

WICI Book Club: “The Ministry for the Future” Discussion Questions

In “The Ministry for the Future,” author Kim Stanley Robinson paints a dystopian, yet ultimately hopeful picture of our planet’s next century. In this hybrid fiction/non-fiction book, Robinson hypothesizes how a combination of novel policies and major societal changes might allow humans, and the planet that houses us, to emerge positively from the climate crisis.

In advance of the planned WICI and Fields “Mathematics for Complex Climate Challenges” workshop, we invite readers to share in a discussion of Robinson’s proposed resolutions to the climate crises, viewed through a complex systems lens.

Proposed discussion questions:

1. Robinson describes a series of increasingly extreme climate events. How do these extreme events trigger climate action—or not?
2. The implementation of an international carbon currency is a central policy action that successfully initiates climate mitigation in Robinson’s narrative. What institutional barriers initially stall implementation of a global carbon currency? Once implemented, what unintended consequences are discovered? Through what incentive pathways does the global carbon currency ultimately succeed?
3. Geoengineering solutions enter Robinson’s narrative both as the actions of individual countries, and later as an internationally coordinated solution. What are the potential risks and benefits of individual-country geoengineering actions? What circumstances might make global coordination around geoengineering decisions more likely? How do the answers depend on the extent to which risks and benefits can be internalized, or are borne globally?
4. Policies that reduce income and wealth inequality play a central role in Robinson’s narrative. How and why might reductions in inequality be a necessary condition for climate change action? How likely do you think such a transition would be in today’s world? What factors might stand in the way? (Hint-think about the signature statistical distributions of complex systems.)
5. Robinson envisions violent actions against the world’s worst climate offenders, both individually and institutionally initiated. Is such violence an essential ingredient for ultimate climate success in his narrative? Can we envision climate solutions that do not involve individual or institutionalized violence?
6. **Extra credit question:** Altogether, the successes envisioned by Robinson are brought about incrementally, through combinations of new policies that shift incentives, new technologies, coercion, and cultural change. (Systems diagrams welcome!)
7. On page 504, Robinson writes:
...Will this itself create problems?
Of course.
Such as?
Such as the way that like-minded people working to solve the same problems will engage in a continuous civil way with each other over methods, destroying their chances of success.
Why does that happen, do you think?
The narcissism of small differences.
That’s an odd name.
It’s Freud’s name. Means more regard for yourself than for your allies or the problems you both face ...

As we strive for interdisciplinary collaboration that brings together topical climate change experts and applied mathematicians, how can we avoid “the narcissism of small differences”?