ECONOMY AND ECOLOGY 25.02.2021 | Karin Pettersson

Can we change the climate on climate change?

Kim Stanley Robinson's new novel vividly imagines the climate apocalypse. But it's also a hopeful and visionary account of how to stop it

It is five years since 196 countries signed the Paris agreement and promised to ensure global warming would be kept below two degrees centigrade, by comparison with pre-industrial levels. Unfortunately, the promise turned out to be a lie. With today's trajectory of carbon-dioxide emissions, the earth is moving towards a warming of 3.2C.

Okay, but what does that *mean*?

One of the better answers can be found in *The Ministry for the Future*, Kim Stanley Robinson's new novel. It should be mandatory reading for policy-makers and citizens alike.

The story begins in the Indian province of Uttar Pradesh, where Frank May, a young aid worker, gets caught in a heat wave — though those words are not enough. Think incinerator, or inferno.

In unbearable detail, Robinson describes how the old and the children die first, how the electricity runs out, the water pumps stop and the extra generator is stolen. How no help arrives and there is nowhere to go. How 20 million people end up simply boiling to death.

This takes place in 2025, a bare four years from now — a realistic scenario in the time of climate emergency.

May remains the only survivor, severely traumatised. His story is woven together with that of Mary Murphy, an Irish bureaucrat who heads a new organisation, the Ministry for the Future, which is created after the Indian disaster by the signatories of the Paris agreement. The task is to protect the right of future people to live.

Suicidal death cult

At first it does not go well. Fossil-fuel capital clings to the idea of profit today at the expense of the downfall of civilisation tomorrow. The massive investments required are not made, as neither financial markets nor political logic allow for it. The suicidal death cult that is late capitalism happily dances on.

How do we stop a development that is about to lead to mass extinction, the loss of millions of lives — the lives of our children and grandchildren? What needs to be done and what means are allowed?

One of the major breakthroughs comes when Murphy finally persuades the world's central banks to support a new currency, which rewards companies that reduce C02 emissions.

Robinson is not only one of the world's foremost writers in the genre known as science fiction, but which perhaps should be renamed something else — ecorealism? He also holds a PhD in literature, his advisor the literary critic and Marxist scholar Fredric Jameson. It shows.

If Martin Hägglund tried to describe the philosophical principles of a new democratic socialism, Robinson is more practical. He rolls up his sleeves and addresses the issues that politicians and pundits are extremely careful to avoid discussing: what political and moral dilemmas do we actually face?

Robinson's book deals with eco-terrorism, geo-engineering, asymmetric warfare, organic farming and monetary policy. It is about violence, power, and money. And it's incredibly liberating.

Chorus of voices

In the book, a chorus of voices can be heard: climate refugees, terrorists, farmers and bureaucrats. The narrative is mixed with reports, facts, memos, and meeting minutes. It is a kind of collective novel, inspired by John Dos Passos' *USA trilogy*, where the concrete consequences of the crisis are described from different perspectives.

One of the major breakthroughs comes when Murphy finally persuades the world's central banks to support a new currency, which rewards companies that reduce C02 emissions. It may sound utopian. But who would have thought, before the financial crisis of 2008, that those banks would pump virtually unlimited amounts of money into financial systems to avoid a further crash — the black monetary magic we in

everyday language call ‘quantitative easing’.

Which version of reality is the most insane: one in which our economic system rewards those who make a profit from destroying the world or one where it is profitable to try to save it? As Robinson writes in a paraphrase of William Gibson, ‘the money already exists, it is just not evenly distributed’.

In Robinson’s vision, the Paris agreement is the structure that can eventually be built on, an expression of the best in humanity — the possibility of collective action based on the principles of the enlightenment.

In *The Ministry for the Future*, terrorist groups are formed by people who, as with May, have been radicalised by the effects of climate disaster. They torpedo diesel-powered cargo ships and co-ordinate drone attacks on commercial aircraft. Innocent people die. In a crucial early scene, May kidnaps Murphy and they have a conversation in which her bureaucratic perspective is contrasted with what he has witnessed — the suffering and the trauma.

Famine and war

Already today, climate change is creating famine and migration and war. The question Robinson reluctantly asks himself — and us — is whether the fossil-fuel companies’ lobbying and continued investment in C02 emissions is not in itself a kind of slow violence, sanctioned by nation-states and law.

And what do we do if the tools of democracy are not enough to save humanity? If 20 million people’s lives are threatened, maybe 100 million? It is a dilemma touched on by the human ecologist Andreas Malm in *How to Blow up a Pipeline*, where he presents sabotage against the infrastructure of the fossil-fuel economy as a strategic alternative for the climate movement.

In Robinson’s vision, the Paris agreement is the structure that can eventually be built on, an expression of the best in humanity — the possibility of collective action based on the principles of the enlightenment. The tragedy in his scenario is that it takes many millions of lives, terrorism and irreversible ecological devastation to make real change possible.

The Ministry for the Future carries an enormous wealth of knowledge about economics, politics, technology, and human psychology. It is crass

and often funny. It is realistic and thus pitch-black. It is hopeful and visionary. It is the most important book I have read for a very long time.

This article is a joint publication by Social Europe and IPS-Journal. A Swedish version appeared in Aftonbladet.



Karin Pettersson
Stockholm

Karin Pettersson is director of public policy at Schibsted Media Group and chair of WAN-IFRA Media Freedom Board. She is a 2017 Nieman-Berkman Klein Fellow at Harvard. Formerly she was political editor-in-chief at Aftonbladet, Scandinavia's biggest daily newspaper. She founded Fokus, Sweden's leading news magazine, and worked for the Swedish Social Democratic Party.