

The Ministry for the Future, Kim Stanley Robinson (2020). London, United Kingdom: Orbit. 576p, paperback. £17. ISBN: 9780316300131

In 1997, the prolific science fiction writer, Kim Stanley Robinson, published *Antarctica*, an eco-thriller set at a time in the future when mineral exploitation is a viable concern and the Antarctic Treaty has all but collapsed. Antarctic literature expert, Elle Leane, suggested it pointed to the Antarctic Treaty System “as a site of possible hope” (Polar Journal, 3, 2013, p.345) and described it as “the most ambitious attempt in fiction to work through the dystopian and eutopian possibilities that Antarctic represents”. However, the 1998 review in Polar Record (34, p.73) had criticised it as a “rather rambling account” informed by “extensive research” that “seriously interferes with the plot” though the review concluded that “the Antarctic needs all the positive publicity it can get these days, and if Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel alerts the public to the perilous state of the Earth’s last unexploited wilderness, then it cannot be a bad thing”.

In 2020, Robinson revisits Antarctica as a pivotal component within a much broader sweep across the global change processes of the Anthropocene. In the intervening years, Antarctica appears, at least for Robinson, to have moved from an unexploited wilderness to become an important supporting act to reverse the impact of disastrous climatic change through an audacious geoengineering intervention. All of which is heroically masterminded through the titular Ministry for the Future (MftF), established in 2025 to advocate for the world’s future generations and to protect all living creatures, present and future. Described as an anti-dystopian novel by Bill McKibben (New York Review of Books, 17.12.20), it opens with the disastrous consequences of a warming planet and goes on to describe the steps taken to mitigate them through technological and political innovation.

Central to this is Antarctica’s role. In Project Slowdown, about 60 cubic kms of water needs to be extracted from under 74 glaciers, so they can “thump back down onto bedrock and slow down to the grind-it-out speed that used to be normal” (p.35) to prevent sea levels from rising catastrophically. While the initial idea came from hesitant glaciologists (“A scientist gets into geoengineering, they’re not a scientist anymore, they’re a politician” p.83), the politics of making Project Slowdown happen are not obvious: a Russian billionaire and nuclear submarine reactors lent from the Russian Navy, as well as microwave energy beamed down from Russian satellites, are mentioned but not explained. Oil companies are incentivised to use their drilling expertise to pump water instead of oil. What finally wins over some glaciologists seems to be the availability of research funding and access to ice flow data (“If we had been doing that research only for its own sake, it would have taken centuries to learn what we’ve learned” p.472). Quite how the Antarctic Treaty System enabled this (or was skilfully outmanoeuvred) remarkable situation is, frustratingly, not explained even though the book is situated around the time that the Treaty could technically open up to such possibilities.


For Robinson; however, the root of the problem appears to be fossil fuel capitalism and he asserts that “some of the richest two percent of the world’s population have decided to give up on the pretence that ‘progress’ or ‘development’ can be achieved for all eight billion of the world’s people” (p.68). From the multitude of ideas about possible pathways to a decarbonised world, two strategies stand out: a completely rejigged financial and monetary system supported by the biggest international reserve banks and a wave of ecoterrorist attacks that disrupt and destroy the global fossil industry and their representatives. While the post-carbon monetary system is a signature project of the MftF and its leader Mary Murphy, a former Irish diplomat, the protagonists of the terrorist violence that forms the other key driver of change remain, curiously, in the background. However, both the catalytic first act of unilateral solar geoengineering and the transnational ecoterrorist group, “Children of Kali”, originated in India. Murphy’s right hand, Badim, who is tacitly supporting black ops on behalf of the Ministry, is also Indian.

This violence towards petro-capitalist structures by agents from the Global South is portrayed as justified, even necessary, as a form of anti-imperial struggle for survival, but Robinson – perhaps pitching mostly to a Global North audience – focuses on what he considers pathways to the transformation of power structures at its heart: the American financial and monetary system. All of which brings to mind Amitav Ghosh’s alternative view in *The Great Derangement*: “To look at the climate crisis through the prism of empire is to recognise,

first, that the continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it" (p.87). Robinson hints at these possibilities with his vision of a New India, "now the bold new leader of the world" (p.127), and role model through its organic revolution in food production, land reform and electricity nationalisation. Badim, who eventually succeeds Murphy as the leader of MftF, at one point also contemplates a new religion: "People need something bigger than themselves. All these economic plans, always talking about things in terms of money and self-interest-people aren't really like that" (p.255). Reminiscent of Octavia E. Butler's fictional Earthseed religion, this spiritual argument makes clear that the Anthropocene is not just a scientific, economic and political challenge for humanity, but also a philosophical and spiritual dilemma about how to relate to nature.

Unfortunately, some criticisms from the earlier volume remain. The characters are weakly developed and rather two-dimensional. The language is often wooden and lacks creative spark – "raining cats and dogs" (p.291), for example, doesn't feel very futuristic. It all leads to more of a Boys Own Adventure with daring escapes through the Swiss Alps by secret tunnels. And, somewhat surprisingly, SCAR continues, as in the earlier book, to be the Scientific Committee "for" Antarctic Research (p.92). Interwoven with the main narrative

storylines, are many stronger, shorter chapters introducing ideas such as Modern Monetary Theory (MMT) or the perspective of a carbon atom, the latter describing its birth in the Big Bang and subsequent journey through billions of years in the carbon cycle.

Overall, what makes MftF an interesting read is the wealth of ideas about how decarbonisation of the global economy could be achieved and how it might play out politically at the local and global scales. The pathways, while not always clear, plausible or convincing, are thought provoking, particularly on the potential role of violence, climate justice and geoengineering. As with *Antarctica*, the style is rather rambling; more an assemblage of provocative ideas than a dissertation on a plausible future scenario. In conclusion, it is, especially given its length, perhaps the ideal book for a long-haul flight for an age in which travel was more commonplace and especially as Antarctica continues to need all the positive publicity it can get. (Bob Frame, Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand. (research@frameworks.nz) and Patrick Flamm, School of History, Philosophy, Political Science & International Relations, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand. (patrick.flamm@vuw.ac.nz) .

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