

Step by Step, Ferociously

Space is not the place

Christopher Clancy

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a review of

Space Forces: A Critical History of Life in Outer Space by Fred Scharmen. Verso, 2021

The late stand-up comedian, Bill Hicks, used to close his routines with an idea. Take all the money allocated to the U.S. military each year, he would say, and instead use it to feed and clothe and educate the poor of the world, not one person left behind, then take whatever's left over "to explore space, together, both inner and outer, forever, in peace."

Fred Scharmen's *Space Forces: A Critical History of Life in Outer Space* is a critical history of the last 150 years of humanity's dream of exploring and living in outer space, beginning with Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, father of the Soviet space program, and finishing with recent efforts by Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk.

An architect and urban designer, Scharmen claims in his introduction that his history is by no means comprehensive. Still, his ability to work-in space-adjacent cultural references—from Gravity's Rainbow to Roadside Picnic, Timothy Leary to Carl Sagan, Logan's Run to "Whitey on the Moon"—lends his book the sense of no stone being left unturned.

The book's early chapters detail the visionary works of Tsiolkovsky, whose 1920 novel, *Beyond the Planet Earth*, provides "a road map for one part of the Cosmist Task: a demonstration that conscious collective human effort could overcome the circumstances set up by the blind forces in space."

Offsetting this socialist optimism is America's own Edmund Everette Hale, a Unitarian minister, whose 1896 short story, "The Brick Moon," recounts the trials and tribulations of a group of speculators who build and launch a satellite that serves as a habitable space station, eventually developing the means to live independently and secede from Earth.

What shines through in these early accounts is the notion that outer space served as the ultimate blank canvas upon which the future of humanity could be contemplated.

What Tsiolkovsky and Hale and others saw when they looked up at the sky said as much about them as what might really be out there.

"Any conception of a specific space is also the conception of a specific 'we' who that space is for," writes Scharmen. "Sometimes the conception of that subject reinforces existing power structures instead of offering new ways to live."

Our modern, technology-reliant age is introduced through the work of Irish physicist J.D. Bernal, who in 1929 envisioned giant spheres that replicate themselves, providing humanity with a potentially infinite number of safe, comfortable, Sun-orbiting habitats where "voluntary associations of interested persons would be the rule."

Still, Bernal seemed to recognize the wishfulness of his own thinking, later predicting, "Man will not ultimately be content to be parasitic on the stars but will invade them and organize them for his own purposes."

Enter Wernher von Braun, a Nazi SS officer and rocket designer for the Third Reich whose V-2 ballistic missile produced by prisoners at the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp bombed London. In 1945, he was relocated to El

Paso by the U.S. military to work with the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics to build America's first exploratory rockets, helping to launch the effort that would eventually result in tire tracks on the moon.

It's more than a little telling that, when von Braun looked up at the sky, he saw more war. His 1952 novel, *Das Marsprojekt*, tells the story of an arms race between Earthlings still recovering from a third world war and a highly organized, highly aggressive Martian race.

One highlight of *Space Forces* comes in Scharmen's accounts of institutional racism within NASA at the height of the space race in the 1960s. The contributions of African Americans like Jesse Strickland, chief architect of NASA's Lewis Flight Propulsion Laboratory through that decade, and Katherine Johnson, whose calculations of orbital mechanics were essential to the success of early American spaceflights, were so shielded from public view that they were all but forgotten. That is, until the release of films like *Hidden Figures* (2016) ushered them into mainstream consciousness. With the Russkies breathing down their necks and *Life* magazine looking to run a cover story, NASA's "we" consisted exclusively of white men.

Going by humanity's most recent spaceflights, the reinforcement of existing power structures is the only reason to go into space. Jeff Bezos and his Blue Origin project (official slogan: "Gradatim Ferociter," or "Step by step, ferociously") is committed to the idea of humans living and working on satellites made from materials mined from other planets. As Bezos would have it, these people would occasionally be able to visit an ecologically revitalized Earth, presumably to see what a tree looks like. Nothing is said about who would comprise the sacrifice class doing the extraterrestrial labor to enrich the owners. One can only imagine a scenario like the early years of the Industrial Revolution with the lives of outer space workers being "nasty, brutish, and short."

Elon Musk and his SpaceX project aim to offer trips to Mars plus a solar powered yurt of one's own for as little as \$200,000. "And Mars would have a labor shortage for a long time, so jobs would not be in short supply," Musk said in 2016.

Our ongoing conquest of space depends not just on the visions of billionaire CEOs. The technology necessary for space travel requires a centralized nation state spending its citizens' tax dollars. There's also the necessity of a cutting-edge military capable of providing the security to protect these corporate interests on and around other planets. Perfect timing, then, that former President/Space Force Commander Donald Trump signed an executive order in 2020 denying outer space as a "global commons," hence leaving space open to whatever new forms of extractive capitalism our billionaires can come up with.

Fun fact: In *Das Marsprojekt*, von Braun named his military space unit "Space Force of the U.S.A."

Scharmen writes, "If the would-be Moon and asteroid miners want to extend the status quo, it's not hard to imagine that the Space Force exists in part to defend that status quo. Dominance is the dominant paradigm, and unless it is undermined, it will remain so."

Challenging, if not undermining, the currently dominant paradigm, are organizations like Maine-based Global Network Against Weapons and Nuclear Power in Space, created in 1992 to build consciousness and constituency to protect space from escalating militarization and its attendant miseries. So far, their criticisms of the march toward U.S. military dominance of the heavens is relegated to a black hole in political space, swept aside by the giddiness around dreams of conquering the cosmos.

Scharmen concludes his history with a call for "messy thinking," or the realization that outer space remains, for the time being, a mostly blank canvas, one where conscious collective human effort overcomes blind force and even Bill Hicks's ideas have a chance.

"One reaction to this situation might be to fall back on a naturalized false realism: the wealthy and elite get to do things that ordinary people don't," the author writes. "But the world is more full, more complicated and messy than all that, and so are other worlds."

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