

Capitalism in space

Corporate claim on an asteroid

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In a world where the capitalist market dominates social life, and the right to buy and own private property is considered natural and God-given, the drive to acquire more and more wealth can take on bizarre forms.

Jim Benson, one of the founders of the corporation Space Dev, recently announced his intention of spending \$79 million to have the US space agency NASA build and launch a space probe to rendezvous with an asteroid known as 4660 Nereus in the year 2002. Space Dev plans to stake its claim to the asteroid, making Benson the first private citizen to be the owner of a planetary object.

The asteroid will pass within about four million miles of earth. After orbiting the moon six times, Space Dev's Near Earth Asteroid Prospector (NEAP) probe will be flung out to meet the asteroid. The same NASA scientists and engineers who developed the probe for the Mars Pathfinder mission will be contracted to build the NEAP.

In a recent interview, Benson bluntly spelt out the reasons for his project: 'This mission could set a precedent for private property rights in space. We are going to a small planetary body, without public subsidy, at our own risk and expense. If we are there, we landed on it, it's ours.'

At first sight, it might appear to be a case of a very rich man with a touch of megalomania. But there is method to his madness. Benson hopes to raise almost \$24 million for the mission by charging anyone who wishes to conduct experiments on the probe. NASA, Canada and Brazil's space agency have already hinted that they are interested.

A shift is taking place in space research. In the past, private corporations could not afford the huge outlays necessary to develop the technology for little

immediate return. Governments carried out the research, planned the missions and launched the satellites and probes. While there were often important scientific objectives, these programs were always subordinated to military and national interests. More recently profit has increasingly intruded as a key motive. Telecommunications companies put satellites in orbit and there has been a proliferation of private companies seeking to utilise space technology for a variety of purposes.

With an eye to the future, Benson is seeking to set himself up as one of the first space entrepreneurs--offering space missions designed to order for bargain prices. Space Dev describes itself as 'an innovative public corporation which intends to create and exploit profitable space exploration and development opportunities, beginning with an historic scientific data collection mission to another planetary body'.

It offers to 'design missions, spacecraft and launch vehicles; produce satellite and spacecraft subsystems; assemble spacecraft and satellites; manufacture launch vehicles; perform launch integration services; launch private and public missions for itself and its customers; provide ground stations; and perform mission control'.

Clearly the mission to 4660 Nereus is aimed at staking more than just a claim to a space boulder. Space Dev is seeking a niche, just as venture capital anywhere attempts to get a jump on its rivals, whether it is the exploitation of oil reserves in Central Asia or mining exploration in Africa.

The corporation boasts that its NEAP will be the first private mission to leave earth's orbit, the first private spacecraft to visit and land payloads on another planetary body, the first mission to provide scientists and researchers with fully insured access to deep space

at fixed commercial prices and, last but not least, the first mission to set a precedent for private property rights in space.

For its part, NASA has given the all-clear for the new up-and-coming Space Dev. The corporation has recently recruited ex-employees from NASA and NASA's administrator Daniel Goldin has organised senior personnel to work on the NEAP project. No doubt as government funding is increasingly scarce, NASA administrators are looking for other financial avenues.

As private profit intrudes into space research, the broader scientific inquiries will inevitably be sacrificed to the narrower and more immediate demands of corporations for returns on their investments. Moreover if a private individual can 'own' an asteroid then why not a stake on the Moon or Mars? As better and cheaper forms of space travel are developed, mining or other activities on the Moon may become a profitable venture and all the rivalries and conflicts that beset mankind on Earth will be transferred to outer space.

Benson's ideas might seem eccentric, but there is a logic--the perverse logic of the capitalist market.

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