

MAIN SECTION

The Currency of the Anthropocene. Dismantling the Theological Presupposition of Neoliberalism in Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*

Andrea Righi – Miami University of Ohio, USA
Contact: righia@miamioh.edu

ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes Kim Stanley Robinson's latest Sci-fi novel, *The Ministry for the Future* (2020), by focusing on key narrative elements developed in the text that offer solutions to our current climate crisis. Although fictional, these ideas are theoretically relevant because they challenge the current symbolic system of neoliberalism based on a sacrificial economy and a notion of transcendence that demands the infinite accumulation of surplus value. In particular, I examine the import of Robinson's argument regarding the need for political representation of future generations through the creation of an ad hoc intragovernmental branch (the above-mentioned Ministry of the title of his novel) and a new understanding of value based on the concept of the Carbon Coin reward system.

KEYWORDS

Anthropocene, Carbon Coin, Transcendence, Neoliberalism, Alterity

PEER REVIEWED

10.6092/issn.2612-0496/15217

ISSN 2612-0496

Copyright © 2022 Andrea Righi

Darko Suvin famously pointed out that a fictional novum or “cognitive innovation” is a structural element in science fiction, which works as a “totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality.”¹ In Kim Stanley Robinson’s latest novel *The Ministry for the Future* (2020)—a polyphonic near-future account of how our present environmental collapse produces a global revolution that dissolves capitalism—the novum is not so much a scientific invention but an economic, political, and philosophical paradigm shift. It has been said that this is a concept novel. Granted that this category can be applied to virtually any novel or work of art, *The Ministry for the Future* (from now on *MF*) is not only an exceptional attempt to represent our climate apocalypse in its globality—and not as the usual backdrop for some dystopian plot—but also a powerful depiction of a revolution that dismantles the theological presupposition ruling neoliberalism and its hyper-utilitarian and extractive vision of the world.

Several scholars have demonstrated how historically there is no clear distinction between the symbolic domains of theology and economy.² This is particularly true when considering the organization of power via the notion of *transcendence*. Western societies display a tendency to imagine the dimension of the absolute—be it power, value, time—in a beyond-like realm that governs reality from the outside. In this power structure, transcendence captures the social potential of human life via a tributary bond. In other words, transcendence manages the excessive energy of human social production—the ever-expanding circuits of credits and debts that constitute relationality—by channeling it into an exchange module (or a moral bookkeeping) based on rewards and punishments, in short, a pactional structure that forces individuals to comply with the demands of the Other (God, the King, the Church, etc.). Eric Santner described this mechanism as a narrative of *payability of debt*, which manages the oscillation between lack and excess that constitutes us as symbolic animals by dictating that scarcity can and should always be “made good.”³ I will say more about payability in the first part of this essay. This framework will be instrumental to illustrate how Robinson’s novel disarms this symbolic mechanism by activating three counter-narratives: a new dimension of time revealed by the Anthropocene (or Capitalocene as Donna Haraway calls it), a different relationship with the *other* from that established under a transcendent regime, and an immanent concept of value through a new currency.⁴

1 Darko Suvin, “Science Fiction and the Novum,” in *Defined by a Hollow* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 68.

2 See Giacomo Todeschini, *Come l’acqua e il sangue* (Rome: Carocci, 2021).

3 Eric Santner, “A Critique of Mana-Theism,” *Narratives of Debt*, 2019, <https://youtu.be/j4fNKG0JNcY>.

4 See Haraway Donna, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 47.

What is redemption?

The trifold innovation of *MF* emerges against the backdrop of neoliberalism as a symbolic model that has at its center the notion of *redemption*. Redemption is both a religious and economic term tied with the discourse of making good with one's debts, i.e., payability. As observed, this tributary logic is a device that administers the infinite creation of social relations that constitute the social ontology of any society. Procreation is a material example of such social infinity because it is continuous and never-ending. These infinities are social objects in the sense that they have a clear human origin, yet mankind represses their derivation producing narratives or institutions that seem non-human. Because the infinite nature of social life is repressed, transcendence absorbs such infinity thereby shining with the splendor and glory of all its might, insignia which are normally assigned to power.

The basic symbolic structure of neoliberalism is homologous to the template I just described; it only substitutes a theological transcendence with an economic one. This logic follows a sacrificial economy because it forces us to pay tribute to a transcendent authority that mobilizes vast regions of our life.⁵ However, under capitalism, transcendence does not grant nor promise redemption. As Walter Benjamin famously pointed out, capitalism has a specific cultic structure "that makes guilt and debt pervasive. Capitalism is probably the first instance of a cult that creates guilt, not atonement."⁶ Transcendence demands a tribute that is unpayable and establishes a relation where the subject is never in compliance but rather is chased by pending liabilities and works to sustain the eternal growth of surplus value. To follow our metaphor, in our societies the logic of payability has no maturity date.

Although neoliberalism claims that payability is a universal truth, a group is exempted from the liabilities of this pactional economy. Therein an exclusive path to redemption emerges for the 1%. Bail-outs are for those who run the financial machine, Mladen Dolar points out, as these elites are always granted assistance because they are "in the mercy," eternally saved because of "their very position which entitled them to speculation."⁷ While this caste socializes its losses, it is always too big to fail, neoliberal governments staunchly promote the virtuousness of austerity measures. The founding principle of this narrative, which Stephanie Kelton has dubbed the deficit myth, assimilates the household's budget to that of a sovereign state.⁸ Projected onto the state, this misguided doctrine demands

5 See Andrea Righi, *The Other Side of the Digital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

6 Walter Benjamin, "Capitalism as Religion," in *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996), 288.

7 Mladen Dolar, "The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strained," *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 60 (2014): 18.

8 Stephanie Kelton, *The Deficit Myth* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020).

the slashing of spending to avoid insolvency of future generations. This claim draws its force on a moral argument (the future of our children) that presents itself as absolute, yet the economic school of Modern Monetary Theory has demonstrated that its fallacy originates in the misunderstanding of the nature of taxes and money.⁹ Let us briefly explore the deep-seated causes of this distortion and its socially and environmentally devastating consequences.

Contrary to mainstream economics, Modern Monetary Theory maintains that the state does not use taxes to fund its operations but to ensure the circulation of its currency. Randal Wray argues that “because of this, the only real debt incurred by a government that issues a nonconvertible currency is the promise to accept that currency in payment of tax liabilities.”¹⁰ Taxes do not create money. The state creates money, which it then proceeds to redeem via taxes, fines, and other instruments. In this sense, “the word redemption is used in two ways: accepting your own IOUs [money] in payment and promising to convert your IOUs, to something else (such as gold, foreign currency, or the state’s IOUs).”¹¹ All money is FIAT money. It is the state that decides the amount of liquidity to service society’s needs. But this mobilization must be ensured through permanent fiscal operations. Here we encounter a second conceptual error in common economics. State money is not a *thing* but a function. As Scott Ferguson writes “money is not an alienable entity government amass or hemorrhage. It is a limitless writing instrument for mobilizing social production and provisioning the public purpose.”¹² To follow Ferguson’s metaphor, the revenue system is a curator, it guarantees the legibility of this writing by ritualistically taking currency out and back into circulation. This is why there is “perpetual redemption at the center of money’s spiraling temporality.”¹³ Salvation does not expect us in the afterlife nor is it something a transcendent entity will grant us. Salvation is the immanent process that nourishes social reproduction.

If this understanding of salvation seems inappropriate, it is because it defies the definition Christianity adopted from Roman law, which referred to the ransom paid by the Senate to entities who held captive Roman soldiers at the time of the Republic. This model, which is at the root of how Christianity envisions redemption in theological terms, rests on the trust

9 Modern Monetary Theory understands money both as credit and as Fiat money—i.e., money made by governments decree. From this integration, it constructs an alternative to austerity focusing on the underutilization of public resources. See Randall Wray, *Modern Monetary Theory: A Primer on Macroeconomics for Sovereign Monetary System* (New York: Palgrave, 2015).

10 Randal Wray, *Introduction to Credit and State Theories of Money* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 2004), 8.

11 Wray, “Modern Money Theory: How I Came to MMT and What I Include in MMT,” October 1, 2018, Multiplier Effect, <https://multiplier-effect.org/modern-money-theory-how-i-came-to-mmt-and-what-i-include-in-mmt/>.

12 Scott Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 63.

13 Ferguson, *Declarations of Dependence*, 63.

that some *Other* (called *redemptor*) will act and the tributary relationship to a benefactor.¹⁴ Therein a contractual system of reward and punishment emerges as a dominating institution. This is not the place to show how the accounting of the soul in the afterlife is far from being mathematically sound. On earth, Christian societies did engage in various forms of redemption by declaring amnesties or adopting systems of basic welfare for the community. In the Middle Ages, the general tendency to invest in the needs of the *communitas* was called *fructuatio*, while the imperative to donate quotas of capital for good works at the end of one's life fell under the term *restitutio*. Despite these social conventions, one finds a specific spiritualization of the pactional system in Christianity that leads to Neoliberalism. The Good news of the Gospel seems to be particularly susceptible to a more integral form of extraction. This paradoxical conclusion arises from the understanding of "the infinite value of Christ's body, or of the ecclesiastic community embodied by the Church."¹⁵ It is this (abstract) infinite dimension that shifts the focus from redistribution in life to the one beyond that. Things in the Old Testament were somewhat different. Although in the Hebrew tradition redemption was never exclusively understood as a factual gain, the Levitical model for salvation called for the cancelling of material obligations: the *jubilee* was the moment in which society would begin again from a clean slate, a common institution in antiquity.¹⁶

Insisting on investment and growth, Christian theology rewrites the clauses of the Jewish covenant opening a pathway for dismantling its base of reciprocity. It is no coincidence that one of its targets is the Sabbath year of the Leviticus. First of all, let us remember that even the rightful economic basis for salvation codified by *restitutio* may easily slip into instruments of social control if not worst.¹⁷ Giacomo Todeschini points out, for instance, how it was not uncommon for religious authorities like the IX-X century bishop Raterius of Verona to claim that the poor who wants riches sins, while the rich, who is unencumbered by wealth, is an example of piety.¹⁸ Ignoring earthly justice, other authorities like the XI-century Benedictine Monk, Peter Damian, went a step further offering a remarkable argument against the debt-relief practice prescribed in the Leviticus. He pointed out that

the precepts of the law are truly fulfilled when they are carried out in accord with the spiritual meaning for which they were instituted. Formerly, while they were being carried out physically, they were

14 See Tiziana Faitini, "The Redemption between Law and Theology" *Ius commune graeco-romanum* (Leuven: Peeters Publisher, 2019).

15 Giacomo Todeschini, "The Incivility of Judas" *Money, Morality, and Culture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 38.

16 See David Graeber, *Debt. The First 5,000 Years* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2012), 65.

17 See Giacomo Todeschini, *I Mercanti e Il Tempio* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002). 188.

18 *Ibid.*, 191.

empty, that is, a shadow or image of the thing, and not the thing itself.¹⁹

It is the (abstract) infinite dimension of transcendence that shifts the focus from redistribution in this life to the one beyond that. Debt forgiveness on this world is only an illusory copy of true forgiveness. Peter Damian projects value to the elsewhere of the divine thus undercutting the legitimacy of earthly salvation. Therein, the idealization of infinity supersedes the social infinity of human relations. This innovation to the pactional economy hints at the modulation of transcendence in modern times. As an economic virtue that will be rewarded, neoliberal austerity follows the same sacrificial formalism enacted by the elsewhere of Peter Damian's "thing in itself." Under advanced capitalism, the spiritualization that appreciates the value of the beyond dissolves any limit and possibility of solvency for people on earth because virtuosity is now defined by its efficacy in expanding surplus value.

Not surprisingly, the elite's easy-access to grace on earth generates two behaviors equally dominated by surplus value: conspicuous opulence, think of the new space craze among U.S. oligarchs, and avarice, another of those theological categories behind capitalist accumulation. The miser is the perfect example of somebody driven by the desire of accumulation for accumulation's sake. As Dolar points out, the miser's wealth becomes the object of all objects, a metaphysic entity or "surplus object," that which augments totality not because of some specific goal but because it mirrors infinity. The surplus object is what "in money is more than money, the general equivalent without equivalent."²⁰ This surplus object is the neoliberal God of Christianity: the creed that demands infinite valorization through extractive practices and debt economy. It is an imaginary *Other* that is leading us to extinction.

Time in the Anthropocene

I argued that by structuring itself around a transcendent Other that demands the endless creation of surplus value, neoliberalism advances an extractive program that degrades societies and the environment while blocking the necessary injection of liquidity to address our climate and social crisis. Transcendence also impresses a teleological mark on the progress of time by setting salvation as an endpoint in one's life and now, under neoliberalism, by substituting redemption with the endless work of restitution (what we have called a debt or sacrificial economy). However, the problem is not the *other* but the relation we imagine to have with this alterity. For instance, the jubilee complied with a sacred function by alleviating a structural problem in the ancient world. Facing a planetary

19 Damian Peter, *Letters 1-30* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 70.

20 Dolar, "Avatars of Avarice" *Jnanapravaha Mumbai Conference*, 2019, <https://youtu.be/b13eEBHgn9I>.

collapse, instead, the neoliberal response ranges from outright denial to inadequate promises that are always geared toward surplus value. Inflation is a plague. State budgets are limited—except for wars—while the private sector must always be protected in order to insure a country's competitiveness in the global market. Ultimately, the transcendent logic of capitalism accommodates its polar opposites—i.e., denialism and paralyzing anxiety—because it has coopted terms like nature itself. As Timothy Morton writes, neoliberalism can always explain away the cost of externalities and ecological destruction because both capital and nature “exist in an ethereal beyond,” which is capable of absorbing anything.²¹

The technical innovations imagined by Robinson in *MF* redefine the implacability of this ideological approach to reality. The novel is an exercise in what Haraway called sympoesis, the narrative “yoke for becoming with, for staying with the trouble of inheriting the damages and achievements of colonial and postcolonial naturalcultural histories in telling the tale of still possible recuperation.”²² In this case, recuperation entails the attempt to bring the *other* and its infinities into the fold of the social dimension. The novel begins in the mid 2020s and closes a couple of decades later mapping how a global movement, aided by an avantgarde team of bureaucrats, pushes modern society to embrace a revolution that includes the rights and voices of the *future* into today's politics. The center of this transformation is a political institution—the ministry that gives the title to the novel—tasked to represent the future, that which commonsense dictates does not exist. This political device is a “subsidiary body” charged with the mission of advocating

for the world's future generations of citizens, whose rights [...] are as valid as our own. This new subsidiary body is furthermore charged with defending all living creatures present and future who cannot speak for themselves, by promoting their legal standing and physical protection.²³

The Ministry complies with this function not only via legal means but also by promoting and financing initiatives that fight climate change. The office is held by a combative politician, “Mary Murphy, an Irish woman of about forty-five years of age, ex-minister of foreign affairs in the Government of the Irish Republic, and before that a union lawyer.”²⁴ Mary and her international cabinet members are the co-protagonists of the polyphonic and multiform movement that culminates in the revolution of 2048. I will say more about this event later on. For now, it is important to take stock of

21 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects*. (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), 115.

22 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 125.

23 Stanley Robinson Kim, *The Ministry for the Future* (New York: Orbit, 2020), 16.

24 Ibid., 18. Mary resembles another's of Robinson's heroes from the Mars Trilogy, Tatiana Durova, an engineer, who similarly channels revolutionary change through institutional means. On the sociopolitical framework for the Mars trilogy see Kenneth Knoespel, “Reading and Revolution on the Horizon of Myth and History: Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars Trilogy,” *Configurations* 20, no. 1 (2012), 109-136.

this theoretical principle: through the Ministry, future generations become a stakeholder in today's politics. This alterity finds a form of political representation radically different from the cultic belief heralded by neoliberalism. In other words, this alterity is not a transcendent Other rather it attempts to represent the infinities of human generations, which are already here and need care and tending. The novel aims to depict this new emotional life of society and delineates what Raymond Williams called a new structure of feeling, one in tune with the immediacy of future *others*.²⁵

Robinson operates this shift not only through character development and plotlines, but also by pushing his text toward a certain degree of experimentalism. The point of view adopted in the novel moves from an omniscient perspective to a focalization that is usually internal—whereas an external focalization, where facts and knowledge is held back, never occurs—thus making the amount of narrative information an unavoidable presence, a historical reality open to interpretations but certainly impossible to neglect. The text, in fact, could be read as an archive of events, strategies, and ideas from the near future. Furthermore, the objectivity of the documentary evidence relies not so much a rational understanding of consequences and causes of each singular event, but rather on the radical ex-position. From this standpoint, Buddhism is a key influence in Robinson.²⁶ The work of tending to reality is not carried out via manipulation or mastering. It is a playful frequentation marked by an oblique bond that liquifies the solid foundation of the classic cartesian subject. The responsibility one carries with regard to the world enlivens the book not only through direct dramatizations, but also via its formal architecture. In this sense, the insertions of documentary evidences and fun bricolage of limericks, "it notes," meeting debriefs, etc., can be tied precisely to a Zen philosophy. The *suchness* of experience liberates the individual from a cartesian self-centered understanding of one's relation with the world, a constitutive element of the neoliberal subject afflicted by the logic of payability.²⁷ This is why some of Robinson's inserts work almost as a prosopopoeia. Personification usually humanizes living and inanimate things. Here the opposite is true. By speaking, these objects (Robinson includes "it notes" by animals, photons, the market etc.) de-center the narrative voice, hollowing them out of their subjective pretenses. Their suchness is what matters. Insofar as tending to their existence embodies an ethical way of life, these formal elements add to the oblique structure of the narrative.

The claims of invisible generations of others are not only inspiration for experimental poetics. *MF* stages a shift in the role and actions of the

25 See Raymond Williams, *Preface to Film* (London: Film Drama, 1954).

26 See Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, "Possible Mountains and Rivers: The Zen Realism of Kim Stanley Robinson's *Three Californias*," *Configurations* 20, no. 1-2 (2012), 149-185.

27 Robinson also displaces the typical *SF* narrative mode based on the (male) protagonist as the "human-making machine of history," Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 118.

Ministry that deviates from standard thinking about time. In short, the Ministry functions like a time device, one that embodies the new temporality of the Anthropocene. Our Newtonian understanding of time states that the future is what does not exist. However, Robinson attempts to capture a structure of feeling that roots itself in the idea of the immanence of time. Folding the social infinities into the present means bending time, drawing it into the intimacy of immanence. The novel illustrates this form of temporal immanence in at least two ways. The first is epistemological in nature. Robinson understands environmental change not so much as a near future possibility but as something that has already happened. This is because he is well aware that climate change reveals how reality is an ensemble of hyperobjects. An "hyperobject" is a category of things, Morton argued, endowed with a dimensionality that liquidates words like Nature or the World, which is imagined as a transcendent entity, an empty container that is self-standing. Morton argues that "there is no top object that gives all objects value and meaning, and no bottom object to which they can be reduced independent from other."²⁸ Because of their size, hyperobjects demand a different understanding of time. It is well known that our actions (or inactions) will have a lasting impact on the lifeforms that will populate this planet. Morton summarizes the unusual temporality of the Anthropocene as follows: "the very large finitude of hyperobjects forces humans to coexist with a strange future, a future 'without us.' Recall that plutonium and global warming have amortization rates of 24,100 and 100,000 years respectively."²⁹ The fact that the future is embedded in our present forces upon us what he calls an "intimacy" with the other.³⁰

The second marker of immanence has to do with the temporality of the novel, which unravels through events that disrupt the sameness of neoliberal time. Here, the dystopian situation of the ecological catastrophe takes frontstage. The book opens with a disaster told from the point of view of a young American aid worker, Frank May, living in the north of India when a massive heatwave exterminates millions of people. As the lone survivor of this tragedy, Frank embodies the traumatic but also implacable truth voiced by the witness. His attempted kidnap of Mary functions as a catalyzer for the development of the plot. Particularly, Frank's rebuttal of her institutionalist approach to political change spills over into the rest of the novel as a counteraction to the generalized apathy of Western society. Mary is compelled to address the questions he poses to her; later on, she feels obligated to care for him. This encounter pushes her to act in ways that go beyond the political mandate of a typical UN agency.

The Ministry becomes a kind of shadow directorate for the green revolution. But the rugged road that leads to this transformation emerges

28 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 116.

29 Ibid., 94.

30 Ibid., 95.

in non-linear bursts of energy. Sometimes there are bloody spikes, as in large-scale attacks by eco-terrorists against the aviation and fossil fuel industry; other times there are more targeted actions like sabotages, strikes, as well as the hilarious contrappasso-like punishment for a number of CEOs who are forced into re-education camps where they attend endless Power Point presentations on human induced effects on the environment. Geopolitical change takes place as well, mostly from the south of the world, India, Africa etc. This turmoil and the catastrophic crescendo culminate in a new Springtime of the Peoples of 1848. Significantly, what inaugurates this momentous year is a fiscal strike by the National Student's Union in the United States.

Student debt was a trillion-dollar annual income stream for the banks, so this coordinated default meant that the banks were suddenly in cash-flow hell. And they were so over-leveraged, and thus dependent on all incoming payments being made to them on time to be able to keep paying their own debts, that this fiscal strike threw them immediately into a liquidity crisis reminiscent of the 2008 and 2020 and 2034 crashes, except this time people had defaulted on purpose, and precisely to bring the banks down [...] But this time the Fed asked Congress to authorize their bailing out the banks in exchange for ownership shares in every bank that took the offer.³¹

This lucky conjuncture of history, where the U.S. Congress does the right thing, inverts the symbolic mechanism of redemption by eliminating the eternal salvation for the elite. It also disrupts the teleology of the debt economy ingrained in such structure because redemption returns to the core of the State's function: not to protect an oligopoly but to serve as an instrument for the mobilization of the social ontology aimed at the benefit of present and future citizens. A growing interconnectedness based on this new sense of time animates the spirit of 2048. From a theoretical point of view, this also means that the logic of social reproduction displaces surplus value as the object of objects and the discourse of payability that administers the endless recreation of social relations. I already observed that because it is infinite, the work of reproduction points to a form of eternity. This timeless dimension thus stretches out toward the future as well, claiming its presence. The high finance of capitalism claims to predict the future when in reality it wants only to dominate. Robinson's efforts go in the opposite direction. In order to safeguard the alterity of the future, humanity creates solutions that protect the ecosystem by nourishing the reproduction of relations of humanity and its many others (people, animals, organisms etc.).

31 Ibid., 375.

The money of social infinity

MF directly critiques the two mechanisms that sustain the discourse of transcendence: grace as a teleological direction of time and surplus value as the top object that harnesses life. If the Ministry is the institutional tool that incorporates a new sense of time, money is the second narrative innovation that ends the model of redemption as we know it. The minutes of a tense cabinet meeting set the stage for this transformation. As rising levels of CO2 unleash unbearable environmental pressures, Mary's team analyzes reports about unprecedented losses and financial exposure for insurance companies:

Lack of predictability means re-insurance companies simply refusing to cover environmental catastrophes, the way they don't insure war or political unrest etc. So end of insurance, basically. [...] Governments therefore payer of last resort, but most governments already deep in debt to finance, meaning also re-insurance companies. Nothing left to give without endangering belief in money.³²

The scale of the devastation opens a fissure in the system by bringing onto the scene the problem of infinity and its economic quantification. This type of infinity is not the spiritual driver of surplus value but of human life. If money is the general equivalent that measures the value of things, these calamities defy standard risk assessment because the cost of remediation defies calculation: "so just call it infinity," says Dick Bosworth, the Australian advisor to the cabinet.³³

The issue of representability emerges here as a productive paradox because it inserts itself in the discourse of payability exploding the pactional cage of neoliberalism. Just like with temporality, the novel operates an immanentization of infinity by recognizing its social character. Dick neatly enunciates this contradiction and draws the rightful conclusions:

if you rate all future humans as having equal value to us alive now, they become a kind of infinity, whereas we are finite ... If we were working for them as well as ourselves, then really we should be doing everything for them. Every good project we can think of would be rated as infinitely good, thus equal to all other projects. And every bad thing we do to them is infinitely bad and to be avoided.³⁴

All our efforts should thus be aimed at the wellbeing of future others. Economists call this the *discount* rate, the rate Central Banks set on money they lend to banks and other depositary institutions that regulates liquidity. The discount rate is thus an estimate of the future value of money; or a way to represent money across time, and thus to compare reality to infinity. Naturally, neoliberalism distorts this asymmetry focusing its decisions

32 Ibid., 54.

33 Ibid., 55.

34 Ibid., 130.

on growth. Therein discount rate oscillates from high rates—this type of quantitative tightening allegedly reigns in inflation—to lower ones to spur borrowing, as in the quantitative easing cycles due to the Great Recession and, more recently, the pandemic. In any case, the theological infinity of transcendence is coopted by the economic, so that the template for the relationship between our present finiteness and future infinity is one where surplus value is always dominant.

Setting aside economicist interpretations, Dick explains the problem of the discount rate by bringing into focus the philosophical paradox of how finitude can comply with infinity. Quantitative easing is not enough to ensure the wellbeing of the future. To finance the mobilization needed to comply with infinity one needs another form of infinity. Robinson imagines the adoption of a new money, borrowing the idea of a digital currency recently developed by Delton Chen, director of the Global Carbon Reward Initiative. Under the new reward-base policy, various private and public actors who sequester carbon (and are certified by appointed agencies) are reimbursed with digital credits. Before I turn to the role of the Carbon Coin, it is important to note that Chen's framework for a carbon reward, in effect, mimics the infinity of transcendence—the bioremediation work needed to restore acceptable environmental conditions is immense although not unlimited, this is why the unit of account for one coin is defined as 1000 kg of CO₂ mitigated for a 100-year duration.³⁵ However, this amount is shaped not so much as a limit but as a stage where new rules apply that allow a proliferation of actions and movement. Robinson's decision to include this monetary innovation is defamiliarizing in multiple ways. It is not a prophecy or a prediction, but a kind of looped temporality (one again that is fully in line with the Anthropocene) that from the future returns back into the past determining it. Furthermore, it offers a counter-narrative to the ideology of Silicon Valley for, ultimately, the Carbon Coin stands out as a counter bitcoin: not an anarcho-capitalist asset but a collective monetary tool.

The novel describes the introduction of carbon credits in a topical moment of history, when the political struggle needs to find the proper socio-economic outlet for it to succeed. Just like a regular digital currency, the Carbon Coin encompasses all three basic monetary functions. It is a unit of account, storage of value, and medium of exchange (Robinson imagines the creation of fractions of a Carbon Coin for daily expenditure called *carboni*).³⁶ But because the exchange rate for the Carbon Coin is set at a level that meets the mitigation target established by the international community, the yield is constantly rising. This is a solution to the problem of the discount rate with its discrepancy between finiteness of the present and infinity of the future. The response is that infinity is already present in

35 See *Global Carbon Reward Initiative*, <https://globalcarbonreward.org/carbon-currency/>.

36 Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future*, 356-57. Chen envisions the Global Carbon Reward as an asset not as a medium of exchange.

the world of humans. It is the work of reproduction of social relations. The nurturing of our material and immaterial needs must find a proper conduit to exist. The Carbon Coin becomes this conduit, an economic policy that avoids relapsing into a new form of adulation for transcendence because its purpose is ensuring a livable ecosphere for the reproduction of social ontology.

Instead of creating a set piece, Robinson introduces this currency via a meeting debrief of Mary's cabinet. Dick's note recaps the gravity of the situation and the need for this technical invention:

Told her about the Chen paper, useful for its clarity, and now getting discussed in several discourse communities, it being one of the earlier of various proposal to create some kind of carbon coin. This to be a digital currency, disbursed on proof of carbon sequestration to provide carrot as well as stick, thus enticing loose global capital into virtuous actions on carbon burn actions on carbon burn reduction... a new influx of fiat money, paid into the world to reward biosphere-sustaining actions.³⁷

The biosphere becomes the most valuable entity, or as Dick summarizes, "its worth to people [becomes] a kind of existential infinity. Gauging the price of saving the biosphere's functions against the cost of losing them would therefore always be impossible."³⁸ Under this arrangement, a reward, or shall I say, a redemption is finally bestowed to those who work for the preservation of this life, not the afterlife of Heaven. This economic revolution deals the final blow to the status quo, as gradually the vast majority of people see neoliberal discourse for what it really is "the world's current reigning religion, it had to be admitted: growth. It was a kind of existential assumption, as if civilization were a kind of cancer and them all therefore committed to growth as their particular deadly form of life. But this time, growth might be reconfiguring itself as the growth of some kind of safety."³⁹ At this point life is not oriented toward transcendence but toward its own immanent reproduction. Grafted on a series of massive events and bloody struggles, the Ministry's push for the Carbon Coin is the economic platform that unites people in a common task. It is an economic device in the highest sense: it provides both a symbolic and a material structure for the reproduction of subjectivity and its ecosystem.

This emphasis on social reproduction is typical of Robinson's poetics, particularly when one considers his acclaimed Mars trilogy, but even a non-Sci-fi novel like *Shaman* (2013). His narrative never seeks comfort into the past, say Fordist society, where limits and protections supposedly regulated society; rather, his speculative fiction engages in a description of social and economic devices that are expansive and collectively rich.

37 Ibid., 172.

38 Ibid., 344.

39 Ibid., 345.

Robinson takes a veritable pleasure in staging the work of social reproduction that builds, sustains, and repairs the infrastructure of society. This is also what anchors Robinson's notion of value and why Chen's monetary proposal is so appealing to him. Robinson's understanding of value is economic but not economicistic. Neoliberalism follows an idealized market-based notion of value, the competition for scarce resources which produces profit. However, value also has an anthropological base that, according to David Graeber, marks "the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves; normally, as reflected in one or another socially recognized form."⁴⁰ The new value for the Anthropocene is the preservation of the *other* (the many others that form the biosphere) as an immanent form of life.

40 David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001), 47

References

- Benjamin, Walter. "Capitalism as Religion," *Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996.
- Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan. "Possible Mountains and Rivers: The Zen Realism of Kim Stanley Robinson's Three Californias." *Configurations* 20, no. 1-2 (2012): 149-185. <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2012.0003>
- Dolar, Mladen. "Avatars of Avarice" *Jnanapavaha Mumbai Conference*, 2019, <https://youtu.be/b13eEBHgn9l>.
- . "The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strained," *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 60, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.3138/ycl.60.x.9>
- Faitini, Tiziana. "The Redemption between Law and Theology," *Ius commune graeco-romanum* Leuven: Peeters Publisher, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1q26r6s.6>
- Ferguson, Scott. *Declarations of Dependence*. Lincoln: Nebraska, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqhswb>
- Graeber, David. *Debt. The First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2012.
- . *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2001.
- Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11cw25q>
- Kelton, Stephanie. *The Deficit Myth*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2020.
- Knoespel, Kenneth. "Reading and Revolution on the Horizon of Myth and History: Kim Stanley Robinson's Mars Trilogy." *Configurations* 20, no. 1 (2012): 109-136. <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2012.0000>
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects. Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013.
- Peter, Damian. *Letters 1-30*. Translated by Blum, Owen. Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989.
- Righi, Andrea. *The Other Side of the Digital. The Sacrificial Economy of New Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctv1h7zn4z>
- Robinson, Stanley, Kim. *The Ministry for the Future*. New York: Orbit, 2020.
- Santner, Eric. "A Critique of Mana-Theism," *Narratives of Debt*, 2019, <https://youtu.be/j4fNKG0JNcY>.
- Suvin, Darko. "Science Fiction and the Novum." In *Defined by a Hollow*, 67-92. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010.
- Todeschini, Giacomo. *Come l'acqua e il sangue*. Rome: Carocci, 2021.
- . "The Incivility of Judas: 'Manifest' Usury as a Metaphor for the 'Infamy of Fact' (Infamia Facti)." In *Money, Morality, and Culture in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 33-52: Routledge, 2016.
- . *I Mercanti e Il Tempio*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002.
- Williams, Raymond. *Preface to Film*. London: Film Drama, 1954.
- Wray, Randall. *Introduction to Credit and State Theories of Money*. Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781843769842>
- . *Modern Monetary Theory: A Primer on Macroeconomics for Sovereign Monetary System*. New York: Palgrave, 2015.
- . "Modern Money Theory: How I Came to MMT and What I Include in MMT," October 1, 2018, *Multiplier Effect*, <https://multiplier-effect.org/modern-money-theory-how-i-came-to-mmt-and-what-i-include-in-mmt/>.

