

“There’s Work for You in the Sky:” Capitalist Imperialism in Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*

In his exploration of the frontier myths in Andy Weir’s contemporary sci-fi novel *The Martian*, Philip Smith describes the “Mars settlement genre” as “a site where an idealized version of human history can be replayed” (Smith 322). Science fiction stories set on Mars rely on frontier narratives to entice settler colonialist audiences with a glorified version of their own history, sanitized to let them revel in a romanticized, adventurous past. Ray Bradbury’s 1950 collection of short stories *The Martian Chronicles* also replays a frontier past, yet its darkly satirical moments have an opposite effect on readers: they are forced to remember. But beyond representing a vicious settler colonialist reality, the thread underlying Bradbury’s stories goes to the root of what drives the frontier in the first place—imperialist expansion. *The Martian Chronicles* effectively reproduces the character of imperialism that Vladimir Lenin describes in his book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* by exploring the forces that drive the frontier and the outcomes that result from expansion. Earnest and satirical short stories alternately embody Lenin’s critique of imperialism as a continuation of the exploitative forces of capitalism, but on an astronomical scale that takes capitalist development beyond the confines of planet Earth.

Lenin defines imperialism as “the monopoly stage of capitalism” (Lenin 247). In the early twentieth century, the accumulation of capital in the industrialized nations had intensified so much that the concentration of wealth and production in the hands of a few capitalists led to the creation of monopolies within those nations. Because capital needs to expand in order to survive, and due to the “world market” of capitalism, monopolies not only took over the home market, but the foreign markets as well, creating various “spheres of influence” that became tied

up with colonial expansion (Lenin 243). This colonial expansion, Lenin argues, is so attractive to capitalist nations that the entire globe is involved in a “struggle for economic territory” (Lenin 244), either as an imperialist nation or a nation being imperialized.

Writing in 1916, it was clear that the imperialist nations Lenin was concerned with were the colonial superpowers of the time: Great Britain, France, and Germany, whose primary interests rested in the extraction of resources and wealth from Africa. But imperialism did not die with the end of *Pax Britannica*—it found a new life in the post-war capitalist fortitude of the United States. Bradbury was certainly aware of the dominance of American capitalism when he wrote *The Martian Chronicles*: the stories, though set 50 years in the future, are all steeped in an idyllic postwar American atmosphere, as if the economic power and the subsequent lifestyle generated by America’s involvement in World War II had never left. Yes, the stories were written in the 50s so they’d contain elements of the life Bradbury was accustomed to, but the dominance of 50s elements in a sci-fi future seems too intentional to neglect. In “The Shore,” Bradbury writes “The second men should have traveled from other countries with other accents and other ideas. But the rockets were American and the men were American and it stayed that way” (Bradbury 115). While Bradbury often uses the term “Earth Men” to refer to his stories’ colonizers, this detail and others such as the prevalence of white, American names and American cultural references indicate that the imperialist power of *The Martian Chronicles* is, like today, America.

Lenin argues that imperialism allows capitalism to continue to survive by affording capitalist countries with new resources, new markets, and more labour power. He quotes a British imperialist who, in 1895, said “we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced by them” (Lenin 246). This

need for new markets and new lands is driven by the expansive nature of capital, which concentrates wealth to the effect that workers can't afford the goods that are being produced at ever-increasing rates. Imperialist expansion, according to Lenin, is a solution for the capitalists who want to continue increasing production while maintaining a population of workers who can buy the goods that capitalism creates (Lenin 243).

*The Martian Chronicles* presents a world where the globe has already been partitioned the most it can be. The only way for capitalism to expand is by going into space, with Mars as the primary destination. In "The Settlers," Bradbury matter-of-factly explains what drove the "Earth Men" to Mars:

They were leaving bad wives or bad jobs or bad towns; they were coming to find something or leave something or get something, to dig up something or bury something or leave something alone. They were coming with small dreams or large dreams or none at all. But a government finger pointed from four-color posters in many towns: THERE'S WORK FOR YOU IN THE SKY: SEE MARS! (Bradbury 96)

This complex passage mixes frontier self-determination and state imperialism together as one, although they seem, at first glance, to oppose each other. The dream of finding something or digging something up, even the sentiment behind leaving a bad town, are wrapped up in our collective memories as motivations inherent to the Waynes, Lewises, and Clarks of the lawless American frontier. Yet Bradbury's use of the conjunction "But" leading into a description of an Uncle Sam-style poster advertising Mars for American workers ties all the previous motivations together and casts them all under the shadow of a state-sponsored frontier. This shadow shows that whatever independent, self-deterministic dreams drive men to Mars, the rocket that actually takes them there will have been funded and created by the US government (in the same way that

the rowdy frontiersmen of the nineteenth century were afforded their rowdiness by deeds of land that were never the US government's to give). Under a Leninist framework, no matter the individual settler's motivation to get to Mars, the reason that the US is incentivizing settlement is clear: Capital can expand to Mars to put the unemployed to work, seek new resources, and bring more profits to Earth.

"The Taxpayer" is a satirized example of another facet of the state driving expansion, voiced by the rant of a man named Prichard:

There was going to be a big atomic war on Earth in about two years, and he didn't want to be here when it happened. He and thousands of others like him, if they had any sense, would go to Mars. See if they wouldn't! To get away from wars and censorship and conscription and government control of this and that, of art and science! You could have Earth! (Bradbury 40)

Prichard's exaggerated anger toward all of the facets of Earth that are causing his misery are an inadvertent critique of global capitalism: wars to fight over resources, conscription to man the wars, an arms race to establish dominance, et cetera. We later see that he is right, that these factors largely did lead to Earth's own destruction, but what he gets wrong is that going to Mars is not an escape from these miseries, it will just exacerbate them by concentrating the capitalist conditions that created them.

Lenin famously nicknames imperialism "The Highest Stage of Capitalism" to describe the globalized way that engorged national capitalism can get its second wind. The historical examples of this phenomenon are reproduced in the more earnest stories of *The Martian Chronicles*, yet another key component of the discussion of imperialist capitalism in the book lies elsewhere. Bradbury's more satirical and hyperbolic stories illustrate what Lenin would

likely argue happens as a result of imperialism. Namely, that capitalism leads to its own destruction, both “at home” and on the frontier. “The Green Morning” introduces Benjamin Driscoll, a Johnny Appleseed of sorts who plans to “wage a private horticultural war with Mars” (Bradbury 99), planting trees and grass to make the planet more habitable to humans. Driscoll acts as the archetypal “American yeoman,” described by Philip Smith as a Turner-esque figure who transforms inhabitable land through husbandry rather than violence (Smith 322). This more covert type of settlement still imperializes new land by changing its basic characteristics to fit the needs of the imperialists; Driscoll wants “Mars grown green and tall with trees and foliage, producing air, more air, growing larger with each season,” (Bradbury 97). And his work pays off: Bradbury exaggeratedly lets trees grow tall overnight, permanently changing the surface of Mars as a result of imperialist expansion.

Imperialism leads to its own destruction abroad by reproducing the realities that exist at home, and Driscoll’s quasi “terraforming” is an example of how this starts. Where it ends is in the dual-destruction of the imperial force and its colony, in this case the destruction of Earth by nuclear war and the desertion of Mars by those Earth settlers who returned home for fear that they would remain stuck in space. The desertion of civilization that Bradbury describes first on Mars, in “The Silent Towns,” and then on Earth, in “There Will Come Soft Rains” shows how precariously the imperialists and their colonies are linked. In the deserted Mars, “Water ran in forgotten bathtubs, poured out into living rooms, onto porches, and down through little garden plots to feed neglected flowers” (194). On the Earth of “There Will Come Soft Rains,” an automated house is the last one standing after a nuclear blast, and its mechanical kitchen continues to make breakfast for a family that is no longer living. Twenty-seven years after the beginning of Earth’s imperialist expansion to Mars, both planets are rendered virtually dead.

Lenin's hypothesis of the self-destructive tendency of capitalism applies—here, on an interplanetary scale.

The sci-fi genre lends itself so well to analyses of global capitalism because it creates new worlds that can hold the proverbial mirror up to society. Frank Herbert's 1965 novel *Dune* and Gene Rodenberry's original *Star Trek* series are both widely popular examples of texts that engage in the work of some type of critical analysis of space as the "final frontier." And while Bradbury likely wasn't thinking about Lenin on imperialism when writing *The Martian Chronicles*, when both texts are taken together, they produce an incisive foray into the idea of interplanetary expansion as a result of late-stage capitalism. Now, in an era where capital is the most concentrated it has ever been, where Earth's resources are being depleted and there exists a surplus population without work, the capitalists of Earth sound the same as those in Bradbury's stories. Yes, there is satire in some of the stories, but satire is meant to reflect the truth, and the power it contains is vast—as long as people listen to it.

#### Works Cited

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