

Climate Crisis and Writing in the Anthropocene

An Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson

KIM STANLEY ROBINSON, ANDREW MAJESKE



Figure 1: Kim Stanley Robinson in his backyard workspace in Davis, California. Photo by David Robertson.

America faces a crisis it shares with the rest of the world: the ecological crisis of accelerating climate change caused by human activity in the Anthropocene. I interviewed renowned science fiction author Kim Stanley Robinson who has been thinking about possible ways to address global warming for decades. His

work, which comprises novels like *Ministry of the Future*, *New York 2140*, and the Mars trilogy, prominently engages with late capitalism, ecological crises and how complex systemic problems might be addressed through existing technologies and regulatory mechanisms that are already within reach. Though his novels feature darkly cataclysmic moments, his writing does not predominantly dwell on the dystopian but is remarkable for a distinct utopian impulse and a pragmatic search for technoscientific solutions.

Robinson admittedly does not have a technological fix for the daunting political problem of getting the world's nations to cooperate on the scale needed. Nor does he have one for the sociological problem of how to persuade the developed world to adjust their lifestyles and habits to the reality of what is required. But he is working on it, both through his fiction and as a speaker, essayist, and public intellectual. His most recent book on the subject, titled *Ministry of the Future* (2020), imagines the challenges of a UN agency specifically and exclusively charged with representing the interests of future generations, to give them a "seat at the table" for negotiations on a crisis which will affect them to a much greater degree than it does us.

Upon his return from COP26, the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, where he attended as a participant and featured speaker, Robinson generously agreed to be interviewed for our NASJ special issue on "American Crises."

Andrew Majeske: At COP26 in Glasgow, what was the most hopeful development regarding humanity's efforts to address the global climate change crisis you noted, and what about it gives you hope?

Kim Stanley Robinson: For me this is a strange one to answer because there were things I read about the conference that I could have read anywhere, which were hopeful about the results of the conference—agreeing that 1.5 °C is the highest degree rise in global average temperature that we should allow, for instance—but what I saw while I was there was different from these kinds of summarizing reports, while still giving me reasons for hope. There at the event, I got the sense that the whole world was watching, and I saw that representatives from every country on Earth were in serious negotiations about dealing with climate change. Also, just outside the conference venue, the people of Scotland (mostly) were marching in the streets to demand that governments get serious

about climate change more quickly than any COP [Conference of the Parties] could manage. All these impressions together formed a gestalt, and I'm still trying to sort out what that was, but for sure it seemed to put the danger of climate change right at the center of our time. Which is good.

AM: What was the most concerning development regarding humanity's efforts to address the global climate change crisis that you noted at COP26 in Glasgow, and what about it worries you so much?

KSR: Two things worried me most. First, the consensus model for the COP meetings, in which every country has to agree with every pronouncement, or else the pronouncement doesn't get included, means that the process will always be too cautious and too slow. Second: the rich countries are clearly being far too tight-fisted with money, in that already they are not giving the developing countries sums that were promised earlier, and these sums were too small to begin with.

Adding to these worries, I noticed, while in Glasgow, that the more people knew about the COP process and the world situation, the more frightened they were about it. These were experts in the relevant fields, so I found that disturbing.

AM: If the global climate change crisis is effectively to be addressed in a timely manner, what issue that desperately needs to be dealt with either did not make it onto the agenda at COP26 in Glasgow, or failed to gain traction?

KSR: The ideas of a "carbon coin" or "carbon quantitative easing" were brought up a few times, including by me, so that was good and important. But I noticed that when I extended this line of thought, as I did a few times, to suggest that the petro-states are going to have to get financial compensation for the fossil fuels that they keep in the ground, or else their economies will crash—a kind of pre-emptive carbon sequestration on their part, deserving of carbon-coin style payments—people were both startled and worried, because obviously this would be very expensive and difficult to arrange, with many people objecting to it, citing principles of various sorts. But I don't see how it can be avoided as a topic. And yet it was avoided. Eventually it will have to get discussed. Many crucial nations, holding a good percentage of the world's total population, have already borrowed against their resources, using their fossil fuel reserves as collateral. They are counting on that income (sometimes up to 70% of their national governmental

income) to stay solvent and keep their people employed and fed. Unless they are paid to keep their fossil fuels in the ground, they will do their best to sell and burn them, and the world will crash down into a mass extinction event and social chaos worldwide.

AM: Does the rapid development of novel and effective vaccines in the COVID-19 pandemic make you more hopeful about the scientific enterprises' ability to develop rapid and effective responses to the global climate change crisis?

KSR: Yes. And we already have the basic elements of many effective responses to the climate crisis, it's just that they have to be paid for, and [they] will be very expensive. To focus on your question specifically, the sciences are getting very powerful and fast, but they're not omnipotent, and never will be. If, in this decade, we cross certain planetary boundaries by failing to deal with climate change and habitat loss and poisoning of the biosphere, we will create runaway conditions we can't claw back from no matter what we do later on. So the situation is really urgent.

AM: The "Ministry of the Future" of your book is a United Nations branch that represents the interests of future generations. Do you think we have any existing institutions that already do this in some sense? And, if we do, do you see any practical way of drafting these institutions into playing a more central role in addressing the global climate change crisis? (I am thinking particularly of commercial institutions that provide long term insurance or reinsurance protections, as well as the militaries of the world's nations, at least those militaries which devote significant resources towards long term strategic planning—primarily the United States, China, and Russia).

KSR: Both kinds of institutions you mention are somewhat like ministries, though the insurance and re-insurance industries are mainly there to protect capital by way of risk assessment and risk management, and they are quickly being overwhelmed by the scale of the problem; but their cries of dismay might add to the general alarm.

And yes, the militaries of the world might turn into agencies of emergency relief, and be very useful, in what could be called a true national defense; but only if the nation-states don't start to fight each other, at which point they would turn into war machines again.

Meanwhile, there are actual ministries for the future, in the UN, also in the various children's trusts, the land protection agencies and organizations, and so on. Some governments have granted rights to their biospheres in ways that are like elements of a ministry for the future, and animal protection organizations also.

One problem is that these ministries necessarily step on the toes of all other agencies and companies, and so they are resisted as such, in various kinds of turf battles. So the various ministries for the future will always have a tough time achieving legal standing and making headway against more presentist organizations and efforts.

AM: In your Financial Times essay in August 2021, you indicated that for the global climate change crisis to be addressed effectively, that is, in time for humanity to avoid an existential crisis, a mobilization of resources and efforts on the order of those made for the twentieth century World Wars would be needed. In this essay you also indicated that the best that can be hoped for politically (in terms of general agreement or global solidarity) is what gets accomplished by a “working political majority, reconstituted daily.” I sense some tension between these two assertions.

KSR: Yes, I think that's right. When your cities are being bombed by other people, you know you are in a war and join the effort organized by your government to fight. When all civilization needs a technological and legal change of huge proportions and speed to avoid a biospheric crisis that is hard to see as an individual living in the present, it gets much harder to get compliance to and approval for unusual government moves.

AM: If the mobilization needed to address the global climate change crisis is akin to a wartime situation, then aren't emergency powers warranted that circumvent the deadlock and delay inherent in a system that ordinarily relies upon a “working political majority, reconstituted daily”? Shouldn't humanity's attention to political matters shift to defining these emergency powers and identifying who should wield them and for how long?

KSR: I think here the analogy breaks down, and we're going to have to work through the ordinary powers of governments to get the job done. Maybe the central banks asserting by their actions that money has to be made up from scratch to be devoted to decarbonization—which would be a new thing much like an emer-

gency power—is the closest we can come here. I’m not sure. As the discrepancy between what we need to do and what we are actually doing gets worse—as I assume it will, for a few more years anyway—this will be a topic for discussion, for sure.

AM: In that same *Financial Times* essay, you indicate that capitalism, as it currently operates, needs to be reconceived in terms of promoting the “common good.” What for you is a working idea or definition of the “common good” that could generally be accepted in the contemporary world?

KSR: Here I want to invoke Aldo Leopold’s Land Ethic in a new translation: “what’s good is what’s good for the biosphere” (rather than for “the land”). This is the “common good” in our time, expanded to the largest commons. Earth’s biosphere is irreplaceable, and is our extended body; we are bees to its beehive, and if the hive collapses, all the individual bees die. We have to see that and adjust our political economy accordingly, and pay ourselves to decarbonize fast, and also to restore and protect the biosphere, as a matter of species health. I think this can be made clear, and also, putting it this way takes away the negative side of the war analogy used earlier—we are not fighting other people this time (unless they work hard to wreck the biosphere, which some of them will); we are thrown into a forced marriage with each other, and have to work together for any of us to survive well.

AM: Again, drawing from your *Financial Times* essay, you say that “Aiming science is the work of the humanities and arts, politics and law.” The object of the scientific enterprise’s search for the truth about nature/the natural world is to improve the human condition—and by improving the human condition I mean promoting human dominion over nature and natural forces in order to improve health, to increase human longevity, and to enhance human comfort and security.

I wonder why you don’t think that science should be in charge of aiming (and policing) itself?

KSR: People should be in charge, science is a methodology.

We already use it to make better political judgments, this by way of various social sciences; the move from nepotism and favoritism to quantified sociological and statistical judgments in political actions, is science infiltrating governance, and our reasoning for taking political actions. In other words, government is already scientific to an extent. But science as such is specifically not a matter of values—unless you want to invoke “climax ecology” or “greatest good for greatest number”-type rubrics, which are however philosophical in nature, not scientific per se.

The axioms of our political economy are value judgments about what matters to us; science then is a tool to implement those judgments.

AM: Scientists have begun employing “Modern Portfolio Theory” (MPT) to decide how to manage limited resources in the most productive ways to address the effects of global climate change. Specifically, in the case of coral reefs, scientists have identified 50 reef systems to concentrate their efforts upon. They will prioritize these reefs, and use them (or what they manage to save of them) to regenerate the planet’s reef systems that will be devastated by the effects of global climate change.

Do you think this employment of MPT, as a tool in the fight to slow, stop, and hopefully reverse human caused global climate change, is a hopeful sign, or do you rather consider it a sign that the scientific community may be changing its focus from an “all hands on deck” battle to slow, stop and reverse climate change, to a rearguard actions aimed at saving what we can, while we can?

KSR: I think it’s both. In other words, “all hands on deck” implies or requires the saving of what can be saved, when we see that losses that can never be recovered are already happening. This MPT is clearly a tool used to try to effect some kind of “triage,” and save what can be saved in order not to lose it all—as with corals. But then as we continue to struggle, the method might be extended, if successful in trials, to other situations. It depends on how desperate any situation gets. Often MPT will be too little too late. Same with assisted migration, etc.

AM: Prince William of England, just prior both to COP26 in Glasgow, and to William Shatner’s real life space adventure, stated in a BBC interview: “We need some of the world’s greatest brains and minds fixed on trying to repair this planet, not trying to find the next place to go and live.”

Do you agree with Prince William's sentiment, or do you rather think that space activity and exploration should continue apace while we confront the global climate change crisis?

KSR: "Space science is an earth science"—this great slogan from NASA is true, and points to the use value of space science.

But Prince William is right that the priority right now certainly has to be getting civilization into a sustainable balance with the Earth's biosphere, and any thoughts of "the next place to live" are now and always inappropriate. So—not "some of the world's greatest brains and minds," but rather all of them, and all of us. Because there is no Planet B, and never will be; Mars, the best candidate for human habitation, is poisonous now, and would take thousands of years to make into a place for humans to live, but would rely on an infusion from Earth of all kinds of things, forever.

So that line of thought is a silly dream of escape. A fact that is obvious to most people, but needs to be insisted on, apparently—I'm not sure why. The internet focuses, or can appear to focus, on trivial things sometimes.

AM: What comes next for you, now that you have finished your contract for producing science fiction books and have completed your forthcoming book, *The High Sierra: A Love Story*?

KSR: I am reading and gardening. New writing will come later on. We'll see what happens.

About the Authors

Kim Stanley Robinson is an award-winning science fiction writer and a public voice in debates on climate change. He is the author of *Ministry of the Future*, *New York 2140*, the *Science in the Capital* trilogy, the *Mars* trilogy and other fiction. His commitment as a public intellectual and his longstanding and urgent investment in topics of climate change and global crisis are illustrated by prominent contributions to current debate such as his guest essay in *The Financial Times*, "A Climate Plan for a World in Flames" or his TED Talk "Remembering climate change ... a message from the year 2071."

Andrew Majeske is an NASJ editor, an Associate Professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY, New York), and an Adjunct Professor of Law at McGeorge School of Law (University of the Pacific, California).



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