

Administration, vol. 72, no. 3 (2024), pp. 69–87
doi: 10.2478/admin-2024-0018

Unlocking institutional imagination: Interview with Kim Stanley Robinson

Kim Stanley Robinson

Mary Murphy
Maynooth University, Ireland

Introduction

This is an edited transcript of an interview with the bestselling *New York Times* author, Kim Stanley Robinson (Stan) by Prof. Mary Murphy, Maynooth University. Stan is an American writer of science fiction. He has published twenty-two novels and numerous short stories and is best known for his Mars trilogy. His work has been translated into twenty-four languages. Many of his novels and stories have ecological, cultural, and political themes and feature scientists as heroes. This interview was prompted by his focus on the role of institutional change as an important transformative factor in his 2021 book *Ministry for the Future* (Robinson, 2020). This book imagines that in 2023 the United Nations instituted a ‘Ministry for the Future’. The book reflects on the work of the ministry in 2050 as the world faced imminent climate challenges and related global inequality, misery, war, and conflict. Since its publication, Stan has discussed the issue of institutional reform with various global and national leaders, and has participated in numerous podcasts and debates discussing the challenges of institutional reform. This article is an edited version of a

video interview conducted by Prof. Mary Murphy on 4 March 2024, which was screened at the Futures Forum conference on ‘Transformative Change: Unlocking Institutional Imagination’, held at Maynooth University on 4 April 2024.

Interview

M. MURPHY: Thank you so much for agreeing to do this and for facilitating us with your time. We are looking at transformative change, unlocking institutional imagination, and are very excited about this as our conference theme. It has been very well received by a lot of people who really think we’re talking about something important. And I know a lot of your own work has focused on that idea of how institutions are the interlocutor between technology and people, and the role that institutions play in enabling some ideas and innovation to be translated into real-time action. To start off very generally, how do you see the role of institutional imagination?

STAN: This is something I’ve gotten interested in, Mary, and thank you for doing this with me; it’s a pleasure. *The Ministry for the Future* came out in 2020, and since then I’ve talked to people about climate change and how we can deal with it, and so of course the role of institutions often comes up. I’ve had to think about it, and I can point to a couple of problems that I’ve seen.

Of course institutions are crucial. They’re the clutch between ideas and actions in the world, because we are social creatures, and there are so many of us now that we have to coordinate our actions.

So they’re important, but they also get fixed in their beginnings, and there are a lot of them, each with different amounts of power and influence and money. Last fall, for instance, I travelled in Europe and talked to the World Trade Organization [WTO] in Geneva, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] in Paris, and the EU [European Union] Government in Brussels. They were all interested in effecting rapid change to decarbonise civilisation and keep us from wrecking the biosphere that supports us. But they were also stuck in place by their constituent members, who to a greater or lesser extent constrain what they can do and how quickly they can change. For instance, the WTO wants to revise its trading rules to make them more just and sustainable. This is admirable, and the desire comes from their new Director-General, and those who work there want it too. But the member nations of the WTO might keep them from doing all they want to do.

And in fact, in this latest round of WTO talks, it was India that was impeding rapid improvements in WTO rules, its representatives thinking the proposed changes might be bad for India. It'll be a different country every time.

Then also, these organisations didn't know what the other ones were doing. They each have their own problems and zone of action, and that seems to absorb all their attention. So the OECD recently made a rule that all OECD countries have to set a minimum corporate tax of 15%. More would be better, of course, but this rule helps to get rid of tax havens and thus reduces tax-dodging. That was powerful, and it was a bit out of their lane, institutionally speaking. No one asked them to do it and they did it anyway. But they didn't know about the WTO efforts to revise the trading rules, and they didn't know what was happening up in Brussels at the EU.

I'll end by just pointing out they inevitably have structures that get fossilised, and they also have member states that are overdetermining what they can do. They aren't free agents. At the same time they are staffed by young, ambitious, well-educated people, wanting to effect rapid change and so joining organisations like this. It's somewhat like a young mind getting stuck in an old body. I'm sorry to use that image because for me that's daily life. But these young people get frustrated by the fact that their institution can't act on the good new thinking that they've brought to it, with their education and their youth. So I see a lot of frustration at that level. Now, what can be done? Well, it can be talked about, like you are in your conference. More communication amongst institutions would be good – they could perhaps gather to say, 'This is what we're doing and this is what we're trying. What about you?' And that perhaps might even lead to coordinated actions, but at least information would be shared. Because popping from one to the next, I'm seeing that the world is too big for anyone to know all that's going on. You get caught up in your own institution, in its detailed problems, the daily minutiae, things right in your face that you have to deal with. You don't know that other people are dealing with perhaps similar problems, just one country or one institution over. So a meeting like yours, to talk about these things, that's part of the creation of a new nervous system between organizations.

M. MURPHY: The Nobel Laureate in Economics, William Nordaus, was in Dublin a little while ago and he talked about whether humans have the capacity to respond to the nature of the challenges that climate change is presenting. He was quite optimistic that humans

have the capacity, but he wasn't sure that the institutions have. When we were developing the conference together, we were very taken with Graeber and Wengrow's [2021] book, *The Dawn of Everything*, and the idea that institutions, and our own thought processes, may be stuck and what we need to do to unstuck them? How have you come across ideas or examples of institutions that did manage to get 'unstuck' or to generate new thinking and been able to implement it?

STAN: Good question. I'm scouring my mind. I'm thinking first that the Economics Nobel winner, William Nordhaus, should revise his 4% discount rate [used in assessing capital investments] down to zero [see Weisbach & Sunstein, 2008]. Unless he does, he's part of the problem. He's enabled a whole lot of people to discount future generations as if they're not as important as us, by way of a pseudo-quantitative formula, an ethical choice disguised as a quantitative analysis, which is what a lot of economics is.

He serves to illustrate the point that you've got to be careful, because some ideas you put out there, especially if you make a case that can be defended under certain assumptions, can then be turned and used by people who have darker motives than you yourself. The wrong assumption here with the high discount rate is that future people will have more productive capacities than we do, and can cope with climate change because it will be predictable and linear. None of that is true. It's a science fiction story, as are all stories describing the future. Putting numbers to it doesn't change its fictional and speculative nature.

I've read the Wengrow and Graeber [*sic.*] book, and admire it. It too is a work of science fiction. Like all archaeology, it imagines an explanation for data that are scattered, partial, and fragmentary in the most literal sense. You take a bunch of fragments and then you say, these weren't horrible warrior-supported thieves of the common goods of early farmers – these fragments show a kind of equality! So state formation maybe wasn't what we thought it was! And they're right about this, to this extent – the previous stories about early state formation were also science fiction stories, and undoubtedly oversimplistic. What really happened was for sure more various. That's the main value of their book – to show in the archaeological record that all kinds of institutional inventions were made up as people organised the technological improvements that led to agriculture, and thus to a completely different human way of life, with a whole lot more people than ever before.

We've seen the same thing happen more recently, with the rise of public health, and modern medicine, and the food production of the Green Revolution. Now we have a whole lot more people than have ever existed before. And we're trying to cope with these pressures and impacts with the institutions that existed before these new developments. First of all, those institutions were improvised anyway. They have no particular claim to efficacy, but we're stuck with them, or we seem to be. We're in need of another period of improvisation into a better set of institutions.

So it's right to ask what is an institution, and how can we make them more flexible. And as we look around for examples of this happening, the EU is important, because right now the nation state and capitalism form the global order that we live in, the political side being the nation state, the economic side being capitalism. These two are not the same, and they even are in conflict with each other, in a kind of standing contradiction, even though they are two parts of one system. Nation states are desperately jealous of sovereignty. They guard it like a miser guards a hoard. Then capitalism is global, and capital wants to flow without impediment to the highest rate of return, nation-state borders and sovereignty be damned. So you see these battles being played out in this complicated system that we're in. It's like conjoined twins wrestling – a hopeless mess.

But the EU is a federation in which the nation states turn into member states. They agree to give up some sovereignty, which is already amazing, and then they try to make that work. And so everybody in the EU knows that it's a gigantic kludge and it's, you know, in many ways horrible. Capital can beat the EU just as it can beat nation states. But, because the EU is new, and it's trying to turn nation states into member states for some greater good, it's interesting. It might allow government to seize the directing of our efforts away from capital's market dominance.

Now all nations are part of the UN [United Nations], and the Paris Agreement [international treaty on climate change] includes almost every nation. These new agreements to protect 30% of the Earth's surface, and the similar agreement to protect 30% of the oceans from fishing – these agreements have to do with protecting biodiversity, vital in this age of extinctions caused by human activity. These agreements are all member state actions.

So what you can see is that diplomats from the nation states, in the desperation of knowing they have a planetary problem and yet they

have only sovereignty over their little patch of land, or their big patch of land, are trying to team up and work together.

So the institutions devoted to this are new, and you might say embryonic, or emergent. But they are being built. And as they emerge they're looking around – 'Okay, we're here', they say, 'but what can we do?' Because ultimately money conveys a great deal of the power and agency we have, and that power and money are still stuck back at the level of the nation-state, and in global capital itself, which wants to be completely free of constraints and only wants the highest rate of return.

What can these new institutions do? Well, the more they're talked about, the more teamwork can get done between them. The more you think about what the EU has accomplished, the more you have an example of how it might work. It obviously will never be easy, but there are things being done. Now there are three big powers in this world: the United States and China, they're both huge, and then the European Union comprised of twenty-seven small and medium-sized countries. The EU is the third power on earth in terms of political economy, including also India as a fourth. It's this association with each other in a greater project that makes the EU so powerful. So there are lessons to be learned from the early examples that we have right now.

M. MURPHY: Indeed, in March 2024, the Belgian presidency of the EU focused on the institutional architecture that might be needed to really build on just transition, and the idea of social inequality being as important as climate change, and how to approach them both together. So it's interesting just to see them actually try to engineer new institutional ways of thinking and new ways of thinking about knowledge as well.

I wanted to ask you about knowledge because you talk a lot about cognitive processes and 'cognitive estrangement' [Robinson, 1984, p. 33] or 'loosening the grip on fixed ideas'. I think that's very much what we're getting at when we're talking about institutional imagination, and the idea of whose knowledge is important, what's consensual knowledge, who decides whose knowledge doesn't get talked about. What do you think is happening there? I mean, there's been quite a lot of attempts to break down those kind of paradigms that you spoke of earlier, of capitalism and of the dominant ideas that frame how we understand the world.

STAN: Well, we have another new global thing, which is the Internet, a kind of virtual public space, or a digital global commons. But wherever there's a commons, there's an attempt at enclosure. So privatization of the Internet, and ownership of it by monopoly powers – that's been bad, it's another example of enclosure. But there's still conversations going on, there's still Wikipedia, there's still Creative Commons, there are attempts to keep this new thing a commons. People sometimes call it a platform, because it platforms so many discussions, but it's also a realm of discourse that creates a global shared reality. It's what used to be called general knowledge, or the general intellect, or even common sense.

It's now out there for everybody to see and join, in a big new 'slurry of voices'. But it's so big that it can't be taken in whole. So then people curate their own realities, depending on what sources you go to online, which then influences who you talk to in daily life. In your online life, you get to pick and choose what you read and what you look at.

As a result of that, by persistent choices, people end up living in different realities. Can this therefore be yet another example of ideology, as defined by Althusser [2001 [1971]]. One's Internet life is indeed an imaginary relationship to a real situation. There is a real situation out there, and these curated realities are only part of the story. They are, in effect, ideologies in action, created because you can't take in the whole story.

So you concoct a smaller story that makes sense to you. That story is made up of a mash of other stories, which you find more or less attractive. This leads me to the idea of persuasion – of telling a story that people find persuasive enough that they include it in their dominant narrative.

And one story now, thank God, is that the planet's living creatures are endangered by climate change. Note that this new story can't be invented by any one person. Science is a collective enterprise, and it's science that has identified climate change, which no one individual could see as a global historical phenomenon. That takes data, and data analysis. It's a collective process.

You're in a storm; that you can see yourself. It can even kill you. But we have been in storms before. The fact that the temperature of the earth is a couple of degrees higher than it was before the Industrial Revolution, and that this is the result of humanity's burning of fossil fuels – no individual can sense that. To believe in it, you have to trust science. Why should we trust science?

But then you can add to this story: every time you get so sick that you're scared for your life, you run to a scientist. That's your doctor. Medicine is part of science.

So when push comes to shove and you're scared you might die, then you trust science, no matter what other stories you might tell yourself. That fact is itself a story that needs telling. That story connects people back to their basic emotions, their fears. When you're sick, when you're scared for your life, you do what scientists tell you to do. Therefore you actually do believe in science. Even if you've curated a version of reality that tries to put science down, reduce it to the level of any other discourse or story, you'll throw all that aside and run to the doctor when you're sick.

That story needs to be told, and maybe even insisted on, to connect up the rest of the stories that science is now telling us. You can add further stories, which lead to the realisation that justice for all creates safety for all. That until everyone feels they live in a just system, no one is safe. And we've got a lot of work to do to make the green transition and stop poisoning the Earth, and a lot of that has to happen in the Global South. It has to happen everywhere on Earth, and it has to be paid for. So can we not arrange our incentives to do that? Couldn't governments agree to direct the businesses of the world and pay them to do the necessary work? Governments make up money and back it, so they could pay for the green transition, by putting a lot of people to work who weren't at work before. With that you create social justice as well as the green transition, which becomes a kind of full employment project, which is a good in and of itself. It would mean you have meaningful work, and a way to make a living and pay your bills, as you're making the green transition happen.

There is, in other words, a connected story that puts together the different parts of our current moment, which is a complex crisis, such that they add up to a positive future, a vision that you can give to people. And then, in the ongoing war of stories, hopefully you have the one that is most persuasive, because it's the most grounded in reality.

M. MURPHY: You've been very critical of some language in the construction of those stories and of particular language being very dominant. What kind of language do you think gets in the way of constructing those kinds of narratives that could clear a direction for what needs to happen?

STAN: I have been very critical of mainstream economics, of capitalism, and of capitalist realism. Economics has been the quantification of a power relation that never questions the power relation. Capitalism is the name for a power relation among people. Capitalist realism is the attitude that our system is natural and could not be any other way, because it's just a matter of being efficient. But I don't believe in efficiency as a value. This is a word that means something like optimising resources to get the maximum result from them. But a machine gun is efficient. So it depends what you're trying to be efficient at, and when people use 'efficient' to mean 'good', this isn't right. It needs to be re-examined. It's just one part of capitalist realism that needs to be re-examined.

I am particularly shocked by some of the phrases out of neoliberal economics, the power relation that we've been in for the last forty years. Take for example 'wage pressure'. That means scaring poor people into taking 'shit jobs', as Graeber [2018] called them. In order to stay alive at all, you have to take what you're offered, or else it's starvation and being thrown out on the street. And yet this is called 'wage pressure' by business schools and economic textbooks and the financial press, often as advice to the managerial class.

For them, wage pressure is a good thing, because then you maximise the return to the shareholder. Which is to say, the rich get richer, and the poor are scared to death. But you can disguise that reality with a pseudo-technical terminology that takes the human element out of it. There should be something like Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary* [1912], where every term in economics and in the business schools is translated into its actual human impacts. That could quickly become a big Wikipedia-type project.

M. MURPHY: Yes, I've seen variations of those types of things. For example, in feminist discourse, some women have taken on some language where they have made those very dictionaries. You're also very critical of words like 'degrowth', though, and even 'socialism'.

STAN: Well, I speak as a kind of eco-socialist myself, but I think now that in trying to persuade people, the language that you use will either gather people into your storytelling or immediately they'll sling out of it, just because of the words you use.

I don't like the word 'degrowth', even though renouncing growth of the GDP [gross domestic product] model is important. But when you say 'degrowth', it implies a kind of regression, or a saintly suffering or

renunciation, or a denial of electricity and health care to those still immiserated. It isn't necessary to put it like that. You could say growth of sophistication, growth of care, growth of wellness, and these would still be growth. There's room for growth of goodness and justice and well-being. These just aren't well marked by GDP. So I think 'degrowth' immediately throws people off; it's not a good word for attracting people. And here I'm thinking just about how to persuade. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, is understudied these days.

Now, 'socialism'. I think that all of the necessities of life should be owned by people together, and run by their government, which is to say 'of the people, by the people, and for the people'. This is my notion of government. What we should own and share in that system includes food, water, shelter, clothing, health care, education, and electricity. This is the group of needs that ought to be shared, and should not be withheld and sold for the private profit of a few, based on the suffering of the many.

That's socialism. I'm a member of the Democratic Socialists of America, because I like supporting a group with that name, and I wish it were a bigger group. So I don't renounce socialism.

But when you use that word in common discourse now, in the United States, you tend to sound like a foreigner. You're marginalising yourself by words rather than by ideas. In the United States, you ought to talk about public utility districts. In Sacramento, for example, 20 miles to the east of me, the electrical supply is owned by the people of Sacramento, and distributed by the Sacramento Municipal Utility District. People there share the costs and the profits, and try to make it come out as a kind of a non-profit, make it come out even, while servicing themselves and having electricity, and paying the people working on it for their work.

They own their power, just 20 miles away. Here in Davis, we are under the rule of Pacific Gas and Electric, a private monopoly power that sets its own prices, and pushes us around. And the money that we pay them doesn't go to improvements to our system. It goes to shareholders abroad. So look: public over private. That's how I would put it in America. And then you leave the word socialism aside, as a word from the nineteenth century. It is a valiant and important word for some of us, but only historians. People with an interest in the history of the nineteenth century are not all that common in the twenty-first century. And what you want are the effects and the actions and the results, not the names.

M. MURPHY: You were talking earlier on about the importance of science and that people's underlying motivation was to believe science. There's a spectrum of opinions from the view that technology would give us the answers to very low technology worlds where real cultural change and social transformation might give us the answer. I was just wondering on that spectrum of technology to social transformation, where you would lie and how you see the two in tension with each other.

STAN: Wow. Okay, here's my first response. We are a technological species. We evolved by way of inventing and using tools. It was before we were humans that we started using fire and stone and language, and that turned us into humans. So you can never say no to technology. And particularly when there's 8 billion people on one planet, which is a technological achievement.

Could we make cleaner technologies that don't harm the biosphere? Yes, of course. So technological improvements of that sort are important.

On the other hand, once you've got enough for the day, further technological improvements in your toys, which often turn you into a less healthy animal, aren't improvements at all. So when people talk about technological improvements, they're mashing together several different categories at once.

But we do need better technologies in the sense of cleaner. One of the technologies that should be improved is restoring the biosphere to health in areas we've devastated by way of a mine or a dump. That way you can regreen the world; that's a technology too.

Then also, the word 'technology' begins to blow up when you describe laws as software. Then you could say our legal system is a technology. Eventually you can deconstruct that word to mean just the human enterprise. At that point, you're also talking about social constructs, and of changing the ways we behave with each other. If it's encoded in our laws, then it's a software system, which is another technology.

There's big improvements possible there. You can say that everybody ought to live at a sufficiency. There should be no misery or lack of dignity in this world. This sufficiency could be called a base value of one, which everybody gets by being born; society provides it, people work to make it happen. That's a floor; then what's the ceiling?

It should be ten times a sufficiency. By definition that is obviously already luxurious. Ten sufficiencies? So when the richest people have

1,000 times a sufficiency, as they do today, it's stupid. Is that a technology, that 1:10 wage ratio, if it were a law? But it's also social, it's the way we interact with each other, it's a set of values.

Now, I think, when you are talking about values as a technology, you've blown up the words. They no longer mean what they usually mean, and you get confused. I too think values and technologies are different things; but the values ought to drive the decisions about what to do. What are our values, then? What are we trying for? It becomes like talking about your religion. *Religion*, what binds us together. How we treat other people.

Values are kind of a religious position. And some people talk about religions as technologies by which the few exert control over the many. So these words, at the largest and most abstract levels, begin to move together in ways that make the whole conversation fall apart, like something in a college dorm at 2 a.m.

But sticking to typical meanings for terms, you could just say we need cleaner technologies, we need more justice. People who say that justice and sustainability are two parts of the same project are gesturing towards this connection of things. I think they're right to do so.

M. MURPHY: Your *Ministry for the Future* book, you wrote it before the pandemic, but obviously the pandemic was a significant opportunity to see large-scale adaptation and new technologies and new knowledge coming in. Did you observe any great learning over the pandemic that struck you as something you had speculated on in your novels?

STAN: The pandemic certainly boggled my mind. Like everybody else, it took me by surprise. And it's true I wrote *The Ministry for the Future* before the pandemic. That shows, now, because everything was speeded up by the pandemic, so all the dates in my novel are wrong. Everything is happening faster. The pandemic caused an acceleration in history and in planetary consciousness.

It was a huge success scientifically to invent those vaccines and get them distributed so fast. Well, that's science, technology, and government. Business too. But the invention, and the cooperation across borders between scientists – to do that so quickly was a gigantic success and needs to be celebrated. After the crux, however, people began to complain; and indeed each nation state was like a laboratory experiment in how to respond. Let's do it this way, let's do it another way. You can actually look at results and see which ways worked better

than others, although it gets very confusing because there are multiple variants. Anyway now there are complaints. Only half the people on Earth ever got the vaccines, for instance.

But I'm thinking, half of that half don't even have clean water and toilets. That the vaccine didn't get to some people is just to point out the massive injustice in the world that already existed. Those people are outside the system in much more fundamental ways than in a newly invented vaccine. So, yes, there is injustice. But to think that we failed to cope with COVID is to mistake what happened. One out of every thousand humans died in the pandemic, but it could have been so much worse. It could have been 1 out of every 100, and that could have crashed all kinds of systems. And those crashes didn't happen, because of science and law and international cooperation and manufacturing abilities, all together inventing and manufacturing and distributing this vaccine.

Okay, so it didn't work for everybody, because the world system doesn't work for everybody. But it worked damn fast, and it kept a pandemic down to a level that was shocking but wasn't civilisation-wrecking. So I call it a success, and revealing of just how quick science can be. And go back to our discussion of institutions: science runs in institutions, and they get together on an annual basis, or more frequently, to talk about what they're up to, share results, propose new projects, and so on.

The scientific method. Could it be made better? Yes, that is part of the scientific method; to examine how it's working and try improvements. Right now, a lot of it is a gift economy. I'll do peer review; I'll edit an entire journal; I'll mentor; all for free, given to other scientists. It's part of the job. There's a huge element of gift economy in the sciences. And when struck with a crisis, boom – those institutions worked like a crazy well-oiled machine, to get help out to the rest of humanity.

The other institutions – national governments, international aid organisations – some of them worked pretty well. Others did not. Often they were caught up in old ideas, saying 'Oh no, we don't do that, or, how could we possibly do that?' A failure of imagination, and of adapting to a new biological reality.

So it was a mixed picture, but also it was like institutions being put into an acid bath. The ones that were flexible and tough and imaginative responded well. The ones that were fossilised or weak folded under that pressure.

M. MURPHY: The pandemic might give some insights into what we might expect in the future. Going back to that idea of time, you mentioned the pandemic accelerating processes and outcomes. Time is such a central political challenge in terms of determining the pace of things and the scale of change. And it's so linked to institutional imagination – that idea of temporal imagination. Can you talk to me a little bit about how you see time?

STAN: Yeah. I was talking to Tino Cuéllar, who runs the Carnegie Institute for International Peace. That institution is 114 years old, he told me, and that whole time it's been working towards international peace, with obviously limited results, but it's been trying. And he pointed out that there's much of the political world where you are thinking out one year, two years, three years. The question and political necessity is to think about 'What can I get?' and 'Can I show people it's been got?' in that time period.

So you're really thinking short term, although I would point out that in finance, in order to make a profit from trading on fluctuations in stock markets, you have things working at a speed of nanoseconds, in high-speed trading which can make a lot of money by moving faster than anyone else. This comes down to the lengths of fibre-optic cables, and nanoseconds in which to take a cut before a deal is done. That's a kind of parasite on the system. But what we need, as Tino pointed out to me, is an institution, or in all institutions, some thinking about ten years, twenty years, fifty years out. If you have an image of what you want the world to be like fifty years out, you can better judge what you ought to do in the next year or two.

So extending the forecast, you postulate a desired state fifty years out, and then you run backwards to the present. What would have to have happened to get to that desired state? Well, this is very much a science fiction exercise, indeed a utopian science fiction exercise. I've been doing it my whole career. But I want to point out that everybody does this. It is not a specialised skill. Young people think, 'Well, as an adult, a good thing would be to be X, and what will get me to X decides your daily activities in the present'.

So utopian science fiction writing is an ordinary human thought process; considering a best-case scenario and then how to get to it is not specialised or alien thinking. In terms of institutions, since that's what you're focusing on here, I'm wondering if the way there are general plans for towns – a town will set up a general plan – this is how

we could design our daily legislation to get to that desired goal. Which in fact we do already.

It's an example of long-term thinking, and indeed long-term research plans are there all the time. So adding more, and institutionalising them – but I don't mean making up a new and specialised institution. I've had to think about that, as a lot of people discuss with me the possibility of starting a real-world Ministry for the Future. Again I'm thinking, literary metaphors are not the same thing as political institutions. A literary metaphor means to suggest something in symbolic terms. On the other hand, if there was regard for the future in all institutions, or if being an institution makes you a Ministry for the Future automatically, just by definition, then you might take the long-range view into account more often.

M. MURPHY: Yes, we do see a focus on anticipatory forecasting and scenario planning and skills and methodologies associated with that beginning to creep into some of the institutional processes and practices in Ireland. But I think it's relatively at the beginning and quite slow to develop.

You mentioned in a previous podcast that you felt that part of the problem that society had was that the scale of the challenge and the speed of change that was needed was very much out of alignment with society's capacity to meet those challenges, but that in more recent years, maybe you've felt that there is more alignment and more capacity of society to deal with what needs to be dealt with in a time frame that can be coped with. Do you still feel that way?

STAN: Well, I'm more scared than I was when I said those things. It's a year of big elections.

A third of the people on Earth are choosing their leaderships. You're being offered a choice to actually grapple with the future, in a moment of crisis. Things are moving really fast compared to our ability to change, so we have to learn to change faster, because the crisis isn't going away.

If we don't learn that, we exacerbate the problems. So we have to learn to move faster, and it's scary.

There are people offering us another choice: pretend it's not real. Stick your head in the sand, put a wall up around the borders of your little country or your big country, and say, 'We don't care about the rest of the world', 'We'll solve our problems ourselves'. In a global planetary biosphere crisis that has to do with human wastes in the

atmosphere, this is an obviously escapist and nonfunctional response, and yet that might win elections, because it's a matter of fear versus hope, or a matter of looking the other way rather than coming to terms with the problem. All of us are susceptible to fear. So in a world where everybody is afraid, the party of fear might win an election, and then stick its head in the sand and thus make the problem worse. So you have to rally fearful people to act hopefully. And that's a tougher assignment than scaring them, but it can be done, because people always see that sticking your head in the sand as a chicken thing to do. It's a crap response, and the people who take that route know it, and that makes them angry, so they double down and lash out, not wanting to admit it's crap.

But most people do want to face up to problems, and cope with them in ways that give their children a better life. But that is a narrative battle that has to be made and won, and it is super intense. I don't know what to say beyond that. One of the things I can say, as a science fiction writer, is that nobody can predict the future. Nobody can say what it's going to be like. What kind of world are we going to be in a year from now? No way to know, because we're going to decide this fall.

There are of course some trajectories and momentums that are going to continue no matter which political party we choose. On the other hand, those choices are important, in terms of allocating effort and money and time. So I'm as worried as anyone.

M. MURPHY: I know you've said before that you're inclined towards optimism and hope and that you see 'pessimism as almost a dereliction of duty', that it is a duty to be optimistic, or maybe hopeful rather than optimistic. Maybe it's a political duty almost, or a nod to politics. I think that that's good. I'm really glad you said that.

STAN: Yeah. I believe in that. Of course I have always had to fight being labelled an optimist, which is a two-edged sword, in that very often it means you're somewhat dim-witted, because how could you be optimistic in this dire situation? You must be a little dim. I know that's what people mean when they talk about 'Robinson the optimist'.

It's okay. It's a political stance to say the world could be better, therefore it should be better. I beat people with that truth, which is self-evident. The world could be run better, and therefore we ought to do it, and not to do it is a dereliction. Some Latin American said it's too late for pessimism, which is an interesting way to put it. It's a

matter of sticking in there when you're in a tough fight. Angry optimism.

M. MURPHY: Maybe to go towards an ending, your latest book, *The High Sierra: A Love Story* [Robinson, 2022], very much focuses on land and your own love of land. The Nature Restoration Act was just recently legislated in the EU. You have talked about rewilding policies and the '30 x 30' policy and how there is optimism when we see things like that happening.

And land is very much part of Irish culture and politics. We've seen a lot of recent protest in Europe from farmers resisting some of the regulatory frameworks that are coming in. So I just wanted you to unpack for a little how you see the politics of land and issues around land, climate, and sustainability.

STAN: That's a deep one, and complicated, and important. When I took a bus ride across Ireland, my only experience of it aside from a week in the West and a couple of days in Dublin, I really felt that crossing the country, it looked familiar, like the upper Midwest in the United States. Farming country and cattle ranching and some sheep. My mom was a McElroy and all her grandparents came from Ireland to the upper Midwest – maybe it wasn't a coincidence.

Anyway it looked very familiar, wetter than the American West by a long shot, but familiar. Say that's your land, and that's your people's land, and has been for as long as it's been occupied. But now? Could you do what you do on it without fossil fuels? Without pesticides and fertilisers? Maybe, maybe not. But the current land use is a high-tech activity, and it's a dirty tech the way we do it now.

You need to have clean tech in Ireland too. If you made that transition, and made your living by doing it – in other words, you didn't have to pay to do it, but you got paid to do it – that's the arrangement you need. You shouldn't be told, 'You have to go broke, you have to suffer, and the bank is going to take over your land'. Of course you're already in debt to them, but at least you own your property, sort of. But if you could free yourself from that debt, if you could make your living by decarbonising, by creating food for people in a way that sucks carbon down, rather than burning carbon into the atmosphere – that would be a solution.

This so-called 'regenerative agriculture', meaning carbon-negative growing of food, is a new technology that is quite beautiful for the

long-term health of everything, and if financed right, you still have your land, and you're still making a living from it. This is the circle that has to be squared, but that comes down to a question that is government-driven. Government has to say, and legislate, and fund this idea: 'We will make sure that the economic system rewards you for doing good work'. In my novel, I called it the 'carbon coin', but again, that's just a symbol for the idea that we pay ourselves for doing green work.

And then land questions. You are caretaking when you work for the green transition, because the future generations will then inherit land as healthy as yours, and you're helping all the Earth by sucking down carbon in your farming and ranching.

Interesting thought for Ireland: if we accidentally stall the Gulf Stream by way of human activities, Ireland would turn into something like the Yukon Territories. It's very far north, it's the Gulf Stream that gives it its mild climate. Absent the Gulf Stream, you'd have some kind of Siberia. Now *that* is destruction of land, and the Ireland that you know would for sure be gone. So it's peculiar to be a small island, just 5 million people on a relatively small patch of land, utterly dependent on the entire human world to do the right things to keep Ireland healthy.

Well, every other country is like that too.

M. MURPHY: There's a sense that it's one area where institutional imagination is needed. People talk of the 'Just Transition' for agriculture in Ireland being the really serious challenge that we have, while other countries might be looking at fossil fuels. That's the real debate in Ireland.

I'm going to let you go now because we've totally taken advantage of your generosity in time.

I just really, really want to thank you for your time, for your insights, for your wisdom,

STAN: Thank you, Mary. I wish I could be there in person. And, you know, someday I'll get back.

References

- Althusser, L. (2001). Ideology and ideological state apparatus (notes towards an investigation) (January–April 1969). In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (B. Brewster, Transl.) (pp. 85–126). Monthly Review Press. (Original work published 1971.)

- Bierce, A. (1912). *The collected work of Ambrose Bierce*. Vol 7: *The Devil's Dictionary*. Neale Publishing.
- Graeber, D. (2018). *Bullshit jobs: A theory*. Penguin.
- Graeber, D. & Wengrow, D. (2021). *The dawn of everything*. Penguin Books.
- Robinson, K. S. (1984). *The novels of Philip K. Dick*. UMI Research Press.
- Robinson, K. S. (2020). *The Ministry for the Future*. Orbit.
- Robinson, K. S. (2022). *The high sierra: A love story*. Hachette UK.
- Weisbach, D. & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). Climate change and discounting the future: A guide for the perplexed. *Yale Law and Policy Review*, 27, 433–7.

