of optimism and hope, but tinged with desperation, sadness and sometimes even anger. This time, it is not our next exciting adventure, but our final hope.

Just in the last few years, I have seen a number of people who should know better speculating on how colonizing Mars may be humanity's best prospect for a liveable future. The logic verges on the psychopathic: We have now wrecked this planet beyond the point of no return; there are too many people here, our political systems are unable to contain our technological or economic ambitions, and individual greed and desire is running out of control. There is no way that seven billion people can live the kind of lifestyle they apparently want to live without endless conflict and ecological destruction.

The solution? Not to change ourselves, but to find another planet on which to replay the same script. If we begin to shift people 'offworld,' we will have new frontiers to explore. The pressure on Earth will be reduced. We will be saved, by our cleverness, from the consequences of our cleverness.

Some of the voices which have been clamoring for humans to build themselves a presence on other worlds have been predictable enough. Astronaut Buzz Aldrin, for example, a veteran of those optimistic times, called last year for "American permanence on the planet Mars" within two decades. Stephen Hawking, probably the world's most famous scientist, recently insisted that "we must continue to go into space for humanity...We won't survive another 1,000 years without escaping our fragile planet."

Physicists and astronauts can be excused their daydreams, but they are no longer alone. New strands have been woven into the optimistic space rhetoric of earlier times, and one of the most common is the suggestion that colonizing other worlds will provide new space for humans to expand - and, perhaps crucially, may offer new resources for the toys, gadgets and machines we are mining our own planet to death to get hold of. Writing in the millionaire's magazine of choice Forbes last year, technology writer James Conca made this case starkly: "Growing shortages of key inorganic elements, such as rare earth elements for all our electronic gadgets and renewable energy systems, platinum and other related metals...suggest that we may need more non-renewable resources than Earth can provide," he explained.

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You will find arguments like this in every niche on the internet now: we need more space, we need more stuff, and we can't find it here. Maybe it is 'out there'; instead! Bind this bundle of blind greed and desire with a length of imperial bombast - insist that exploring space is the equivalent of exploring the oceans in an earlier age, that it is our right and our destiny - and you have a whole new fantastical mythology on your hands. Now, the planet which created us is what holds us back from achieving our potential. Note how Hawking talks of 'escaping' the Earth, as if the only living planet we know of, the source of all life, were a prison, and the dead vacuum of space offered the clean air of freedom. It takes a strange kind of mind to believe this. Perhaps it takes a brilliant one.

At the same time as this seed has begun to re-establish itself in the intellectual topsoil of the industrial world, I have seen other utopian weeds begin to flourish. I recently had a conversation with a woman who told me she was looking forward to the development of the artificial uterus - a technology which is currently being explored - so that women could be relieved of the burden of pregnancy and birth. She believed it would foster gender equality.

Perhaps related to this is the ever-popular dream of the 'Singularity' - itself a term coined in the 1950s. The Singularity is the point at which machine intelligence surpasses human intelligence, and all bets are off about the future of our species (and presumably every other species too). The Singularity is an idea that used to be confined to the hipster idealists of Silicon Valley, but it has recently broken free and is beginning to establish itself more widely.

There is plenty more technological utopianism that could be added to this list: the ongoing crusade by neo-environmentalists to use biotechnology to recreate extinct species, for example. Or perhaps even the increasingly dominant concept of the 'Anthropocene' era, the Age of Humans, in which we have changed the Earth so radically that our only option is to act as if we were not simply inhabitants but creators: to take on the mantle of gods in order to correct our mistakes. For a culture which pivots around a need for control and a deeply anthropocentric idea of human manifest destiny, the appeal of this notion is clear enough.

What are we to make of this? Is it some strange, deranged endgame? Perhaps techno-industrial society, hyped up on its own sense of indestructibility, is hitting walls everywhere and doesn't have the intellectual or spiritual equipment to deal with the resulting mess. All we can do is argue for more of the same: more onward momentum, more technological mediation, more control. Are these anything more than the fantasies of people whose worldview is crumbling? Are they any more than delusions?

Certainly many of these fantasies - because this is what they are - start to fall apart on examination. Take that colonization of Mars, for example. The writer John Michael Greer

recently drew attention to a paper published in the journal Nature in 1997. A team of economists had calculated how much value was contributed to the global economy by nature, as opposed to human effort. Their results suggested that, for every US dollar's worth of goods and services consumed by human beings each year, around 75 cents are provided free of charge by the Earth's ecosystems. Only the remaining 25 cents were created by human economic activity. If we were to colonize a dead planet, like Mars, we would somehow need to make up that 75 percent on our own, working it up from a world of dead rock and dust. How would we do it? We have no idea. In all likelihood, it would be entirely impossible.

So, what should we call this clutching at straws? We could call it idealism, even utopianism. It is clearly both of those things. But perhaps it is something else too. Perhaps it is a modern day form of Romanticism.

Look up the word 'Romantic' in a dictionary, and you will probably be met with definitions like this: "exaggeration or picturesque falsehood... A sense of remoteness from or idealization of everyday life ... Exaggerate or distort the truth, especially fantastically." 'Romantic' is a word that is commonly thrown around, often by the kind of people who idealize Mars bases, to dismiss people who draw inspiration from the past rather than the future. It is a popular insult, which, as so many insults do, relieves the insulter of the burden of thinking.

A 'Romantic,' in these terms, is somebody who views the past through 'rose-tinted spectacles,' and desires a return to it. Somebody who, for example, idealizes rural communities and low technology cultures and doesn't understand the harshness and horror of preindustrial life. A 'Romantic' is usually a bourgeois escapist, who sees 'nature' as welcoming rather than threatening, doesn't realize that life before the coming of antibiotics and television was nasty, brutish and short, and is only able to hold those views because of his or her privileged position within the protective bubble of industrial society.

But it seems to me that Romanticizing the past, in our culture at this point in time, is less common than Romanticizing the future. The only difference is that Romanticizing the future is socially acceptable.

This caricature is not entirely unfounded. Certainly there are plenty of naive visions of the past around, and there are plenty of unrealistic assessments of the present as well. But it seems to me that Romanticizing the past, in our culture at this point in time, is less common than Romanticizing the future. The only difference is that Romanticizing the future is socially acceptable.

Consider what the two worldviews have in common. One of them looks back to a period of the past which is considered to be superior to the present, and draws inspiration from it. So a 'primitivist,' for example, may look right back to the Paleolithic era, before the development of agriculture, and hail this as the high point of human

development. We lived in harmony with the natural world until the first grain seed was cultivated, after which we slid into a future of hierarchy, control and ecological destruction. Because there is no possibility of getting back to this period, and because we know very little about it, it is easy to project our emotional needs onto it. This is essentially the Christian narrative of the Fall re-tooled for an anti-capitalist age, and it has the same primal appeal.

It's not hard to find people who swim in these waters. I've swum there myself, and I find it a tempting and comforting story. Perhaps buying into narratives like this is foolish, or perhaps it is just human. But if it is foolish, is it any more so than indulging in fantasies about moon bases and salvation by silicon chip? What is the difference between those who project their needs onto the past, and those who project them onto the future? What is the difference between someone who sees perfection in the ice age, and someone who sees perfection in the space age? It may not always be realistic to look to the past for inspiration, but at least we know, more or less, what the past was like. We have no idea what the future will bring. Perhaps that is the attraction: space is empty, in every sense, and that makes it big enough to contain all of our dreams, however baroque.

Still, if we are going to use words like 'Romantic' we should at least understand their provenance. The Romantic movement, which flourished during the first half of the 19th century, was a reaction to the utilitarianism of the 18th-century 'Enlightenment.' It responded to the dehumanizing impact of mass industry, the rationalization of nature and the increasing emphasis on human reason, with a defense of an emotional, intuitive reaction to the natural world and to human relationships. Though it is perhaps best known today through the poetry of Wordsworth or the art of the German landscape painters, it was at the time just as deeply entwined with radical politics and an assault on the dogmas of materialism and scientism. If it sometimes idealized the past, that was probably an inevitable reaction to the bombastic championing of the future which was going on all around.

Personally, I don't think the word 'Romantic' should be used as an insult at all; like its counterpart 'Luddite' it is a misused historical term. But if it must be - and perhaps it is too late to turn things around - then at least let it be an equal opportunities insult. If it is to be used to condemn those who idealize particular time periods, let the time periods encompass those yet to come as well as those which have gone.

Looked at this way, the Mars-base future, like the future in which we rebuild passenger pigeons in laboratories, breed babies in machines and download our consciousness into silicon chips, is an exercise in Space Age Romanticism. The kind of people who are disgusted by an idealized past can often barely contain their enthusiasm for an idealized future. And when objections are raised, they can dress their visions up in moral language: we must save the planet, we must provide new space for humans to develop and meet their ever-increasing needs. Expect to hear more of this in years to come, as the situation here on Earth grows more desperate.

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What is to be done about this? The answer to this question, as so often, seems to me to be personal rather than political. There is no way to prevent this society from Romanticizing progress and technology, and there is no way to prevent it coming down hard on visions of human-scale and ecological development. It will continue to do this until its own intellectual framework, and probably its physical framework, collapses under its own weight. These attitudes are in our Space Age DNA.

But what we can do, when presented with a vision which projects an ideal onto either the future or the past, is examine our own personal need to be deluded. Engage with any of the world's great spiritual teachers, or many of its secular philosophers, and you will come across the claim that most of us, most of the time, are caught up in our own delusions. That is to say, we are creating our own mental maps of the world, by which we navigate its harsh tracts, and we are hugely reluctant to see these maps taken from us, or to see any of the directions printed upon them questioned. These maps may be religious, philosophical, political or any variation of these things. But they mean that when we look out at the world, we don't see the world itself, we see our own perception of it, and that perception of it is colored by our own emotional needs.

So, if we need to believe in progress, we will believe in progress. If we need to believe in Apocalypse, we will believe in that. If we need to deny the existence of climate change, or believe we can go back to the Pleistocene or forward to the Martian future, we will believe those things, and as long as we want to believe them, nothing can tear those maps from our hands.

The purpose of delusions is to comfort us, and our Space Age delusions comfort us on a civilizational level. The best way around them is probably to examine our own mental maps - and thus our own minds - and try to deflect them as they come. This is the work of a lifetime, but perhaps in the end it is the only work.

"All that we are," explained the Buddha 2,500 years ago, "is the result of what we have thought. The mind is everything. What we think we become." We can see what our civilization is becoming, and where it is going too. What delusions brought you here - and how do you begin to strip them away?

Illustration by Alex Schomburg