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Review of the Master's Thesis

Apocalyptic Imaged Futures as Securitizing Speech Acts in the Reconceptualization of Outer Space as a Private Domain: Applied to Discourse From the Pro-Privatized Outer Space Epistemic Community

by Jonathan Arenson

In his MA thesis, Jonathan Arenson mainly focuses on the following issue: “the use of an imagined apocalyptic future, diffused to the audience in the form of a securitizing speech act, in an attempt to enlarge the already existing pro-privatized outer space epistemic community, which in turn will be crucial for legitimizing on an international scale, the reconceptualization of outer space as a private domain” (p. 7). The introduction is followed by a literature review of considerable length. The first three subsections give a historical overview, and the remainder of the chapter deals with selected key concepts of the thesis. Chapter 3 (“Theory”) is nearly as lengthy as the previous chapter. Subsections deal with, inter alia, constructivism as a theoretical approach, legitimization, securitizing speech acts, and epistemic communities. The following chapter contains a short empirical analysis. Chapter 5 presents some conclusions and implications.

Mr. Arenson's thesis is a mainly theoretical single case study with a small empirical part. The theoretical chapter draws on the literature on constructivism, legitimization, securitizing speech acts, and epistemic communities. The empirical chapter can be described as a qualitative and exploratory content analysis. It is mainly based on selected statements from different crucial actors. At the beginning of the thesis, the author presents a hypothesis that guides his further work: “Creating and diffusing an intersubjective shared idea of an apocalyptic imagined future through securitizing speech acts, where humanity's only chance of survival will be an established permanent privately owned and operated colony in outer space, will be a crucial aspect required to build an epistemic community large enough and with enough influence to reconceptualize outer space from an international regulatory and regime perspective. This in turn will serve as a catalyst for the normalization and legitimization of free-market private enterprise in outer space” (p. 7, repeated on pp. 68 and 72).

The author concludes, inter alia, that “the gain of this thesis is the gap it fills in the literature on private space exploration. There is no literature that explicitly draws an exploratory red-line through today's private outer space realities, its history, and then the theories including constructivism, legitimization of international regimes, securitization as a speech act, epistemic communities, the use of an imagined apocalyptic future playing a crucial role in the reconceptualization and ultimately, legitimization of outer space as a private domain [...] In drawing this exploratory red-line, this thesis has established that” the above-mentioned hypothesis is at least justified (p. 72).

Jonathan Arenson convincingly explains the societal and scientific relevance of his well-structured thesis. In my opinion, however, the thesis lacks a clear research question. The research gap is described in a comprehensible manner. From my point of view, the author's theoretical and methodological approach is at least partly convincing (for some criticism see below). His analysis and usage of the relevant literature is good. The results as well as Mr. Arenson's conclusions are plausible albeit limited. The author is mostly aware of the analytical limits of his single case study and he does not over-generalize his results. Unfortunately, the thesis does not really aspire to contribute to theory development.

From my point of view, the thesis suffers from several deficiencies. Large parts of the text are more descriptive, narrative, or repetitive than analytical. For example, the lengthy chapter 2 mainly re-narrates or summarizes the development of private outer space activities. Moreover, it mostly draws on one single source, the key study by Weeks (2012). Similarly, the theoretical chapter mainly presents, describes, and portrays different theoretical approaches, but these theories are not really used to tackle a scientific problem or puzzle. Subsection 3.2 is a rare positive exception: On these few pages, the author discusses conflicting theoretical arguments. The above-mentioned hypothesis, which is already outlined at the very beginning of the thesis, is neither parsimonious nor properly deduced from theoretical observations. The author is not sure whether it can be empirically tested (cf. p. 71). One could interpret the whole thesis as an inductive, hypothesis-generating study. In this regard, the repetition of the hypothesis – which seems to be a bit self-referential or redundant – at the end of the study would make more sense. However, the thesis is not explicitly meant and properly designed as a hypothesis-generating study. Mr. Arenson sees his thesis as “an explanatory theory [...] of one part of a much greater whole” (p. 72). He does not specify or operationalize certain concepts or elements of his long-winded hypothesis (e.g. “large enough” or “enough influence”). Apart from that, one could expect from a mainly theoretical thesis that the author discusses whether the topic is a challenge or puzzle for the respective theories and whether these approaches can be refined or developed further by dealing with the subject in question. With regard to the empirical part, the thesis lacks a (sub-) section on methodology. For example, there is little information on the selection criteria and the method of analyzing the data. In this regard, the information on p. 60 is too short and does not refer to relevant literature. To sum up, unfortunately, it has to be concluded that the scientific added value of the thesis is rather limited although it is obvious that the author knows a lot about both constructivism and private outer space activities.

The thesis is very well-written and mainly complies with the formal requirements regarding scientific papers. Some bibliographic details are missing in the references section. It has to be mentioned that the bookbinding of the study was of such a poor quality that the thesis soon fell apart.

Grade: 3,0

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(PD Dr. Sebastian Wolf)