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HU 3900

11 October 2021

Analyzing the Moon Landing in the Context of the Civil Rights Movement

Is a moon rock more valuable than the life of a Black child in America? In 1969, this was a reasonable question to ask and to many African Americans, the answer appeared to be yes. The United States government had promised that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would put African Americans on equal footing with their white counterparts. Though these pieces of legislation addressed segregation and removed legal roadblocks for African Americans, they failed to alleviate poverty in the Black community. Even a few years later, Blacks made up about one-tenth of the U.S. population but still constituted nearly a third of those in poverty in America.[1] Therefore, it is not surprising that hundreds of protesters gathered at Kennedy Space Center to voice their disapproval of the Apollo 11 launch on July 16, 1969. At its core, Black opposition to federal spending on space exploration is not a rejection of scientific advancement. Rather, it stems from the government's failure to prioritize African Americans and their needs, especially during the late 1960s.

In this time period, racial equality, feminism, and environmentalism were at the forefront of American politics. While other pieces of scholarship, including Neil Maher's *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, discuss the intersection of different political movements and NASA's moon

[1] United States Bureau of the Census, *24 Million Americans: Poverty in the United States: 1969*, page 1.

efforts, they are limited in their examination of civil rights. This research not only provides a detailed analysis of the protests to the moon landing, but also situates them in the context of the broader civil rights struggle at the time. Furthermore, focusing on these protests reveals how poverty, racial tensions, and frustration at the limited progress made in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Act fueled African American resistance to the space program.

One aspect where Maher's book excelled is in his description of the societal factors that contributed to the push for the moon. He argued that the concurrence of the Woodstock music festival and the Apollo program was not a coincidence. Maher claimed that the space program was heavily connected to humanitarian struggles at the time, including the fight for civil rights, the environmentalist movement, the rise of feminism, and antiwar protests. He wrote that "As the space race transformed the grassroots political movements of the 1960s era, civil rights demonstrators, anti-war protesters, environmentalists, feminists, and hippies in turn altered the space race."[2] The moon landing was designed to reignite the flame of American patriotism at a time when the country was in disarray. Nevertheless, NASA and political advocates were often at odds. As space exploration technology developed, activists increasingly pressured NASA to solve societal problems like energy costs in urban housing projects. Yet, when support for space efforts began to dwindle, NASA and activists became dependent on each other to gain credibility in the eyes of the American public. For instance, in December of 1972, NASA photographed the first color image of the entire Earth from space. Today, this is known as "The Blue Marble" photograph. Grassroots environmentalists turned the image into what Maher referred to as an "environmental icon". They plastered it across posters, t-shirts, bumper stickers, and flags. The image had significant implications for both NASA and the environmental movement. NASA

[2] Neil Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), page 234.

attracted nationwide attention, while membership in environmental organizations skyrocketed. New environmental groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council also formed and legislation passed, including the Toxic Substances Control Act and Clean Water Act.[3] Through *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, Maher successfully placed the moon landing within the context of the broader U.S. political climate. However, his investigation of civil rights can be more extensively developed.

At the time of the moon landing, both America and the Black Power movement were tearing apart at the seams. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had failed to level the economic playing field for African Americans. A 1969 U.S. Bureau of the Census report noted that "Persons of Negro and other races constituted 31% of the poor in 1969, although they comprised only 12 percent of the total population."[4] For comparison, only 9.5% of white Americans were below the poverty level even though they made up 88 percent of the total population.[5] Moreover, the report stated that "In 1969, it would have taken approximately $10.1 billion to raise the aggregate incomes of all poor families to the poverty level."[6] Instead, the U.S. government gave about $16.1 billion to NASA to put men on the moon.

As the Apollo 11 astronauts prepared to ascend, racial tensions in the United States escalated. Between 1967 and 1968, race riots broke out in the following cities: Detroit, New York, Tallahassee, Boston, Charlotte, Chicago, Norfolk, Pittsburg, Jacksonville, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Kansas City, Wilmington, Trenton, Louisville, Miami, Cleveland, Greensboro, Cairo, and Washington, D.C. In fact, a particularly notable incident of civil unrest, the York race riot,

[3] Neil Maher, *Apollo in the Age of Aquarius*, page 94.
[4] *24 Million Americans: Poverty in the United States: 1969*, page 1.
[5] *24 Million Americans: Poverty in the United States: 1969*, page 3.
[6] *24 Million Americans: Poverty in the United States: 1969*, page 2.

began just one day after the Saturn V rocket lifted off from Kennedy Space Center.[7] Many of the riots listed were, at least in part, in response to the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968. The civil rights leader had expressed his own disapproval of the moon landing just two years prior on December 15, 1966 in a testimony before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on the Executive Reorganization of the Committee on Government Operations when he declared, "With the continuation of these strange values, in a few years we can be assured that we will set a man on the Moon and with an adequate telescope he will be able to see the slums on Earth with intensified congestion, decay, and turbulence."[8] King's death was still fresh in the minds of African Americans. For many, the moon landing epitomized the idea of the American Dream. Unfortunately, recent events, including Dr. King's assassination, had forced African Americans to reject the American Dream. As a result, they rejected NASA's space exploration efforts.[9]

The civil rights movement also faced significant backlash and cracks emerged within the movement itself as a result of conflict over the trajectory and rise of black power. At the end of the 1960s, two competing tendencies emerged: the mainline civil rights movement which Ralph Abernathy inherited from Martin Luther King and the more extreme anti-colonial politics of the Black Panthers. The moon landing debate did not create these tensions, but it certainly exposed them. The different tactics used to critique the moon landing offer insight about these divisions. On July 15, 1969, Reverend Ralph Abernathy, the new leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led the Poor People's Campaign to Launch Complex 39A. In a curious

[7] Joanna Schneider Zangrando and Robert L. Zangrando, "Black Protest: A Rejection of the American Dream," *Journal of Black Studies*, 1970, 141-59.
[8] *Martin Luther King, Jr. - King's Journey: 1964 - April 4, 1967*, December 15, 1966.
[9] Joanna Schneider Zangrando and Robert L. Zangrando, "Black Protest: A Rejection of the American Dream," *Journal of Black Studies*, 1970, 141-59.

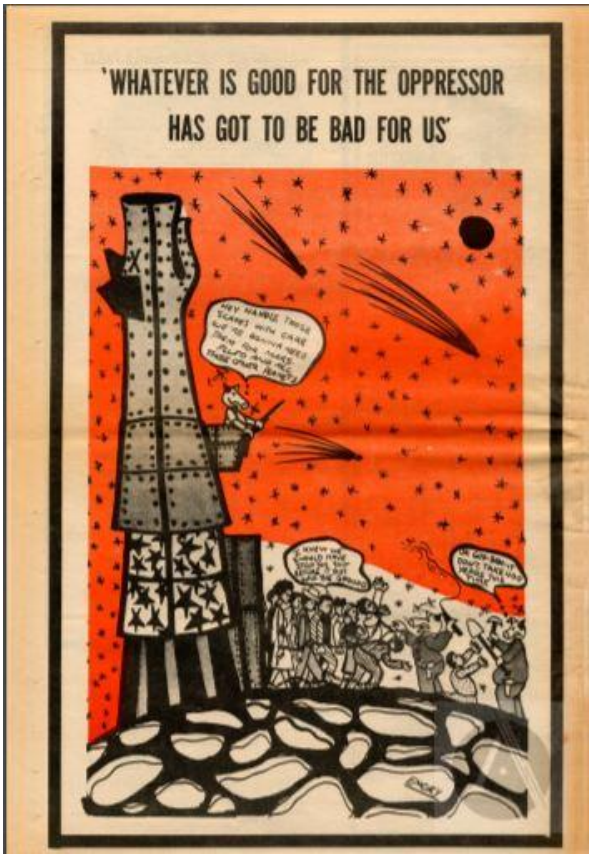
juxtaposition, the protestors placed their signature Mule Train in front of the Apollo rocket as shown in the image below:[10]

Martin Luther King Jr. prepared to lead a similar caravan of Mule Trains to the National Mall just one year earlier in his last civil rights project before being assassinated. The Cape Kennedy protests relied on theatrics and preconceived notions about the underdevelopment of rural Black communities to highlight the misallocation of resources taking place. One message painted on a mule-drawn carriage read: “Which is Better? Send a Man to the Moon or Feed Him on Earth?”[11]

While Abernathy and the Poor People’s Campaign were mostly concerned about distorted national priorities, the fact that the rocket existed at all was the primary issue for Emory Douglas and the Black Panther Party. Through a collection of illustrations in the Black Panther

[10] Bettmann, "The Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Poor People's Marchers..."
[11] David Molina and P. J. Blount, "Bringing the Moon to Mankind: The Civil Rights Narrative and the Space Age," page 48.

Community News Service, Douglas linked the Apollo missions to sharecropping and slavery. One such image from the July 26, 1969 edition is included below:[12]



This illustration depicts the Apollo rocket as a slave ship in the shape of a pig's head. At the foot of the rocket, a group of African Americans steps on the surface of the moon saying, "I knew we should have stop this shit before it got off the ground." They are greeted by three pigs. One, who sits at the top of the rocket with a gun, remarks "Hey handle those slaves with care we're gonna need them for Mars, Pluto and all the other planets." Another responds, "Ok God-dam-it don't take 400 years this time." The third pig is cracking a whip at the newcomers. Finally, the caption for the illustration is "Whatever Is Good For The Oppressor Has Got To Be

[12] The Black Panther Party, "Black Panther News Vol 3, No. 14," *Black Panther Black Community News* Service, 1969.

Bad For Us."[13] Through his artwork, Douglas rejected the idea that space travel would benefit all people. Douglas understood that the phrase "for all mankind" did not necessarily include Black Americans, as they were not considered equal humans by their white counterparts at one point in the nation's history. He also conveyed the fact that opposition to the Apollo program had nothing to do with priorities. Instead, it was a rejection of the expansion of the colonial and frontier mindset which had forced African Americans into slavery.

Both Abernathy and Douglas offered a general critique of the U.S. government through the lens of Apollo. However, their approaches fundamentally differed in that the Poor People's Campaign argued that the government should redistribute the launch funds toward under-resourced communities. In contrast, Douglas' illustrations did not call for the reform of state policies. Instead, they dismissed the idea of state redistribution of wealth entirely.[14] To the Black Panthers, the state was inherently oppressive and could not be trusted with power. These two different perspectives from opposite ends of the civil rights spectrum foreground the fact that disagreements between Black activists further complicated debates about the government's role in exploring space and aiding African Americans in need.

Outside the boundaries of the Black population, public opinion about space exploration was much more positive. A series of public opinion polls administered in the early years of the Space Race indicated that even though many Americans claimed to be uninterested in the development of space technology, a majority of the people polled were optimistic about the United States' ability to catch up to the Russians. Public opinion analyst Samuel Lubell

[13] David Molina and P. J. Blount, "Bringing the Moon to Mankind: The Civil Rights Narrative and the Space Age," page 51.
[14] David Molina and P. J. Blount, "Bringing the Moon to Mankind: The Civil Rights Narrative and the Space Age," page 52.

attempted to account for this inconsistency when he remarked, “One thing that I found especially striking was how closely the public’s reactions corresponded to the explanatory ‘line’ which was coming from the White House.”[15] This trust in government is noticeably absent from the African American community because of the numerous unfulfilled promises which politicians had made to them in the years prior.

The response to the moon landing can be divided into three categories: African American sentiments, media reaction, and government action. While families around the country celebrated the launch, many African Americans met news about Apollo 11 with apathy. They had their own problems to worry about, such as the rats taking over their cities or how they would afford their next meal. While about 8,000 people congregated in Central Park to watch the moon landing, thousands of Black Americans gathered in Harlem to watch Stevie Wonder perform. A *New York Times* article from July 27, 1969 reported that "An estimated 50,000 people flocked to last Sunday's Harlem Cultural Festival at Mt. Morris Park and the single mention of the [Lunar Module] touching down brought boos from the audience."[16] These negative sentiments toward the launch were indicative of a more general economic and racial conflict at the time. Civil rights activists and Black publications, such as the New York *Amsterdam News*, suggested that the moon landing budget should be allocated toward helping Americans living in poverty instead.[17]

The anarchist-libertarian segment of the media echoed these concerns. For example, an article in the July 24, 1969 edition of politically and socially radical underground Detroit

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[15] Donald N. Michael, “The Beginning of the Space Age and American Public Opinion,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly 24*, 1960.
[16] Thomas A. Johnson, "Blacks and Apollo; Most Couldn't Have Cared Less,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1969.
[17] Bryan Greene, "While NASA Was Landing on the Moon, Many African Americans Sought Economic Justice Instead," *Smithsonian Magazine*, July 11, 2019.

newspaper *The Fifth Estate* introduced the idea of "moonism".[18] The article defined the essence of moonism as "the elevation of the relatively insignificant to the level of the colossal and super-human." When pondering the purpose of the Apollo program, the author satirically commented, "If nothing else proving that no territory in the Universe is safe from U.S. expansionism and making one grateful that at least there are no 'Indians' on the moon who will have to be slaughtered for their resistance to 'progress.'"[19] This clearly suggested that the same imperialism which white settlers used to massacre Native Americans was at the heart of American space exploration.

Others, like author Ray Bradbury, had a more rose-colored view of the moon landing. In a 1972 speech, Bradbury described an experience he had on the night of the Apollo landing. Bradbury was on a TV show on CBS with a panel of three "great intellects" as he called them. He said that all of them were asking why America was spending all this money on space instead of other things. They continued to label space travel as a "waste." This struck a nerve in Bradbury, who decided to defend space exploration. After telling them to shut up, he unleashed the following rant: "What, what do we have here tonight? What do we have here tonight? This...is the result of six billion years of evolution, this very evening...We're sitting here in this studio...our men have been on the moon two hours...it took billions of years for this Earth to cool, for the rains to fall, for the oceans to form, for the animalcules to come out of the chemistry and ferment of the seas. For the small creatures of the sea to give up their gills, to build spines, to crawl out on the land, to hide in the caves, to seek the trees, to come down out of the jungles. To till the fields, to build the cities, to envy the birds, to SEE THE STARS! To...revile gravity

[18] *Fifth Estate Records 1967-2016*, University of Michigan Library.
[19] *Fifth Estate* 4, 1969, page 5.

and...finally wish to wind up somewhere else except riveted here to this tombstone Earth! Tonight, we have given the lie to gravity! We have reached for the stars. We have touched down on another world! After six billion years of evolution, and you refuse to celebrate? TO HELL WITH YOU!"[20]

Although the government response to the Cape Kennedy protests seemed to address the concerns of civil rights activists, it was riddled with false promises. During his meeting with Ralph Abernathy and about 150 members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on July 15, 1969, NASA administrator Thomas O. Paine expressed that "If it were possible for us not to push that button tomorrow morning and solve the problems you are talking about, we would not push that button." Abernathy clarified that his people were not opposing the launch, but instead protesting the United States' "distorted sense of national priorities."[21] In a patronizing gesture, Paine gave 10 VIP tickets to the launch to Abernathy and his associates. He also assured them that NASA would become dedicated to solving problems like poverty. Paine concluded, "I personally and the members of the space program feel that the space program is a program for all America, and we hope it will make a resolution for Americans to band together to fight the problems you are talking about."[22] Likewise, in his 1970 statement on the future of American space exploration, President Nixon declared that "We must realize that space expenditures must take their proper place within a rigorous system of national priorities."[23] This demonstrated that government officials heard the criticisms by civil rights activists and African Americans. Yet

[20] Ray Bradbury, Lecture, Palace of Fine Arts, San Francisco, July 10, 1972.
[21] "NASA Chief Briefs Abernathy after Protest at Cape," *UPI Archives*, July 16, 1969.
[22] "NASA Chief Briefs Abernathy after Protest at Cape," *UPI Archives*, July 16, 1969.
[23] Homer E. Newell, *Beyond the Atmosphere: Early Years of Space Science*, 1980.

Nixon's assurances were superficial, as he announced that the United States would continue to explore the moon and later cut funding to anti-poverty programs.

The coincidence of the moon landing and the peak of the civil rights movement opened a countrywide conversation regarding national priorities. A 1969 article in *The Phi Delta Kappan* titled "The Bitter Problem of Priorities" summarized the primary opposing perspectives at the time. Anthropologist Margaret Mead expressed optimism about the impacts of the Apollo program when she stated, "This can be a first step, not into space alone, but into the disciplined and courageous use of enhanced human powers for man, ennobled as he is today, as the first to step on the moon." From a contrarily critical point of view, Ralph Abernathy claimed that "A society that can resolve to conquer space, to put a man in a place where in ages past it was considered that only God could reach … deserves both our acclaim and contempt … acclaim for achievement and contempt for bizarre social values. For though it has had the capacity to meet extraordinary challenges, it has failed to use its ability to rid itself of the scourges of racism, poverty, and war."[24]

Poet, jazz musician, and militant political commentator Gil Scott-Heron's piece "Whitey on the Moon" took on a more aggressive tone. In one particularly gruesome line, Scott-Heron wrote "A rat done bit my sister Nell with Whitey on the moon" to illuminate the fact that even though Black Americans were struggling to survive, white leaders were intent on pouring U.S. resources into the space program. Later in the poem, he remarked "Was all that money I made las' year for Whitey on the moon? How come there ain't no money here? Hm! Whitey's on the moon."[25] This stanza further demonstrated that many African Americans felt their income was

[24] *Phi Delta Kappan*, "The Bitter Problem of Priorities," 1969.
[25] Gil Scott-Heron, "Whitey on the Moon," 1970.

being wasted on large government projects like the Apollo program instead of being spent in their cities. Though different in their approach, the Phi Delta Kappan article and Scott Heron's poem both convey the same sentiment: the United States failed to prioritize American lives on earth over its war with the Soviet Union in space.

Recent developments in the field of space exploration have sparked an eerily similar debate about priorities. Although this discussion might appear new, modern circumstances, more advanced space technology, and a shift from public to private funding of space endeavors have simply added a fresh coat of paint to a centuries-old conflict. In 2018 - after Elon Musk and his company, SpaceX, spent $90 million to boost his Tesla roadster sports car into space - writer Nathan Robinson of The Guardian decided to point out the hypocrisy of Musk launching the $100 thousand vehicle while the U.S. government bombed 80 Syrians on that same day. Robinson wrote "A mission to Mars does indeed sound exciting, but it's important to have our priorities straight." He suggested that the U.S. should instead focus on making sure a child no longer dies every two minutes from malaria or fighting poverty in Alabama. Robinson even referenced Gil Scott-Heron's poem at the conclusion of his article when he sarcastically remarked, "Whitey may not have gone back to the moon recently, but his sports car is now in space."[26]

Later, in 2021, Amazon and Blue Origin founder Jeff Bezos faced a comparable backlash when he launched himself into space and thanked Amazon employees for funding his trip despite the company's history of failed unionization, low wages, and harsh working conditions. African American activist Chris Smalls, who was fired from Amazon in March of the same year, called

[26] Nathan Robinson, "Why Elon Musk's SpaceX Launch Is Utterly Depressing," *The Guardian*, February 7, 2018.

Bezos' display of gratitude toward Amazon employees a "slap in the face." Smalls continued, "We take it as disrespect, and all the money he was donating, giving out, and the fact that I'm outside of his facility in 90-degree weather handing out waters … we honestly don't even care about it."[27] The apathy in his words closely mirrors that of the men and women at the Stevie Wonder concert in Harlem.

Both Musk's and Bezos' launches exemplify the persistence of America's inability to properly allocate its resources. The difference is that in 1969 the U.S. government was the predominant offender, whereas today it is the major corporations which grew out of the government's budget mismanagement. This conflict also raises questions about how people like Musk and Bezos can get so rich and why there is such a massive amount of wealth inequality between American people, the owners of corporations, and the federal government. Despite nearly sixty years of progress since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the United States still struggles to prioritize humanitarian needs over space exploration.

In the wake of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, segregation had legally ended, but African Americans were far from economically equivalent to white Americans. Even still, the United States government decided that funding the moon landing was more important than economic equality. Grievances about poverty, limited political progress, racial tensions, environmentalism, feminism, anti-war sentiments, civil rights infighting, and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. all combined to create the perfect breeding ground for Black hostility toward the Apollo program. These factors are directly responsible for the Abernathy protests at Kennedy Space Center, the Douglas illustrations, and those loud boos at the Stevie Wonder concert in Harlem. Is

[27] Catherine Thorbecke, "Backlash over Bezos Spaceflight Sparks Debate about Equity in the Cosmos," *ABC* News, July 25, 2021.

a moon rock more valuable than the life of an African American child? This question is for the individual to decide. However, one thing is certain: in the late 1960s, some government bureaucrats were more concerned with U.S. dominance over the Soviets than feeding impoverished American people. In 2021, wealth has transferred from government to the owners of major corporations. Yet, the issue of national priorities with respect to space exploration still looms as a grey cloud over the American political landscape.

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