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Cover Story
Moon-walking?
The African World
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July 20, 1969 I was in Hyannis, Massachusetts. I was watching all the coverage of the moon landing and was positively thrilled. Yes, I was aware, as the Black Panther Party warned at the time, that this moon landing could be the harbinger of an expansion of imperialism into outer space, but I saw in the landing immense possibilities for the future of human-kind. I still do.

For a variety of reasons, detailed considerably over the last several days as the anniversary of the Apollo 11 landing approached, space exploration has lost its way. We are not "lost in space," but rather lost *from* space. The costs involved; the impact of the Indochina War followed by economic crisis; the renewal of the Cold War followed by the collapse of the USSR; cynicism; all led to decreasing interest in human travel into the cosmos. Significant automated space flights have taken place within the solar system, along with the development of the Hubble space telescope and the international space station. Yet, with the exception of George W. Bush's throw-away line about humans going to Mars - a half-hearted commitment from someone who clearly had no vision in connection with his statement - there has been no general direction when it comes to human space travel.

In addition to various inventions that have been introduced as a direct result of space travel and exploration, the fundamental reason to pursue space exploration is because it is "there." Arguments can abound as to the minerals that probably can be harvested from asteroid fields and other planets, but more than anything else, what lies in space is the answer to a question which has teased humanity since we turned our heads to the skies: are we alone?

If one goes beyond the philosophical, however, there is a strong argument for a progressive, rather than military, expansion into space: the survival of human life on Earth. One reason, which has been ridiculed by some commentators, is the actual

danger to planet Earth from asteroid or comet impact, e.g., the asteroid that hit Earth and exterminated the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Thus, having human outposts on other planets increases the chances for human survival.

The second reason is actually related to the first - that as fascinating as is space, it is also quite dangerous. There may be protective measures that humans can take against asteroids or meteors if we develop the appropriate technology, e.g., an early warning system and sufficient space travel capability.

Third, and to borrow from the progressive science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson and his commentary in the July 19, 2009 issue of the ***Washington Post***, there may be means to tap into the Sun for energy that can be transmitted to Earth to address the increasing demands of the population of the planet.

A friend of mine once scoffed at my suggestions about human expansion into space by arguing that humans have made such a mess of the Earth, why would we not do the same thing in outer space? Despite the mockery I took this comment quite seriously. Yet the answer depends on whether one believes that humans have a built-in predilection toward destruction or whether the destruction of the blue planet is tied into socio-economic systems that have placed wealth and avarice above the collective good for human-kind.

Additionally, the answer to this question depends on whether one believes that the question of space is actually the sort of challenge that humanity needs in order to survive. Specifically, is an expansion into space part of a humbling process that at one and the same time reminds us of our relative insignificance on the scale of the universe, but also reminds us of the interconnections between all things?

Kim Stanley Robinson and others have wisely noted that it may not be physically possible for humans to live in space (meaning, other worlds). That the ecosystem of this planet, into which we are integrated, has such a strong pull that we cannot exist outside of it. Clearly any "colonization" of other worlds would necessitate finding a planet almost identical to Earth or some sort of terraforming in order to ensure that a stable population can grow. That said, to me such commentary remains a cautionary note rather than a stop sign. In large part this is due to my conviction that as long as humans can glimpse the planets and stars we will never cease to wonder, *what truly awaits us within the darkness of the heavens?*

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