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An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Power, Conflict, and Climate in *American War* and *The Ministry for the Future*

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Abstract

This essay discusses the political dimensions of Omar El Akkad's *American War* and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, exploring their distinct yet interconnected critiques of governance, authoritarianism, and global cooperation in times of existential crisis. Drawing upon diverse political theories, such as Hobbesian social contracts, Arendtian distinctions between power and violence, and Marxist critiques of systemic inequality, the analysis situates these novels within the broader context of speculative fiction's role in reimagining political systems. By examining themes of climate change, radicalization, systemic reform, and international diplomacy, this study illuminates the enduring relevance of speculative narratives as blueprints for understanding and addressing contemporary global challenges. These narratives not only critique existing power structures, but also offer innovative perspectives on the possibilities of systemic reform. Ultimately, the essay positions speculative fiction as a vital tool for envisioning alternative trajectories for a just, inclusive, and sustainable future, emphasizing its transformative potential in shaping political and ecological discourse.

Keywords: Speculative Literature, Climate Change, International Cooperation, Radicalization, State Violence

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Introduction

Speculative fiction, with its ability to extrapolate from present realities into imagined futures, serves as a critical medium for interrogating and reimagining political structures. As a genre that encompasses dystopian, utopian, and climate fiction, speculative narratives offer a unique means of exploring governance, systemic transformation, and power dynamics in response to crisis. Unlike mainstream literary forms, which often focus on immediate socio-political concerns, speculative fiction employs cognitive estrangement to critique existing power structures and envision alternative futures. By projecting contemporary issues onto speculative canvases, these narratives offer a unique lens through which to analyze power dynamics, explore potential avenues of resistance, and expose systemic failures in the face of global crises. Omar El Akkad's *American War* (2017) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) provide fertile grounds for such an analysis, offering distinct yet complementary explorations of governance, authoritarianism, the fragility of democratic institutions, and the complex interplay between human actions and large-scale systemic change. These novels resonate with a host of pressing real-world political challenges, including the escalating climate crisis, intensifying political polarization, persistent economic inequality, and the rise of nationalist and populist movements. By engaging with diverse political philosophies and deploying distinct narrative strategies, these works invite readers to critically reconsider the ethical and practical implications of existing power structures in contemporary societies and to imagine alternative trajectories for the future.

Although numerous studies have examined speculative fiction's engagement with political and environmental themes, this research distinguishes itself by offering a comparative analysis of *American War* and *The Ministry for the Future* within the framework of political theory. Prior analyses of *American War* have largely focused on its critique of U.S. imperialism, radicalization, and state violence (Milner 2019), while discussions of *The Ministry for the Future* have emphasized its engagement with climate policy and geoengineering (Canavan & Robinson 2014). However, little scholarship has directly compared these novels in terms of their approaches to governance, power, and systemic transformation. This essay undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the novels, framing its interpretation within the context of

key political theories. These include Thomas Hobbes's (1651) concept of the social contract, which explores the relationship between individual liberty and state power, and provides a framework for understanding the breakdown of social order in times of crisis. Hannah Arendt's (1951) significant concept of power, which distinguishes between power as the ability to act in concert and violence as the instrumental use of force, provides a valuable lens for analyzing the dynamics of resistance and authoritarian control in both novels. Moreover, Marxist critiques of systemic inequality, as articulated by Karl Marx (1867) and later theorists, are also central to this analysis, illuminating the ways in which economic disparities exacerbate social and political tensions and contribute to ecological degradation. These theoretical frameworks facilitate a more significant understanding of how speculative fiction can effectively critique and reimagine fundamental aspects of governance, resistance strategies, and the struggle for survival in the face of existential threats. Building on these theoretical foundations, this essay explores how the novels offer contrasting yet complementary perspectives on governance, resistance, and systemic transformation in response to crisis. While *American War* illustrates the catastrophic consequences of failed governance, environmental collapse, and authoritarian rule, *The Ministry for the Future* envisions alternative pathways toward global cooperation and policy-driven reform. These novels serve as cautionary and aspirational narratives, respectively, highlighting the stakes involved in contemporary political decision-making and the potential consequences of both action and inaction. By examining the intersection of climate change, conflict, and power structures in these texts, this study emphasizes speculative fiction's vital role in shaping political consciousness. The narratives of El Akkad and Robinson go beyond mere storytelling; they function as urgent calls for reflection on the pressing challenges of the 21st century.

Studies specifically focusing on *American War* have highlighted its powerful engagement with themes of radicalization, systemic failure, and the enduring legacies of conflict. Julian Milner (2019) situates *American War* within the broader context of post-9/11 literature, examining its complex portrayal of terrorism, state violence, and the cyclical nature of conflict. El Akkad's work also echoes Edward Said's (1978) influential concept of Orientalism, as it effectively deconstructs the simplistic and often harmful binaries of "self" and "other" that underpin global conflict and

perpetuate cycles of violence. By portraying the devastating consequences of war on both sides of the conflict, El Akkad challenges readers to confront the complexities of human conflict and to recognize the shared humanity of all those affected by violence.

A robust and ever-growing body of scholarship highlights the significant role of speculative fiction as a crucial tool for exploring complex political and social dynamics. Ruth Levitas (2013), in her work on utopian literature, emphasizes the transformative potential of speculative narratives to envision alternative futures, offering blueprints for social and political change and inspiring hope for a better world. Conversely, Tom Moylan (2000) situates speculative fiction, particularly dystopian narratives, within a broader tradition of critical dystopias that interrogate present conditions by projecting them into bleak and cautionary futures. These dystopian visions serve as warnings, highlighting the potential consequences of current social, political, and environmental trends. Mark Fisher (2009), in his analysis of "capitalist realism," identifies the crucial role of speculative fiction in critiquing the pervasive sense that capitalism is the only viable political and economic system. By creating alternative worlds, speculative fiction challenges hegemonic ideologies and opens up possibilities for imagining different ways of organizing society. In the specific context of climate fiction, Rob Nixon (2011) introduces the compelling concept of "slow violence" to describe the often-insidious and temporally dispersed nature of ecological crises. This concept is particularly relevant to Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, which grapples with the long-term and often invisible consequences of climate change. Similarly, Gerry Canavan and Kim Stanley Robinson (2014), in their edited collection, explore the crucial intersections of speculative fiction and environmental justice, highlighting the genre's unique capacity to integrate complex ecological and political discourses, giving voice to marginalized communities and exploring the uneven distribution of environmental risks and benefits.

The capacity of speculative fiction to critique and reimagine political systems has been extensively documented and analyzed in academic literature. Darko Suvin (1979) identifies "cognitive estrangement" as a defining characteristic of the genre, arguing that by creating worlds that are both familiar and strange, speculative fiction enables readers to perceive their own world from a fresh and critical perspective. This concept is further elaborated by Fredric Jameson (2005), who

argues that speculative fiction's estranged settings and alternative realities serve to expose the often-hidden ideological underpinnings of contemporary social, political, and economic systems. Ruth Baccolini and Tom Moylan (2003), in their work on utopian and dystopian studies, emphasize the critical and transformative potential of dystopian narratives, situating them within a broader tradition of resistance literature that challenges dominant power structures and imagines possibilities for social and political transformation. In the context of environmental politics and the growing subgenre of climate fiction, Amitav Ghosh (2016) offers a compelling critique of the limitations of mainstream literary forms in adequately addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges of the climate crisis. He argues that speculative fiction, with its capacity to imagine future scenarios and explore the long-term consequences of human actions, is uniquely positioned to foreground the ecological and temporal complexities of climate change. Ursula K. Heise (2016) builds upon this argument by exploring the various narrative strategies employed in climate fiction to render the often-invisible phenomenon of "slow violence" visible and tangible to readers, allowing them to grasp the scale and urgency of the ecological crisis. These insights are particularly relevant to Robinson's *The Ministry for the Future*, which masterfully integrates speculative and scientific elements to propose concrete and often controversial systemic solutions to the climate crisis, including geoengineering, carbon pricing, and the establishment of international regulatory bodies.

Authoritarianism, Conflict, and the Erosion of the Social Contract in *American War*

Omar El Akkad is an Egyptian-Canadian author and journalist known for his poignant exploration of themes such as war, displacement, and environmental degradation. His debut novel, *American War* (2017), is a dystopian narrative set in the late 21st century, depicting a second American Civil War triggered by environmental and political crises. *American War* is set in a fractured United States, where rising sea levels and a ban on fossil fuels have plunged the nation into a second civil war. The story centers on Sarat Chestnut, who grows up in a refugee camp after her family is displaced by the war. As she witnesses the brutality and loss around her, Sarat is drawn into a path of vengeance and violence, ultimately becoming a key figure in the

conflict. *American War* (2017) offers a chillingly realistic depiction of a near-future United States fractured and consumed by a second civil war, fought not over slavery, but over the fundamental issue of fossil fuels and the government's ban on their use. This dystopian landscape serves as a powerful critique of authoritarian governance, exposing the insidious ways in which state power can be abused in the name of security and order.

At the heart of this narrative lies a profound exploration of the erosion of civil liberties, the normalization of surveillance, the establishment of brutal internment camps, and the ruthless suppression of dissent. These extreme measures, ostensibly implemented to quell rebellion and restore stability, ultimately exacerbate social divisions, fuel cycles of violence, and contribute to the radicalization of individuals and communities. This setting directly engages with Thomas Hobbes's (1651) influential concept of the social contract, as articulated in *Leviathan*. Hobbes argued that the state's authority is justified by its capacity to prevent a "war of all against all," a chaotic state of nature where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 1651: 88-89). Individuals, according to Hobbes, relinquish certain freedoms in exchange for the security and order provided by a sovereign power. However, in *American War*, the state's actions fundamentally breach this social contract. Rather than preventing chaos, the state becomes a primary source of violence and instability, betraying the trust of its citizens and creating the very conditions it was meant to prevent. The novel thus presents a stark counterpoint to Hobbes's theory, demonstrating how the unchecked exercise of state power can lead to tyranny and the complete breakdown of social order.

El Akkad's exploration of authoritarianism in *American War* extends beyond the immediate context of the United States, offering a broader and more unsettling commentary on contemporary global political trends. The novel's depiction of a society deeply divided by ideology, consumed by its inability to reconcile conflicting interests, and vulnerable to manipulation by powerful factions stresses the rise of nationalist and populist movements witnessed across the globe in recent years. As the War Office Director testifies, "We do not act as monsters, Madam Chairwoman, even though we are often pitted against them", a justification that echoes real-world authoritarian rhetoric (El Akkad 2017: 249). The erosion of democratic norms, the

spread of misinformation and propaganda, the demonization of opposing viewpoints, and the increasing use of divisive rhetoric are all reflected in the novel's portrayal of a nation tearing itself apart. The recruitment of soldiers through deceptive means corresponds to the novel's critique of propaganda: "What I found worked best was a lie slipped in with the truth... But along with those things, I'd tell them about the slaughter at Pleasant Ridge... After a while, even I couldn't remember if there had been a slaughter at Pleasant Ridge" (289). Furthermore, the novel's focus on the environmental context of the war, fought over the control of fossil fuels in a world grappling with the consequences of climate change, adds another layer of complexity to its critique of governance.

The government's initial ban on fossil fuels, while intended to address the climate crisis, ultimately becomes a catalyst for conflict, highlighting the difficult choices and potential unintended consequences of environmental policies in a deeply polarized society. This allegorical dimension of *American War* positions it not merely as a critique of specific policies or political figures, but also as a powerful indictment of the structural vulnerabilities inherent in modern governance systems. The novel suggests that even in ostensibly democratic societies, the concentration of power, the manipulation of public opinion, and the failure to address underlying social and economic inequalities can pave the way for authoritarianism and societal collapse. The state's use of advanced technology for surveillance, the dehumanizing conditions within the internment camps, and the brutal tactics employed against civilian populations all serve as stark warnings about the potential for abuse of power in the modern world:

> Sometimes the women complained about the blinding heat or about the size of their cages or the smell of their unwashed jumpsuits. When any woman did this too frequently or too loudly, a small team of armed guards would rush the cage and drag the captive to the Non-Compliance Area. A day later a woman so taken would return to her cage, and would not complain anymore. (El Akkad 2017: 289)

Through its dystopian vision of a fractured America, El Akkad's novel serves as both a warning and a reflection of the past, showing how cycles of oppression, propaganda, and environmental devastation can reinforce each other in the march

toward authoritarianism.

Furthermore, the novel's exploration of the long-term consequences of conflict, including the displacement of populations, the trauma inflicted on individuals and communities, and the intergenerational transmission of violence, adds a crucial dimension to its critique of authoritarianism. The character of Sarat, who is displaced from her home and subjected to horrific experiences in refugee camps, embodies the devastating human cost of war and the lasting impact of trauma. As Sarat witnesses the destruction of Camp Patience, she clings to the remnants of her past: "She reached her own tent... But there was nobody inside" (El Akkad 2017: 188). Her journey from a victim of violence to a perpetrator further reinforces the cyclical nature of conflict. The moment of her transformation is captured when she declares, "I want to kill them" (188), as she is manipulated into acts of vengeance. This manipulation aligns with the ways in which authoritarian regimes exploit individuals for their own purposes, as seen in how survivors are shaped by their circumstances: "The soldiers covered the bodies and what was left of them with white cloth... The journalists took pictures of the dead and asked questions of the survivors, who looked straight through them with flint-lacquered eyes" (187) . This focus on the human cost of conflict signifies the psychological and social effects of political violence and displacement. By focusing on the individual experiences of those caught up in the conflict, El Akkad humanizes the consequences of political decisions and challenges readers to confront the ethical implications of state power. This resounds Arendt's (1951) work on totalitarianism, which emphasizes the importance of understanding the mechanisms through which individuals are transformed into instruments of state power. By situating *American War* within the context of contemporary political theory and scholarship on conflict, displacement, and authoritarianism, we can gain a deeper understanding of its powerful critique of modern governance systems and its urgent warning about the potential for societal collapse in the face of political polarization, environmental crisis, and the abuse of state power. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of safeguarding democratic institutions, protecting civil liberties, and addressing the root causes of social and economic inequalities.

The Human Cost of Authoritarianism

At the center of *American War* lies the deeply compelling and ultimately tragic figure of Sarat Chestnut, whose transformation from an innocent child to a hardened radical serves as a powerful microcosm of the devastating human cost exacted by authoritarian regimes. Sarat's journey is not simply a personal tragedy; it is a direct consequence of systemic failures, exposing the state's profound inability to address underlying social and economic grievances and its reliance on coercion, surveillance, and repression as primary instruments of control. Her radicalization, far from being an isolated incident, becomes a symptom of a deeply flawed system. As Sarat herself reflects, "If you knew for a fact we were wrong, would it be enough to turn you against your people?" (El Akkad 2017: 187), showing how deeply ingrained the cycle of violence has become in her psyche. It powerfully reflects Hannah Arendt's (1951) assertion in The Origins of Totalitarianism that violence is often a response to powerlessness, a desperate and often self-destructive last resort for those who have been systematically excluded from political agency and denied any meaningful participation in the decisions that affect their lives. Sarat's initial experiences of loss, displacement, and the constant threat of violence at the hands of the state create a sense of profound alienation and resentment, which are then exploited and channeled by radical groups. As one recruiter teaches her, radicalization is a slow but deliberate process: "Resistance and stress… All it takes is resistance and stress" (El Akkad 2017: 159), demonstrating how prolonged exposure to violence shapes individuals into instruments of revenge. Through Sarat's harrowing experiences, El Akkad offers a scathing critique of the dehumanizing effects of authoritarianism, meticulously illustrating how such regimes perpetuate cycles of violence and alienation, eroding social trust and creating a climate of fear and suspicion. The state's actions, rather than fostering stability and security, create the very conditions that breed extremism and fuel further conflict.

The novel's portrayal of radicalization also engages with Edward Said's (1978) influential concept of Orientalism, as articulated in his seminal work of the same name. While Said's focus was primarily on the Western representation of the "Orient," his analysis of the construction of "otherness" and the creation of simplistic binaries between "us" and "them" is highly relevant to *American War*. El Akkad masterfully

deconstructs these binaries by humanizing Sarat and presenting her motivations in intricate detail. Rather than portraying her as a stereotypical "terrorist" or a faceless enemy of the state, the novel portrays her complex inner world, exploring her fears, her hopes, her loyalties, and the traumatic experiences that shape her worldview. The full weight of Sarat's suffering is revealed in the brutal methods used to break her spirit in the prison camps: "Sarat was drowning. The water moved, endless. She entered and exited death, her body no longer hers… It was in this way her captors finally broke her" (El Akkad 2017: 285). This harrowing moment encapsulates the dehumanizing effects of authoritarian violence. This nuanced portrayal challenges readers to confront the complexities of radicalization and to question the simplistic narratives that often justify state violence and dehumanize those who oppose it. By refusing to reduce Sarat to a caricature, El Akkad forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truth that even those who engage in acts of violence are ultimately human beings with their own stories, motivations, and vulnerabilities. This approach aligns with postcolonial theory's emphasis on the importance of understanding the historical, social, and political contexts that shape individual and collective identities, particularly in situations of conflict and oppression (Spivak 1988).

American War powerfully draws attention to the profound failures of governance in times of crisis, illustrating how authoritarian measures, far from resolving underlying tensions, can actually exacerbate existing divisions and create new ones. The state's reliance on pervasive surveillance, widespread repression, and the suppression of dissent not only alienates its citizens and erodes trust in government institutions but also fuels the very resistance it seeks to suppress. This counterproductive dynamic is starkly exemplified by the novel's depiction of internment camps, which, rather than serving as instruments of control and pacification, become breeding grounds for radicalization, incubators for resentment, and training grounds for future insurgents. As described in the novel, "The women were kept in cages… the taller detainees could not stand without crouching" (El Akkad 2017: 272), illustrating the dehumanizing conditions that cultivate further resistance. This portrayal signifies studies on the effects of imprisonment and detention on radicalization (Silke 2018). These studies suggest that harsh prison conditions, coupled with a sense of injustice and mistreatment, can contribute to the radicalization of inmates, particularly in

contexts of political conflict.

El Akkad's critique extends beyond the specific context of the fictional United States, drawing unsettling parallels between the novel's dystopian vision and real-world regimes that prioritize security over liberty, often at the expense of human rights and democratic principles. The massacre at Fort Jackson, for instance, is followed by an explosion of violence, with Southern leaders declaring: "Every Southern patriot, upon hearing the news of the massacre at Fort Jackson, will know now as a fact that the federal government in Columbus considers Southern lives to be less than worthless" (2017: 57). This reaction mirrors real-world cycles of repression and retaliation in authoritarian states. The novel's depiction of ideological divisions, state-sanctioned violence, and the erosion of civil liberties reflects the dynamics of numerous modern conflicts, such as those in Syria, Yemen, and other regions where authoritarian regimes and external interventions have created protracted humanitarian crises (Lefebvre 2012). By situating its critique within a speculative framework, *American War* invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of these global trends and to consider alternative approaches to governance, conflict resolution, and the pursuit of peace and justice. The novel serves as a cautionary tale, warning against the dangers of unchecked state power and emphasizing the crucial need for governance systems that prioritize inclusivity, accountability, and the protection of fundamental human rights.

The environmental collapse depicted in *American War*, driven by rising sea levels and the struggle for dwindling resources, provides a crucial and often overlooked backdrop for its exploration of authoritarianism. The novel powerfully links ecological degradation to political instability, illustrating how resource scarcity, environmental disasters, and the long-term consequences of climate change can exacerbate existing social and economic tensions and create fertile ground for the rise of authoritarian regimes. The destruction of Florida, where "only the very crest of the hill remained above water, the last vestige of the peninsular state" (El Akkad 2017: 272), points out the severity of climate-induced displacement. This connection directly signifies Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of "slow violence," which describes the often-invisible and temporally dispersed violence inflicted by environmental degradation. In *American War*, the slow violence of rising sea levels, which gradually erodes coastlines and

displaces populations, culminates in the rapid and devastating violence of civil war. This connection between environmental degradation and political conflict highlights the urgent need to address the climate crisis not only as an ecological issue but also as a fundamental threat to social stability and human security. The novel suggests that failing to address climate change will not only lead to ecological devastation but will also create the conditions for increased conflict, displacement, and the erosion of democratic values. By connecting these seemingly disparate issues, El Akkad offers a powerful and timely warning about the interconnectedness of environmental, social, and political challenges in the 21st century.

The Ethics of Resistance

Sarat's descent into resistance against the state's increasingly authoritarian measures raises complex and ethically fraught questions about the limits of dissent and the moral justifications for violence in the face of oppression. While her actions are undeniably fueled by a deeply felt desire for justice, a yearning for the restoration of her lost home and community, and a burning anger at the injustices she and her people have suffered, they also tragically contribute to the perpetuation of cycles of violence, highlighting the profound moral ambiguities inherent in resistance movements, particularly those that resort to armed struggle. This central tension—between the understandable impulse to resist oppression and the devastating consequences of retaliatory violence—lies at the heart of the novel's nuanced and multifaceted critique of authoritarianism.

El Akkad does not offer easy answers or simplistic moral judgments; rather, he forces readers to confront the difficult choices faced by individuals living under oppressive regimes and to grapple with the complex ethical dilemmas that arise in situations of extreme conflict. The massacre at Fort Jackson encapsulates this dilemma, as the government's violent crackdown turns a protest into a justification for further rebellion (2017: 56-57). This sentiment fuels Sarat's own radicalization, as she internalizes the belief that violent resistance is the only available recourse. This tension accentuates the urgent need for resistance strategies that strive to balance the pursuit of justice with the imperative to break the seemingly endless cycle of violence and retribution. Sarat's trajectory serves as a cautionary tale, demonstrating

how even well-intentioned acts of resistance can have unintended and devastating consequences, further exacerbating social divisions and perpetuating the very systems of oppression they seek to dismantle. The manipulation of young recruits further illustrates this cycle: "What I found worked best was a lie slipped in with the truth... After a while, even I couldn't remember if there had been a slaughter at Pleasant Ridge" (289), showing how propaganda is used to create unwavering commitment to violent causes. El Akkad's portrayal of Sarat's radicalization also engages with broader theoretical discussions about the nature of political violence and the conditions that lead individuals to embrace extremism. Her experiences of displacement, loss, and state-sanctioned violence create a sense of profound alienation and resentment, making her susceptible to recruitment by radical groups. This aligns with research on the social and psychological factors that contribute to radicalization (Kruglanski et al. 2014). Such studies suggest that individuals who experience a sense of grievance, injustice, and a lack of control over their lives are more likely to be drawn to extremist ideologies that offer a sense of belonging, purpose, and empowerment. The novel also explores the role of propaganda and manipulation in shaping Sarat's worldview, illustrating how authoritarian regimes can exploit fear, anger, and social divisions to mobilize support for their policies and demonize their opponents. This manipulation extends beyond combatants to the general public, as seen in the way narratives about the war are controlled: "Let's be clear: this was a massacre of South Carolinians, a massacre of Southerners, and a massacre of all who dare raise their voice in protest" (El Akkad 2017: 56) . This echoes studies on the role of media and communication in shaping public opinion and influencing political behavior (Herman & Chomsky 1988).

Furthermore, *American War*'s exploration of Sarat's trajectory connects with postcolonial and decolonial thought, particularly concerning the lasting impacts of colonialism and neocolonialism on marginalized communities. The systematic oppression and displacement of the southern population in the novel can be read as a contemporary allegory for historical processes of colonization, where dominant powers exploit and marginalize indigenous populations for their own gain. This resonates with the work of Frantz Fanon (1963), who explored the psychological and social effects of colonialism on colonized peoples, arguing that colonialism

creates a sense of alienation, inferiority, and a desire for liberation. El Akkad uses the speculative setting of a future American civil war to illuminate these enduring legacies of historical injustice and to highlight the ongoing struggles of marginalized communities for self-determination and social justice.

By combining a detailed and nuanced analysis of state power, individual agency, and systemic failure, this section situates *American War* as a profound and timely critique of authoritarianism in both its fictional and real-world manifestations. The novel's exploration of Sarat's journey, from innocent child to radicalized fighter, serves as a powerful reminder of the human cost of oppression and the urgent need for alternative approaches to governance that prioritize justice, inclusivity, and the protection of fundamental human rights. It illuminates the importance of understanding the complex dynamics of conflict and the need to address the root causes of social and political unrest, rather than simply relying on coercive measures that often exacerbate existing tensions and perpetuate cycles of violence. The novel's speculative framework allows El Akkad to explore these complex issues with a level of depth and nuance that would be difficult to achieve in a more conventional realist narrative. By projecting contemporary trends into a plausible future scenario, *American War* compels readers to confront the potential consequences of current political and social trajectories and to consider the urgent need for change.

Climate Crisis and International Politics in *The Ministry for the Future*

Kim Stanley Robinson is a renowned American science fiction writer celebrated for his works on ecological and sociopolitical themes. *The Ministry for the Future* (2020) is a speculative novel that imagines a near-future world grappling with the catastrophic effects of climate change. *The Ministry for the Future* envisions a world on the brink of collapse due to climate change. The novel begins with a deadly heatwave in India, which catalyzes global action. *The Ministry for the Future*, an organization headquartered in Zurich, works to protect future generations by implementing radical policies and technologies. The narrative weaves together multiple perspectives, including those of scientists, activists, and policymakers, to present a comprehensive vision of how humanity might address the climate crisis. Robinson's novel is both a warning and a hopeful blueprint for a sustainable future. *The Ministry for the Future*

(2020) presents a complex and multifaceted vision of an international organization, the eponymous Ministry, tasked with the daunting challenge of mitigating the catastrophic effects of climate change and securing a habitable future for humanity.

The novel's depiction of global governance, with its emphasis on international cooperation, diplomacy, and the establishment of new institutions, resonates with Immanuel Kant's (1795) influential idea of a "perpetual peace" achievable through the creation of a federation of states committed to peaceful resolution of conflicts. Kant envisioned a world order based on international law and cooperation, where reason and dialogue would prevail over war and violence. However, *The Ministry for the Future* realistically portrays the immense complexities and inherent challenges of achieving consensus and coordinated action among sovereign nation-states with diverse interests, priorities, and levels of development. As one character observes, "We are all in a single global village now. We share the same air and water… so this disaster has happened to all of us", signifying the novel's insistence on the necessity of collective action in confronting planetary crises (Robinson 2020: 34). The novel vividly illustrates the limitations of purely idealist approaches in the face of deeply entrenched political and economic interests, highlighting the persistent obstacles to effective global cooperation on climate change (Keohane & Nye 2012).

The Ministry's struggles to navigate international politics, overcome bureaucratic inertia, and address the competing demands of different nations emphasize the difficulties of translating abstract ideals of global cooperation into concrete action. This is evident in the heated discussions following the Indian heatwave disaster, where the Indian delegation angrily declares, "We are breaking the Agreement… We do not need your permission!" (Robinson 2020: 29), exposing the frustrations of countries most affected by climate change when international agreements fail to deliver tangible results. This resonates with recent scholarship on global environmental governance, which emphasizes the importance of understanding power dynamics, institutional design, and the role of non-state actors in shaping international environmental agreements (Biermann et al. 2017). The novel's strong emphasis on reparative justice, ecological restoration, and systemic economic reforms aligns with Marxist critiques of capitalism, which emphasize the inherent contradictions between the pursuit of profit and the long-term sustainability of the

planet (Foster 2009). As one character cynically observes, It is "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Robinson 2020: 35), encapsulating the structural challenges of achieving meaningful economic transformation in the face of entrenched interests. By proposing radical solutions such as carbon coin systems, quantitative easing for the environment, and various forms of wealth redistribution, Robinson directly addresses the crucial intersections of economic inequality and environmental degradation. These proposals challenge dominant neoliberal paradigms that prioritize short-term profit maximization, deregulation, and free-market principles over ecological integrity and social justice. The novel explores how economic mechanisms can be redesigned to incentivize sustainable practices, internalize environmental costs, and promote a more equitable distribution of resources. This focus on economic reform highlights ecological economics and degrowth, advocating alternative economic models that prioritize ecological well-being and social equity over continuous economic growth (Jackson 2017; Kallis 2018). The concept of "ecological debt," which refers to the historical accumulation of environmental damage by wealthy nations, is also implicitly addressed in the novel's focus on reparative justice and the need for wealthy countries to take responsibility for their disproportionate contribution to the climate crisis (Martinez-Alier 2002). As one character laments, "It was Europe and America and China who caused this heat wave, not us… But no one else is fulfilling commitments" (Robinson 2020: 29), emphasizing the disproportionate burden borne by developing nations.

While *The Ministry for the Future* strongly advocates for collective action at the international level, it also acknowledges the potential role of more radical and even coercive measures in achieving rapid and transformative systemic change. The novel's depiction of eco-terrorism, carried out by fringe groups driven to desperation by the slow pace of political action, raises complex and ethically challenging questions about the balance between moral imperatives and pragmatic strategies. The use of violence, even when motivated by seemingly justifiable environmental concerns, inevitably raises profound ethical dilemmas. This engages with Machiavellian debates, as articulated in *The Prince* (1532), on the use of force for the "greater good," questioning whether the ends can ever justify the means, particularly when those means involve violence and the violation of human rights. The novel does not endorse

eco-terrorism but rather presents it as a symptom of systemic failure and a reflection of the intense frustration and desperation felt by many in the face of climate inaction. This is evident in the reflections of a character involved in clandestine resistance: "Has anyone been terrorized? You mean scared away from burning carbon? … I think it might be good if that had happened, don't you?" (Robinson 2020: 119). The conversation explores the moral ambiguity of using intimidation to force systemic change, challenging conventional definitions of terrorism. As another character cynically observes, "What really scares people is financial" (120) , highlighting the novel's argument that economic pressures may be more effective than violence in shifting people's behavior. This nuanced portrayal avoids simplistic moralizing and instead prompts readers to consider the complex ethical landscape of environmental activism in the context of a planetary emergency.

Recent scholarship on radical environmentalism have also explored the motivations, tactics, and ethical considerations surrounding various forms of environmental activism, including more radical approaches (Best & Nocella 2006). The novel's exploration of these issues also resonates with contemporary discussions about the role of civil disobedience and nonviolent resistance in achieving social and political change (Sharp 1973). The text highlights the tension between different strategies of resistance: "What was the damage before? And did doing some of these things lessen the damage overall? This is what is never clear" (Robinson 2020: 119) , reflecting the unresolved ethical complexities of environmental activism. Furthermore, *The Ministry for the Future* engages with contemporary discussions on the role of science and technology in addressing climate change. While the novel acknowledges the importance of technological innovation, it also emphasizes the need for social, political, and economic transformations. The novel's exploration of geoengineering, for instance, highlights the potential benefits and risks associated with such technologies, emphasizing the need for careful consideration and international oversight. This is vividly illustrated in India's controversial decision to engage in solar radiation management despite international objections (Robinson 2020: 29) . The urgency of climate action forces desperate measures, exposing the fragility of international treaties and the difficult trade-offs involved in large-scale environmental intervention. Considering the governance of geoengineering, the novel stresses the

importance of ethical frameworks, public engagement, and international cooperation in the development and deployment of these technologies (Horton et al. 2016).

The novel also emphasizes the importance of local and community-based initiatives in building resilience to climate change, highlighting the role of grassroots movements and local knowledge in creating sustainable and equitable solutions. This emphasis on local action complements the novel's focus on international governance, suggesting that effective climate action requires a multi-scalar approach that integrates global, national, and local efforts. This is reflected in discussions on regenerative agriculture: "Sikkim model now applied to ag all over India… all organic. No pesticides at all" (Robinson 2020: 142) , demonstrating how bottom-up initiatives can drive large-scale environmental solutions. By combining a detailed exploration of international governance, economic reform, and the ethical complexities of environmental activism, *The Ministry for the Future* offers a rich and thought-provoking contribution to the ongoing debate about how to address the climate crisis. The novel's speculative framework allows Robinson to explore a range of potential future scenarios, offering both cautionary tales and glimpses of hope for a more sustainable and just future.

Comparative Political Themes: Resistance and Reform

Both *American War* and *The Ministry for the Future*, while employing distinct narrative approaches and focusing on different scales of political action, offer powerful interrogations of the nature of power and governance in the face of existential threats. *American War*, through its harrowing depiction of state violence, pervasive surveillance, and the erosion of civil liberties, delivers a stark critique of authoritarianism and its devastating human consequences (Wood 2009: 131-161). The novel exposes the mechanisms through which state power can be abused to suppress dissent, control populations, and perpetuate cycles of violence. Conversely, *The Ministry for the Future* posits that international cooperation and innovative governance strategies can effectively address global crises like climate change. It portrays the intricate dynamics of international diplomacy and the necessity for consensus among nations to formulate lasting solutions (Eisenman 2003: 627; Thies 2006: 1263-1282). Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Hannah Arendt's (1951)

crucial distinction between power (as the capacity for collective action and concerted effort) and violence (as the instrumental use of coercive force) provides a valuable theoretical framework for analyzing these contrasting approaches to governance.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that power emerges from human interaction and communication, while violence is a tool employed when power fails or is absent. *American War* vividly illustrates this distinction by showing how the state's reliance on violence ultimately undermines its legitimacy and fuels further resistance, while *The Ministry for the Future* explores how the Ministry's attempts to build international consensus and implement systemic reforms represent an exercise of collective power, albeit one that is constantly threatened by the potential for violence and coercion. This distinction is further explored in recent scholarship on Arendt's work in the context of contemporary political challenges, such as climate change and global inequality (Benhabib 2003).

In *American War*, the narrative vividly illustrates individual acts of resistance against authoritarianism, emphasizing the moral complexities confronted by the characters amidst oppressive governance. Each character's choices, driven by ethical dilemmas, reveal how personal agency can forge pathways for resistance against overwhelming state control, thereby influencing broader socio-political dynamics (Zahariadis 2013: 648-662; Mussari et al. 2020: 138-156). Conversely, *The Ministry for the Future* stresses the necessity of collaborative efforts for systemic change to combat global issues like climate change. The narrative argues that individual actions, while significant, are insufficient on their own; rather, they must be part of a coordinated international strategy that tackles deep-rooted structural problems (Manion 2016: 362-394; Blanton et al. 2018: 941-970). This juxtaposition between the power of individual resistance and the requisite collective action for large-scale reform encapsulates the dual nature of change in response to multifaceted crises, revealing the intricate balance between personal agency and systemic reform (Gandhi & Lust 2009: 403-422; Bach 2014: 341-361). This interplay between individual agency and structural reform is a central theme in contemporary political and social theory (Giddens 1984), emphasizing the importance of understanding how individual actions are shaped by social structures and how, conversely, individual actions can contribute to the transformation of those structures. This tension between individual

agency and structural constraints is particularly relevant to discussions of climate change, where individual lifestyle choices are often seen as insufficient to address the scale of the problem, which requires systemic changes in energy production, consumption patterns, and economic systems.

The capacity of speculative fiction to critique existing systems and envision alternative futures is central to both works. *American War*, through its dystopian depiction of a divided and war-torn United States, serves as a stark warning against the dangers of unchecked authoritarianism, political polarization, and the failure to address underlying social and economic inequalities. It highlights the potential for even seemingly stable democracies to descend into violence and chaos when fundamental principles of justice and equality are eroded. *The Ministry for the Future*, while also acknowledging the potential for catastrophic outcomes, offers a more hopeful, albeit complex and challenging, blueprint for navigating the complex global challenges of the 21st century, particularly the climate crisis. The novel's exploration of innovative policy solutions, new economic mechanisms, and the potential for international cooperation provides a framework for imagining a more sustainable and just future. By presenting these contrasting visions, both novels draw attention to the transformative potential of literature in shaping political discourse, raising awareness about critical issues, and inspiring readers to engage in civic action and advocacy. This signifies recent scholarship on the role of literature and the arts in fostering social and political change (Keen 2007; Nussbaum 1997). These scholars argue that literature can play a crucial role in cultivating empathy, promoting critical thinking, and inspiring action on important social and political issues. Speculative fiction, in particular, with its capacity to imagine alternative worlds and explore the consequences of different choices, can be a powerful tool for raising awareness about complex global challenges and inspiring hope for a better future.

Conclusion

American War and *The Ministry for the Future* exemplify speculative fiction's capacity to interrogate the mechanisms of power, resistance, and systemic transformation in times of crisis. These novels offer distinct yet interconnected critiques of governance, illustrating both the dangers of authoritarianism and the

potential for international cooperation. *American War* serves as a cautionary tale of state overreach, illustrating the human and ecological costs of conflict, while *The Ministry for the Future* presents a speculative blueprint for systemic reform. By juxtaposing these narratives, this essay highlighted the role of speculative fiction as both a diagnostic and a prescriptive tool – one that critiques existing structures while imagining alternative political and economic orders.

The contrasts between these novels emphasize the broader theoretical and practical tensions in governance and global crisis management. *American War* explores the consequences of a fragmented and coercive state apparatus, where governance collapses into cycles of repression and insurgency. In contrast, *The Ministry for the Future* grapples with the difficulties of multilateral cooperation, economic restructuring, and the ethical dilemmas surrounding radical environmental action. These differing approaches reflect longstanding debates in political theory regarding the relationship between authority, legitimacy, and systemic change. Moreover, the novels highlight the inextricable link between climate change and political stability. *American War* presents environmental degradation as a catalyst for authoritarian governance and conflict, emphasizing how climate crises exacerbate existing social and economic divisions. *The Ministry for the Future*, by contrast, foregrounds the urgent need for proactive governance and policy-driven intervention. This contrast reflects contemporary debates in climate governance, particularly concerning the viability of market-based solutions versus state-led interventions. Robinson's novel advocates for fundamental shifts in economic structures to ensure long-term sustainability. In contrast, El Akkad's work warns the perils of inaction, illustrating the catastrophic consequences of failing to address climate change before it spirals into geopolitical collapse.

Ultimately, these novels reaffirm the transformative power of speculative fiction as a lens for understanding governance, resistance, and systemic reform in the Anthropocene. By engaging with political theory and real-world crises, *American War* and *The Ministry for the Future* push readers to critically examine the moral and structural dilemmas inherent in contemporary governance. Their speculative frameworks offer not only cautionary reflections but also constructive pathways for reimagining just and sustainable futures. As global challenges continue

to intensify, literature that bridges political critique with visionary speculation becomes increasingly vital in shaping academic discourse, policymaking, and public consciousness.

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