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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Palmås, K., Ekberg, K., Åberg, A. (2022). Is there such a thing as a capitalist eschatology?. *Futures*, 136. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2022.102901>

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.



Is there such a thing as a capitalist eschatology?

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

New space
multi-planetary species
Elon Musk
Jean-Francois Lyotard

ABSTRACT

This short communication presents preliminary notes about how to study the role of eschatology in the contemporary economy, focusing specifically on space-colonizing ambitions of US entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk. It is suggested that the proposed research agenda focuses on three problematics, relating to *immediacy*, *investment*, and *ideology*. As such, the text proposes to study the making of alternative futures by situating imaginaries of humanity becoming a multiplanetary species in the present realities of political economy.

1. Introduction

In a 1979 edited volume titled *Voices for the Future: Essays on major science fiction writers*, American cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin discussed the work of J.G. Ballard. By suggesting that Ballard is “mistaking the end of capitalism for the end of the world” (Franklin, 1979), Franklin created a trope that would later morph into a leftist cliché: It is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.

From the 1990s onwards, the phrase came to denote the “weakness” of the imagination that paralysed the left after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the proclamation of the end of history. (Jameson, 1994: xii; Žižek, 1999: 55; Fisher, 2009: 1) Fredric Jameson would later give the phrase another meaning, using it to discuss capitalism in conjunction with the degradation of the earth. Thus understood, the phrase became a way to “imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (Jameson, 2003: 76), or – more broadly – to analyse social situations in which economic necessities trump ecological ones. (Palmås & Lindberg, 2013: 126)

This short communication will present a research agenda which implies another reformulation of this theme: *Has capitalism begun to imagine the end of the world? Is the capacity to imagine the end of the world increasingly integrated in our economic system?* To put it in somewhat more catchy terms: *Are we witnessing the emergence of a “capitalist eschatology”?*

This inquiry is prompted by the recent high-profile space endeavours of entrepreneurs like Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and Elon Musk - particularly the latter’s ambition to make humanity a multiplanetary species. It is also relevant in the context of the more long-standing emergence of “new space” endeavours, such as private space exploration, space mining and space tourism.

Before moving on to outline this agenda, it is worth clarifying the terms of the inquiry. First, when using the term “eschatology”, we are using it in the broad sense, as a narrative or imaginary regarding the end of the world. As such, the term is often used in the context of religious faith. For example, the Judeo-Christian tradition involves eschatological ideas of humanity making an “exodus” to a new “promised land”.

Secondly, when we refer to “our” ability to imagine the end of the world, we have the respective imaginaries of two subjects in mind: For one, we are interested in the *collective* imagination of humankind leaving the earth. This collective imagination is well researched from a historical perspective, especially in a western context. (Geppert, 2018; Kilgore, 2003) However, we are also

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interested in the more specific imaginaries enacted by entrepreneurs, business leaders, financial agents and engineers – the professions that devise plans, budgets and blueprints for such futures.

Thirdly, as regards “our economic system”, we are referring to the systems traditionally prevalent in Western Europe and Northern America, based on private enterprise and relatively free capital expansion. While concepts like “capitalism” and “capital” are bound up with extensive analytical baggage, the tradition of political economy does provide some useful concepts from which to understand our object of inquiry. Thus, we believe that it is productive to discuss eschatology in relation to *investment* (associated with the analysis of the expansive logic of “capital”), as well as in relation to *ideology* (associated with analysis of “capitalism”). However, before moving on to those themes, this text will first engage with the supposed immediacy and inevitability of the prospect of the end of the world. As such, the proposed inquiry will deal with three questions:

- Is the recognition of an inevitable end of life on earth, and the related idea of becoming a multiplanetary species, gaining in immediacy in contemporary public discourse?
- Is this eschatological imaginary increasingly reflected in the investment plans, budgets and blueprints of entrepreneurs, business leaders, financial agents and engineers?
- Is this imaginary serving ideological purposes; that is, serving to legitimate broad support for the current economic system?

The next three sections will explore these themes in greater detail, and the text ends with a short conclusion.

2. Immediacy and inevitability

Elon Musk – founder of carmaker Tesla and space-exploration company SpaceX – is a key protagonist in this proposed research agenda: He has famously argued that humanity is approaching a bifurcation point in history: We either stay on earth or become a multiplanetary species. (Musk, 2017) In promoting the latter, he suggests that this is necessary if humankind is to survive. While he stops short of providing an “*immediate* doomsday prophecy” (46, italics added), he asserts that “there will be some doomsday event” at some point, leaving us no option but to colonise Mars become “space-bearing civilization”.

The first theme of this research agenda involves an inquiry as to how broadly this bold proposition has been accepted. The question at stake is not whether it is readily accepted that life on earth will end *some* time in the future. Rather, the question is whether this prospect is associated with an *immediacy* - understood in the sense of “urgency” - that requires active anticipation by entrepreneurs, business leaders and engineers.

The proposition of leaving the earth and colonising Mars is hardly novel. Indeed, the theme of colonising Mars is explored in science fiction, such as in Kim Stanley Robinson, 1992 *Red Mars*. However, this imaginary also seems to have made its way into business plans. For instance, consider the clothing brand Vollebak, which is designing garments for a future on Mars. “Whether people want to become it or not, Elon is right”, founder Steve Tidball tells the *Financial Times*. The fashion entrepreneur continues:

We are going to become a multiplanetary species and so we’re trying to advance towards intelligent clothing [...] It’s just an absolute *inevitability*. (Auld, 2020, italics added)

The idea that we are living in a culture that recognises the immediacy and inevitability of a life beyond earth has already been discussed by Jean-Francois Lyotard; the French philosopher primarily associated with “the postmodern onslaught on knowledge”. (Sardar, 2020: 2) In his famous book about the postmodern condition, Lyotard (1984) analysed the demise of the metanarratives that since the enlightenment have legitimated knowledge-production. His less famous subsequent work involved an examination of what he believed was emerging as a replacement of these defunct metanarratives - a “postmodern fable” (Lyotard, 1997) strikingly similar to Musk’s proposition.

Thus, Lyotard argued that our culture was gravitating towards the idea that the fate of humanity lies beyond Earth, and that the “*exodus is already on the agenda*”. (Lyotard, 1992: 64-65, italics added) By this he meant that the narrative of eventually leaving Earth was becoming a dominant vision of the future among technoscientific elites. In hindsight, this diagnosis was premature: The 1990s represented a nadir of space exploration. During this period, the Cold War model of state-led endeavours had not yet been properly augmented by the rise of a private-led space industry. While climate-related research kept satellites in orbit, the period can be characterised by a curbed enthusiasm for sending humans into space.

Given Musk’s recent remarks, and the concomitant excitement around it, it is nevertheless worth revisiting Lyotard’s proposition: Is the idea of an inevitable exodus gaining in perceived immediacy in contemporary public discourse? Conversely, is it the case that these ideas are still a marginal phenomenon? In order to put our propositions to the test, the proposed research agenda may entail content analysis of material in popular media – be they traditional or social – as well as new methods emerging from the field of digital humanities.

Beyond this preliminary and general inquiry, further questions may emerge: *If* the idea of becoming a multiplanetary species has become a credible storyline, for *whom*, and what *effects* does this imaginary have on the actions of those societal actors? The next section will ask what effects such eschatological ideas may have on the work of professionals within business and technology, and the subsequent section focuses on what effects they may produce in members of the wider public.

3. Eschatology and investment

In contemporary economic sociology, there is an ongoing discussion on how economic action can be understood not through rational calculations, but through *fictional* expectations. (Beckert, 2016) Given that futures are fundamentally uncertain, collectively

held fictions allow economic actors to free themselves from paralysing doubt. Fictions – be they stories, narratives or imaginaries – lead investments, even if they do not deliver short-term rewards. In fact, Beckert suggests, it is collectively held fictional expectations that underpin and sustain long-term investments.

Following this approach, one may explore how eschatological accounts of the future of humanity may be integrated in more mundane economic calculations regarding investments. How, then, is multiplanetary life framed in terms of economic rationalities? Again, Musk has stopped short of doomsday scenarios, but his arguments on this point seem to chime with the idea – put forward by critics of capitalism (Harvey, 2014: 222) – that endless compound growth is impossible on a finite earth.

This perceived finitude of the Earth is expressed in different ways. For one, recent developments in space mining are in part driven by a perceived threat of resource scarcity. (Kalmbach, Marklund, & Åberg, 2020: 278) Here, again, we see parallels with science fiction – in Kim Stanley Robinson's *Red Mars*, colonisation of Mars begins as a quest for resources. However, there are other aspects of colonising Mars, at least in the future projected by Musk. The red planet is not solely a place for extraction, it is also the new frontier for entrepreneurial settlements. When asked about the details of Mars settlements, Musk tends to describe them first and foremost as blank spaces for new business creation. (Musk, 2015) In fact, this idea of Mars as a free planet is written into the terms of service for the SpaceX satellite internet service. (Crist, 2021)

When viewed through the lens of political economy, it is tempting to interpret this extravagant endeavour, and the more general commercialisation of space, as a new kind of “spatial fix”. (Harvey, 2014: 151) This term implies the process of transforming circulating capital to fixed capital, thus alleviating the tendency towards over-accumulation. In this “spa(ce)tial fix” (Shammas & Holen, 2019: 5), space is transformed into a new place in which to invest in fixed capital. Space becomes a great black hole that sucks in the capital which has run out of terrestrial spaces to go.

Nevertheless, social-scientific theorising aside, there is scope for an inquiry into whether such imaginaries are in fact being factored into the economic reasoning of actors within entrepreneurship and finance. Is there an emerging understanding of diminishing opportunities for Earthbound investments, and a perception of limitless opportunities in space? Will the space industry become a significant sector for the future growth of the economy?

The ideas under investigation may be operative in lucrative businesses that have emerged within the private space industry. As such, an inquiry into how eschatology is made operative in contemporary capitalism is in part an investigation into the “depth” of the convictions held by business actors involved in space exploration. However, it is also an investigation into how “far” these convictions have spread in the world of business, outside of the space industry, such as the above-mentioned case of Vollebak.

This aspect of the research agenda is best served by conducting rich qualitative research on the professionals in question. Again, the challenge is to put our propositions to the test – it may be the case that the suggested effects on investment patterns are marginal. Moreover, it may be the case that the space endeavours of Musk and the business offerings of companies like Vollebak are mere chimeras that mask the lack of a true intent: It may be the case that there are no plans, budgets and blueprints for actually becoming multiplanetary. If so, however, this means that these “empty” signalling actions are significant in another way: What effect do such activities produce amongst broader publics?

4. Eschatology as ideology

Aside from the effects that the idea of multiplanetary life may be having on entrepreneurs, business leaders, financial agents and engineers, there is also the matter of the effects that the idea might be having on broader publics. Here, one may study the ways in which the idea may serve what one might call “ideological” purposes: Can eschatological claims of entrepreneurs legitimise the economic system?

In a recent exchange on social media, Bernie Sanders, the democratic socialist senator from the US state of Vermont, tweeted: “We are in a moment in American history where two guys — Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos — own more wealth than the bottom 40% of people in this country. That level of greed and inequality is not only immoral. It is unsustainable.” Upon reading Sanders’ comment, Musk replies: “I am accumulating resources to help make life multiplanetary & extend the light of consciousness to the stars”. Sanders’ response reads: “Space travel is an exciting idea, but right now we need to focus on Earth”.

This exchange warrants a brief unpacking: One may first note that there is nothing new about a public discourse in which critics of capitalism question the morality and unsustainability of the economic system, and accuse wealthy business owners of being greedy. Nor is there anything new about business moguls responding to such claims, pointing to how their wealth is used for investments in the communities that sustain them, or for projects that benefit humanity as a whole. This logic of moral outrage tempered by philanthropic zeal has a long history, which can be traced from the Carnegies and Rockefellers all the way to present-day activities of the Gates Foundation. (McGoey, 2015)

What is new here is the nature of the endeavour that Musk invokes when legitimating wealth disparities – that of making humanity a multiplanetary species. This ambition differs from that of Carnegie, or Rockefeller, or Gates. The ambition of Musk transcends the “worldly” type of projects usually favoured by philanthropists, such as investments in the built environment, in education or in global food supply. Instead, Musk’s endeavour is end-of-worldly, representing what we have previously called a capitalist eschatology.

Again, since this is a part of a research inquiry, the question is how to put these propositions to the test. In particular, the challenge is to dissociate the legitimizing effects of this multiplanetary narrative from more traditional modes of legitimizing wealth. Indeed, the Protestant ethic of Weber, and the proposition that hard work should pay off, may still overshadow the ideological effects of multiplanetary imaginaries.

This part of the research could be conducted through traditional ideology critique, which tends to use discourse analysis to discuss meaning in statements and actions. However, another productive approach may be to use surveys as a means to assess and detect any

ideological effects from eschatological claims. In any case, it is imperative to note that we are merely analysing potential ideological effects of Musk's eschatological claims – we are not interested in whether he really believes in them, whether he is bluffing, or whether he is wildly overestimating his chances of success.

5. Conclusions

This short communication has sketched the broad outlines of how to study a recent phenomenon – a tendency in which eschatological accounts of humanity's future beyond Earth have become mobilised and integrated in contemporary enterprise. As suggested above, an interrogation of this phenomenon is largely a study of imaginaries and fictions, and the ways in which they guide human action.

In this way, this research agenda seeks to complement the current discussion in this journal about the prospect of space colonisation. Such previous contributions include the special issue on "Human Colonisation of Other Worlds", edited by Smith and Abney (2019), as well as contributions by Szocik (2018, 2020), and Kovic (2021). However, the proposed agenda reorients the futures studies' gaze on space colonisation, focusing specifically on the extent to which such colonisation imaginaries are becoming integrated within the current economic system. As such, it does not comment on the plausibility of colonising endeavours, or normatively evaluate them. Nor does it seek to provide a "blueprint for humanity to use to safeguard our journey into the distant future". (Tonn, 2021: 1, italics in original) While such research ambitions are laudable, the proposed research instead focuses on the politico-economic effects of such prescriptive claims.

For instance, competing prescriptive claims on whether or not to become a multiplanetary species may become an emerging line of political conflict, superimposed over the longer-standing conflict between capital and anti-capitalists. In one camp, there is a business community that prepares for an eventual exodus from the Earth. In the other camp, there are critics of capitalism who argue for the alternative future path that Musk rejects, casting their lot on staying on Earth indefinitely – a wager that is premised on reforming the economic system. This conflict may, in turn, influence which futures that end up being enacted.

As a final point, it is worth noting that the research questions presented above may well be asked within a wide array of disciplines. Here, the interdisciplinarity of the futures studies field can be leveraged in a productive manner. Thus, the proposed inquiry may draw upon anthropologists or sociologists who study professions that actively devise plans, budgets and blueprints for multi-planetary futures. It may equally feature media scholars or even theologians who study whether such imaginaries are embraced by broader publics. In any case, we look forward to further discussions on whether there is indeed a such a thing as a nascent capitalist eschatology.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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