



Book Review:
Economic Science Fictions

Laura E. Goodin

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Darko Suvin has famously defined science fiction as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (20). Authors have based such alternative frameworks on imagined and reimagined technologies, biologies, genders, languages, legal systems, histories, and psychologies, among many others. The use of economic ideas and systems as a means of introducing estrangement is not unknown (Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* being a notable example), but *Economic Science Fictions* brings a new and critical attention to science fiction’s potential role as a catalyst for broad-scale economic change.

The works in this book (not all are essays as such) seek to introduce – or at least suggest the possibility of – disrupting the assumed inevitability of capitalism as *the* economic system that, so to speak, “makes sense”. (Le Guin’s speech at the 2014 National Book Awards, in which she commented, “We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable – but then, so did the divine right of kings”, is mentioned more than once.) The book’s editor, William Davies, asserts in its introduction that capitalist economies “are constituted by a patchwork of institutions and mechanisms, which are amenable to reimagining and recombining” (12) and that “‘the economy’ is *already* partly fictional in its constitution” (22, emphasis original). In other words, like most of the institutions human beings devise as means of collaboration and power allocation, economies are as much an agreement about how the story should go as a reflection of some sort of objective, positivistic reality – and, as such, they are amenable to narrative manipulations. The contributors to this volume offer a many-faceted examination of how science-fictional stories can be used not only to put a

mirror to capitalism, but to actively change it. Their analyses and proposals are, not unexpectedly, sanguine in their conviction that capitalism can, and should, be supplanted, but ultimately their arguments are unsatisfying: can capitalism truly be jettisoned *holus bolus* without any consideration for those of its aspects that have indisputably contributed to the reduction of poverty? Have the potential drawbacks of the solutions proposed herein been fully identified and addressed? Can it really be this straightforward? When the book moves into presenting fictional and creative-nonfictional visualisations of alternative economic futures, can these stories plausibly engender genuine economic change? Have any stories ever done so? Ultimately, the book offers no answers to these questions. Nevertheless, it provides an intriguing look at the intersection between social sciences and literary theory and practice; after all, every work of fiction sits within, and provides a lens to examine, its societal and historical context.

Ha-Joon Chang posits in his opening essay “Economics, Science Fiction, History and Comparative Studies” that while science-fiction writers can make their work more plausible by incorporating insights from formal approaches to economic behaviour, economists will benefit far more from the incorporation of science-fictional approaches, as this compels a rethinking of assumptions about institutions and individuals (35). As an example, he points to the *Mad Max* movies as the logical (if perhaps extreme) extension of the unrestrained market of neoclassical economics, as they depict “the destruction of modern institutions [that] has made people closer to the self-seeking rationalists that are idealised in neoclassical economics” (36). His assertion may be simplistic, as it’s both unlikely that economists will be willing to consider their field of study as something amenable to ideas of estrangement and narrative manipulation and that the political means exist to implement any insights from such approaches; this wistfulness characterises the book as a whole.

The next four pieces provide examples of the application of speculative-fiction techniques to economic thought, situating them more within the field of economics than those of literary criticism or creative practice. Laura Horn in her essay “Future Incorporated?” writes that contesting corporate power is “not to be achieved through individual heroism or subversive hacktivism; it is only through collective thinking and critical engagement with [other possible ways of organising] that these futures might come about” (58). Sherryl Vint writes in “Currencies of Social Organisation: The Future of Money” that neoliberal capitalism is designed to obscure, that “its very functioning is a creation of human choice” (65). Brian Willems in “Automating Economic Revolution: Robert Heinlein’s *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*” and Carina Brand in “Feeding Like a Parasite” follow Horn’s suggestion of examining specific economic topics through the lens of speculative fiction, looking at the ambiguous benefits of decentralised, automated economic exchange and the positive and negative aspects of extraction (specifically, of resources and labour), respectively.

Intriguingly, the book then moves on from analyses that *use* the idea of speculative fiction to works of speculative fiction themselves, demonstrating in practice how science fiction can serve to disrupt economic assumptions. “Pain Camp Economics”, written by the members of the AUDINT research group, is a thought experiment that uses the idea of pain as a currency, making literal and immediate the idea that capitalism only persists by continually increasing the suffering of the poor and disenfranchised. Khairani Barokka, in “AT392-Red”, proposes the trading of “accessibility credits” in the same way, and with the same moral difficulties, as trading carbon credits; for example, if a private apartment building in Hong Kong installs

elevators, a local government seat in Indonesia can consequently undercut funding for its disabled citizens' needs (142). Both works serve more as critiques or satires of neoclassical economics (and capitalism more broadly) than as serious predictions or proposals; this dilutes editor Davies's initial assertion that science fiction can be an agent of change, rather than solely of criticism.

Nora O Murchú's "The New Black" presents an impressionistic "day in the life" of an information worker in an IT-based dystopia. Next, in what this reviewer found the most thought-provoking of the creative works in the book in its definition of wealth as "resistance to shock", Dan Gavshon Brady and James Pockson's "Fatberg and the Sinkholes: A Report on the Findings of a Journey into the United Regions of England by PostRational" imagines an England that has ejected London from the nation and now operates on a "system of social organisation in which all members (at individual, community and regional level) are able to withstand shock through the quality of relationships they form with each other" (177). This system, reminiscent of the utopia that emerges at the culmination of Doris Lessing's *Shikasta*, is "less concerned with what you have, and more with how you do it" (177).

The next section examines various applications of design principles to economic problems. The first case study is Owen Hatherley's "Prefabricating Communism: Mass Production and the Soviet City", which examines the efforts of the Soviet government in the 1960s and 1970s to use the design of high-density housing ostensibly as a way to foster a better, more collectively oriented society. Hatherley acknowledges that these efforts were less successful than originally proposed, attributing this to flaws in the Soviet Union's implementation of communism: "Whether mass housing could achieve greater things in more propitious circumstances, and in a very different kind of society, with less dominance of patriarchy, bureaucracy and Fordist labour, is another question entirely" (235). This case study, in particular, highlights the tendency of the works overall toward a certain naive idealism. Hatherley's examination of Soviet mass dwellings does admit that they fell short of the hype that surrounded them (I've seen numerous examples myself, and they can charitably be described as dreary and dehumanising), and he blames this – probably correctly, at least in part – on "patriarchy, bureaucracy, and Fordist labour" (235); however, he neglects to consider whether fault may also lie with corrupt, self-serving, and hypocritical Communist Party leaders and functionaries. Nor does Hatherley examine the possibility that the idealistic depiction of the utopian benefits of government-designed mass housing at the time was more propaganda than genuine objective.

In "Science Fiction Computer Games", Mark R. Johnson proposes that "games are a particularly rich medium for examining science fiction economies and the physical structures they produce" (238), and he asserts that game designers and players "inevitably hypothesise about what economic forms could possibly underpin these titanic structures, whether slavery and technological control, techno-scientific state and military investment or post-scarcity matter manipulation" (256). In "Economic Design Fictions", Bastien Kerspern writes that "more and more designers are orienting their practice to engage the political" (258). He offers the "Design Fiction" approach as a case study in that it focuses on the question of whether designers are "solving the right problems" (259) and uses "what if?" as the starting point of discussions with stakeholders (260). In "Valuing Utopia in Speculative/Critical Design", Tobias Revell, Justin Pickard, and Georgina Voss assert that the rejection of utopias as either impossible or as disguised dystopias cuts the

designer off from valuable material for critical thought: “Whereas a dystopia would assume a failed state position from the outset, the critical utopia instead highlights the cracks in the utopian vision to expose its failings. It is here that we find the playground of speculative and critical design” (282).

Another section of fiction and creative non-fiction follows, the works therein encouraging a more intuitive reflection on the act of speculation itself. Tim Jackson’s piece “Shooting the Bridge” uses a day spent on the water as a trigger for reflection on risk, tension, resolution, the constraints of finite resources, and the idea of the liminal as they inform speculation on how the present becomes the future. In “Speculative Hyperstition at a Northern Further Education College”, Judy Thorne combines fiction and real-life interviews to present a slightly disorienting, yet poignant, treatment of the human yearning for acceptance and safety, and the effects of this yearning on individual and collective economic decisions. In “The Future Encyclopedia of Luddism”, Miriam A. Cherry proposes an alternative history in which the Luddite movement acts as a pivotal moment: in our history, it failed, with ramifications of that failure resulting in the current worldwide spread of distress and climatic peril; in Cherry’s alternative, it succeeds, and leads to a global economic approach called “Sustainomics”, which brings humanity instead to a rational, compassionate future. While these works may seem out of place in a scholarly volume, they offer examples of using speculative fiction more subtly, as a trigger for reflection – a skill that is receiving increasing attention within academia (see, for example, Coulson and Harvey; Walkerden).

The final chapter, Jo Lindsay Walton’s “Public Money and Democracy”, combines a creative work – an impressionistic, ambiguous, and arch story that looks at the oppressive potential of “big data” algorithms – with its exegesis. The two parts of the chapter put the thesis of the book as a whole into practice: speculative fiction has value as a tool to explore and postulate potential economic futures and their ramifications.

Considered together, the chapters take an unapologetic position significantly to the left of capitalism; it seems entirely plausible to argue that capitalism has served some less well than others, and each work in the book regards this as a given. While the essays and creative works offer a thought-provoking diversity of topics and approaches – from traditional scholarship and reflection to numerous forms of fiction and creative non-fiction – this uniform lean to the left leaves some questions unanswered. For example, many of the chapters emphasise the importance of collective action and mutual responsibility as the only way to disrupt corporate power, but is this really the only way? Individuals’ actions have more than occasionally had a discernable effect on how history unfolds (Mohandas K. Gandhi is an obvious example). And surely the collapse of Soviet-style communism shows that powerful institutions can sometimes fall under their own weight, even in the absence of overt collective resistance. Similarly, the assumption that capitalism is, by its nature, dystopic negates any possibility of extracting any components that might in themselves have benefits for an emergent collective society, such as the contributions of small and medium-sized privately owned enterprises (which themselves rely heavily on personal relationships to thrive; see, for example, Erdem and Atsam) to economic vitality (as the OECD asserts in “Enhancing the Contributions of SMEs in a Global and Digitalised Economy.”) Moreover, it’s been convincingly argued that capitalism does not, in isolation, either cause or reduce poverty; rather, economies are shaped by “the endogenous evolution of technology and the institutions and the political equilibrium

that influence not only technology but also how markets function and how the gains from various different economic arrangements are distributed” (Acemoglu and Robinson 1).

Despite these concerns, *Economic Science Fictions* is an innovative and highly relevant book, the methodology of which can be expanded to imagine not just new economies, but new polities, diplomacies, artistries, sociologies, legal systems, geographies, philosophies, and psychologies. The combination of theoretical approaches and their application in actual works of fiction gives particular power to encourage both explicit debate and intuitive, implicit understanding of crucially important social issues.

Biography: Laura E. Goodin is an independent researcher based in Melbourne, Australia. She holds a PhD in creative writing from the University of Western Australia. Her novels are published by Odyssey Books; her short stories have appeared in numerous print and online publications; and her libretti, plays, and poetry have been performed internationally.

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