

Richard Branson's flight and the privatization of space travel

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14 July 2021

On Sunday, July 11, Virgin Galactic successfully sent four passengers to the edge of space using its SpaceShipTwo class vessel VSS Unity during the company's latest test flight. The entire affair was massively promoted by Virgin Galactic's founder, billionaire Richard Branson, who took part in the ride, and the American media, who can all now assert that Branson is the first billionaire astronaut.

By the technical definition as laid down by NASA, such assertions are correct. Branson and five others—pilots David Mackay and Michael Masucci, and passengers Sirisha Bandla, Colin Bennett and Beth Moses—were lifted to 86 kilometers (53 miles), just above the 80 kilometer limit recognized by the US space agency as the boundary between our planet's atmosphere and outer space, before experiencing the weightlessness produced by free fall for four minutes before gliding back to Earth.

This author couldn't help but recall Woody's derisive comment about Buzz Lightyear when they first met in Pixar's *Toy Story*: "That's not flying, that's falling with style." What Branson did is not space travel, and there is not even much style in his brief and thoroughly pedestrian moment of free fall.

The real significance of Branson's flight, however, is that it marks yet another milestone in the monetization and privatization of spaceflight and the transformation of what had been considered a global commons, in an earlier period, into a playground for the ultra-rich.

Branson, Amazon founder and Blue Origin owner Jeff Bezos, and SpaceX CEO Elon Musk are only among the most obnoxious and self-promoting representatives of the capitalist class. They do not consider space exploration a scientific endeavor for humanity, but merely a way to enrich and amuse themselves and their fellows among the financial oligarchy.

The design of SpaceShipTwo itself makes this abundantly clear. It is essentially a plane that is carried to 50,000 feet by a mothership, White Knight Two, before being released and firing its rocket for less than a minute, reaching its apogee several minutes later and then coasting back to Earth. Such

operations involve technology less sophisticated than the X-15 space plane from 1959, which itself was a testbed for aerodynamic control systems in the upper atmosphere, and is not designed either to go into orbit or lift a payload there.

It is worth comparing Branson's flight to the earliest spaceflights to better understand just how low the bar has been set. When Alan Shepard became the first American in space in May 1961, he flew to 187 kilometers, more than twice the height of Branson's flight. When Yuri Gagarin, the first human in space, flew in April 1961, he actually achieved orbit on the Soviet Vostok I spacecraft, with a maximum height of 327 kilometers, four times as high as Branson, flying around Earth for 108 minutes before landing by parachute.

In other words, far from the plutocrats advancing the exploration of space, their activities represent a significant backward step compared even to the scientific, technical and social achievements of 60 years ago, let alone the colossal society-wide effort that led to the Moon landings in 1969–72.

Rather than being a demonstration that human reason is capable of understanding the world and harnessing nature to its purposes, space travel, like all aspects of social life, is being subordinated to the most noxious expressions of wealth and excess.

Such realities have not stopped glowing reviews of Branson's flight in American newsrooms. The *Washington Post* breathlessly wrote, "Richard Branson completed a daring, barnstorming flight to the edge of space Sunday." He was referred to as the "swashbuckling billionaire" by the Associated Press. The *New York Times* had only a modicum more of restraint, asserting, "Richard Branson at last fulfilled a dream that took decades to realize: He can now call himself an astronaut."

They were joined by a host of media personalities and politicians who were guests at Unity's takeoff and landing site, including New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, Elon Musk and Late Show host Stephen Colbert. R&B singer Khalid debuted a new song, titled "New

Normal,” at the flight’s after-party.

Khalid, Branson and others were attempting to impart the idea that space tourism will become “normal” and routine thanks to their efforts. There are already at least 60 other “space tourists” who have paid \$200,000 to \$250,000 per ticket to go up and experience free fall inside the vessel for a few minutes, averaging about \$1,000 per second of weightlessness. No doubt flights aboard SpaceShipTwo and other similar adventures will become normal, at least for those who are mere multimillionaires.

The bombast also promotes the idea that Branson, Bezos and Musk, and private enterprise in general, provide the way forward for space flight. Unhindered by the bureaucratic red tape of NASA and the US government, so the claims go, the billionaires will take humanity to orbit, and on to the Moon, Mars and beyond! This is the “new normal” they purport to represent.

In fact, it is a testament to the dedication and ingenuity of the hundreds of thousands of scientists, engineers and technicians the world over that so much progress has been made in space exploration over the past half-century, even as funding for space programs has been viciously slashed. The robotic missions to Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Pluto and every other planet in our Solar System, as well as to numerous asteroids and comets, have discovered more about our planetary neighbors and space in general than in centuries of observation from under the cloak of Earth’s atmosphere.

Along with the many scientific lessons learned from such missions—Voyager, Curiosity, Cassini, New Horizons, to name a few—there is also a social lesson: space exploration will always be constricted when it is bound to the resources of one nation or even small groups of nations. The development of genuine planetary exploration, with thousands of robotic missions studying the multitudes of mysteries that still need to be uncovered and the resumption of manned missions beyond Earth’s orbit, requires a coordinated global effort.

The scale cannot be reduced to the whims of a single capitalist, no matter how rich. If a manned space program could only be propelled to the Moon by the competition between the United States and Soviet Union, it will go virtually nowhere driven by competition between Branson and Bezos. They are, moreover, wholly dependent on drawing from the successes of past and present social endeavors, from the rocket science developed by NASA’s army of researchers in the 1960s to the spaceport Branson operates in New Mexico, which the state built for the billionaire at a cost of \$220 million.

There is a further and genuinely criminal aspect to the declarations of a “new normal”: hundreds of millions of

people live in extreme poverty around the world, and *billions* have little to no regular income, while 4.06 million lives have been lost in the past nineteen months from the coronavirus pandemic.

Both Branson and Bezos have in fact increased their vast fortunes while standing atop such death. Branson was one of the many capitalists to receive a portion of the £350 billion granted to big business by the government of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson in March 2020, even as he told staff of another of his companies, Virgin Atlantic, “to take eight weeks unpaid leave over the next three months, with the cost spread over six months’ salary, to drastically reduce costs without job losses.”

For his part, Bezos has had his wealth rocket to \$212 billion during the pandemic, in part as a result of the need for people to buy products online in their effort to avoid the deadly contagion. The world’s billionaires in total last year saw their collective wealth explode from \$8 trillion to \$13.1 trillion, an increase of 60 percent.

Such wealth was not magically created, but extracted from the backs of workers as they were forced to work through an ongoing pandemic, or “created” through the vast money-printing operation at the US Federal Reserve and other central banks, which now must be realized through stepped-up exploitation of the working class.

Rather than force workers to take unpaid leave, as Branson did, Bezos forced workers back into distribution facilities prematurely, causing the deaths of dozens if not hundreds of Amazon employees. And their fellow-billionaire Musk ordered workers back into his Tesla factory in California in April 2020 in defiance of state and federal lockdowns imposed in response to widespread walkouts by workers seeking to stop the spread of the pandemic.

The social misery and social polarization of the capitalist plague year make clear that free enterprise has failed on Earth. What reason is there to believe that it offers humanity a way forward on the level of the entire Solar System?



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