

Economic Science Fictions – Book Review



***Economic Science Fictions*. William Davies (ed.). Goldsmiths Press. 2018.**

Science fiction as an academic case study has long been interrogated in many humanities departments, with a genealogical approach seeming the most obvious or intuitive way to understand any given sci-fi narrative. That is, one may try to link the text to the turmoil around its year of publication and question why the future invoked seems so bleak despite promises of future advancements. Yet, the current trend of embracing science fiction seems to indicate a shift in how scholars value the genre. In recent sensationalist news, the technology sections of many media outlets have continued narratives of AI, disruption and online data breaches. Questions of governance and ethical accountability have been constantly echoed in the policy forums that specifically target technology. In each case, an admiration for sci-fi narratives and their technologies occlude their genealogical significance.

The essays in *Economic Science Fictions* offer reflective critical theories and literary dystopian narratives, which yield the ever normative dilemma of what good science fiction should be and should do. The volume is divided into four thematic sections: the beginning interrogates the science and fictions of the economy; the second part offers a scholarly introduction to the connection between dystopia and capitalism followed by four literary pieces; the authors in the third section consider design for a different future; and the concluding contributions explore utopia. For the purpose of my review, I want to specifically examine how the authors view and critique sci-fi and evaluate the purposes of their scholarly analyses. This is especially important as science fiction has been categorised as speculative fiction in the realm of policy-making, which repurposes these narratives as forms of possible realities and calls for action through policy implications and interventions.

Capitalism and neoliberalism are often invoked in sci-fi narratives. In a foreword based on a contribution in the process of being written by [Mark Fisher](#) prior to his death (to whom the book is also dedicated posthumously), he observes that capitalism has been described as:

“work[ing] with how people actually are; it does not seek to remake humanity in some (idealised) image, but encourages and releases those “instincts” of competition, self-preservation and enterprise that always reemerge no matter what attempts are made to repress or contain them (xi).”



He continues to note that the paradox of neoliberalism is that it is a deeply political project that is both economical and ideological (xi-xii), allowing an often contentious understanding of the relationship between the individual, collective agency and the market. If this sounds familiar, one needs only remember US politician [Nancy Pelosi's controversial statement that 'we' just have to deal with living in a capitalist society](#). In his introduction to this volume, editor William Davies describes the construction of the free market and its emphasis on the importance of a price system, a driving concept of Austrian economist Ludwig von Mises. It is in this way that the market, although a human-made technology, is legitimised by mathematical rationale and scientific terms (3-14).

Davies continues to trace the role of the market's evolution, connecting modernism and visions of utopia from the 1970s as a sign of revisions to the market and any related inequalities. Yet, he sombrely notes that 'progress' might only be measured in narrow terms and according to the metrics of the market. For example, newer sophisticated computers and cellphones are praised for their success in a flourishing market and not necessarily for the betterment of society. Simultaneously, the self-governing and 'rational' citizen-cum-consumer participates in surveillance and economic infrastructures. Despite these old problems in newer economic models and technologies, Davies expresses the need to treat science fiction as a potential risk model, as these narratives are a form of imagined reality.

In the first section of the collection, the task is to understand how science fictions even relate to the field of economics. This interrogation is echoed earlier by Fisher and Davies, as they suggest the words 'fiction', 'utopias' and 'imaginaries' are not empirically-based but instead capture experiences, designs and visions. But, as Ha-Joon Chang writes, economists view their own fictive constructs as science and consider technoscience as the main force to solve any economic problems (31-32). Chang makes two points: that sci-fi can serve as economic critique; and that readers should ask why visions of utopia are imagined in the first place. These fictive narratives should not be merely lauded for their fantastical imagery. Furthermore, he notes that science fiction narratives do indeed depict a world that may be better equipped with technology, but citizens and society may not necessarily be happier or thriving. And yet the persisting need to [innovate based on science fiction](#) has been a common headline in reputable media outlets. [The implausible may be plausible after all](#).

Chang's chapter is a thoughtful critique that should bring attention to what science fiction means in economic reimaginings of the complex relations between individuals, technologies and institutions. Technology should not be spoken of as an artefact with human qualities as it obfuscates responsibility, a topic explored by Laura Horn in the next chapter. Dystopias are frequently reduced to evil corporations and their crimes, and she argues that the lack of questioning and distinguishing of the power that permeates these institutions prevent alternative visions of collective action or worker-directed initiatives (42).

There seem to be two recurring statements throughout the book: firstly, that science fiction narratives are not merely desirable futures but a commentary on the present; and, secondly, that the economy under neoliberal capitalism is a manufactured product that has been viewed as autonomous and natural (205). In the twelfth chapter of the third section, Bastien Kerspern offers the concept of design fiction, a method that relies on 'fictitious artefacts' (257) to attend equally to culture, the social and the economy. Simply put, Kerspern wants to reorient existing problem-solving approaches towards human actors and their values. If the approach to understanding public problems before innovation seems novel, one must remember that the Silicon Valley model of solving problems is actually a competitive race to innovate and to experiment (258).

The essays in *Economic Science Fictions* continue to portray speculative fiction in ways that can be both confusing and pragmatic. The authors have attempted to critically approach sci-fi and address collective calls for change, but they do not always employ a consistent form of critique or settle on a particular conclusion. If the inclusion of literary essays in this volume means anything to scholars, it is to remind them that while sci-fi authors may not necessarily be experts, their stories reveal the increasing anxieties of the impact of technological change on vulnerable societies. In the concluding chapter by Jo Lindsay Walton, he offers a fictional vignette in which the protagonist, Laing, is fired from her journalism job because of automation. Walton then reflects on how a short story illustrates the tension between the democratic commons and the undemocratic algocracy. If algorithms and data have already seeped into our lives and have altered our understanding of governance, what does sci-fi scholarship mean to an existing society at risk?

Looking beyond this volume, one can connect its core dilemma, the role of sci-fi, to critiques posed in science and technology studies (STS). If sci-fi can indeed inform policy, it is not by uncritically mimicking narratives from literary fictions or video games, but by recognising that these concerns are actually rooted in ongoing injustices and inequalities. The implausible but alluring futures of innovation should not make scholars or policy-makers neglect the social context of socio-economic problems. As STS scholar [Sheila Jasanoff wrote for Slate](#), the fetishisation of sci-fi narratives as academic knowledge should not make us lose sight of who and what frames public policy and whose expertise and experiences are included. Sci-fi can certainly be a starting point to better welcome public participation in democratic policy-making, but it should not be used as a testimony for innovation.



Notes:

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