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Democratized Ownership: The Key to Economic Success into the Twenty-Fourth Century

The burgeoning of the global economy throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century has widely been attributed to the dominant economic theory of capitalism. This capitalist ideal allows the laws of supply and demand to dictate resource distribution and wealth creation. Growing alongside this development of a free market has been the political ideal of democracy, where the people of a nation provide the legitimate power of their government. At the turn of the twenty-first century, these two economic and political theories appeared to correlate and reinforce one another. However, there is a growing number who are beginning to question this relationship and among them is Kim Stanley Robinson.

The masterpiece Robinson weaves from Mondragon ownership, Aristotle, Socrates, and many other prominent entities, *2312*, explores the economic theory of cooperatives as an alternative to capitalism to promote democracy and sustain the human race. He establishes the superior qualities of the Mondragon model over the modern capitalist model by characterizing the Mondragon Accord's dominance over the solar system. In a similar fashion, the interplanetary aid spacers — people living in space — give to Earth only succeeds if it involves local agreement, control, and cooperation. Even the overarching plot originates its conflict from the capitalistic competition on Venus and resolves with Mars rejoining the Mondragon Accord.

As with any analysis, context is necessary to establish a common reference frame. The twenty-fourth century, in which *2312* is set, hosts human colonies in every corner of the solar system, accelerated by the previous era's boom in propulsion technology, longevity treatments, fusion, and terraforming techniques. Despite these utopian circumstances, unequal wealth distribution and power struggle still envelop the system. Among the rivaling powers is the Mondragon Accord, a "league of settlements" which assist each other and work together to manage their economies (Robinson 139). The Mondragon Accord is managed logistically by quantum computers and advanced AI automating information recording and providing real-time analysis. In that time period, most colonies are part of the Mondragon Accord, although Mars and Earth are among the few that still rely on capitalism and a mixed economy perspective. The characters of *2312* ride through the hectic period of the Balkanization characterized by intra- and interplanetary political struggles. This period is notable for the lack of unity across the system, resulting in what appeared to be anarchy from the late twenty-third century to the early twenty-fourth century. It is important to note that the major difference between a cooperative economy and capitalist economy is that the interest and well-being of the workers are what determine capital flow whereas traditionally, only the interest of the few who can afford to take ownership is considered (Bamburg).

Through his insightful backstory of the solar system, Robinson clearly conveys how the Mondragon system evolves and naturally becomes the mainstream economic system. In order to transition from the early research station model of colonization to a larger, self-sustaining economy, many space settlements adopt the Mondragon model of "nested co-ops organized for mutual support" (Robinson 138). The primary motivation to pursue this model of economics is

by the fact that every space settlement has “criticalities of their own,” so in an attempt to wean off Earth’s support the scattered colonies assist one another to become self-sufficient (216). These space colonies realize that early on, they cannot sustainably compete with the Earth in a market economy and must find an alternative model to use. Already, Robinson deploys his argument of sustainability by establishing it as the basis for the founding of the Mondragon Accord. As supercomputer and AI technology advance, this non-market economy becomes automated and more convenient to adopt, emanating an innovative and futuristic feeling to associate with this concept. In addition, the longer the Mondragon Accord persists, the more robust it becomes and generates a feedback loop garnering support. Undoubtedly, the space economy determines that this model is the most efficient and sustainable method to allocate resources, presenting itself as a testament to the benefits of such a system.

One aspect of the cooperative economic theory which allows it to be so beneficial, the “bottom-up” sentiment, reverberates with every action taken in the plot and no example demonstrates it better than the foreign aid which spacers give to the Terrans (Alperovitz). In an effort to improve conditions on Earth, spacers try to use their advanced technology and terraforming techniques to revert the aftermath of the climate crisis. Swan, a main character in the novel, embarks on a quest to refurbish the housing in African countries using self-replicating construction machines. Her plan is noble and carries good intentions, however, it soon becomes clear that these projects are not successful due to their top-down nature: all aspects of the project are handled by her team with no local input except that they need help. Earlier on, Warham — another main character — frowns upon the “aggressive” nature of the aid Swan gives to the needy, reminded by the Mondragon Accord’s emphasis on democratized participation (Robinson

430). The charity she gives feels more forced upon the inhabitants than offered altruistically. The machines she uses are controlled by her team, but once her self-replicating machine is hijacked the locals make it clear that they are not comfortable with other people coming in to do their work for them. As it turns out, the Mondragon value of member-first based efforts is more desirable and beneficial in these recovery efforts, a quality which Swan's plans lack. Without the support or input of the community, goals become easily misaligned. Conversely, Warham's plan to "rais[e] Florida from the drowned" experience much better support and results due to its bottom-up nature (434). As the oceans rise, Florida becomes inundated and desolated, but there is potential to raise the rock foundation of Florida and revitalize it using advanced space technologies. Where his plan differs from Swan's is the low probability of unintended detrimental impacts and the vast local support for the project. Warham summarizes the situation beautifully: "Local people working their land was a better image than selfreps dropping out of the sky" (436). The basis of his project rests on the locals' desires to act upon their deteriorating conditions; he only serves as a means for an end. Although the scope of his project is not as grand as Swan's, it generates more support because it is based on localized issues rather than a mass-produced solution trying to find problems to solve. The two foils of foreign aid on Earth highlight the reasoning behind Robinson's support for cooperative economics, conjuring anecdotes for the reader to grasp the concept of community-oriented goals and achievements.

Looming over the efforts of the spacers to aid Earth, the struggle between two factions — the Working Group and Shukra's group — for control over Venus's terraforming destiny eerily resembles capitalism in the selective ownership of accumulated wealth. The problematic nature of capitalism lies in the ownership over the work done to maintain the system and is reflected in

the working population of the two factions; the fact that each unit's members "went where they were told," "did what they were told," and "ate what they were given" parallels modern workers of large corporations (Robinson 232). Despite the workers contributing the bulk of the effort in the system, they do not own any of their work and must depend on the elites to pay them for their efforts. The elites assume that the workers will be satisfied by simply being able to live, however "if happiness is the product of a complete, free, and active life," then a worker whose purpose in life is simply to find a means to live is unhappy (Grobmeier). Historically, an unhappy populous results in restlessness and thus an unstable system, leading to regime shifts such as the Bolshevik Revolution. Because Venus is still in the process of being terraformed, its final sea level is still subject to change. Similar to how the stock market functions, the Working Group bets on a lower sea level than Shukra's group does, making each settlement and property built an investment or stake into what the future sea level will be. Rather than promoting what the people want, the conflict between the two groups escalated to the point where they resort to "scaring a civilian populace into making a certain political choice" (Robinson 594). Ultimately, the capitalistic competitive nature between the two factions is where the instability in the solar system stems from, warning the reader about the behavioral tendencies in such a system.

By the end of the novel, Robinson formally offers the Mondragon system to the audience as a solution to the societal errors which capitalism fails to solve. After the terrorist plots associated with the Working Group are foiled, Warham engages in political debate to promote a triangular trade with Mercury and Mars. This proposal could be mistaken with the capitalistic free market, however, the trade is constructed to "benefit both planets" and motivates each member to "provide [their] part of a triangular trade" (Robinson 613). The interests of the people

are the forefront considerations as these trades are meant to aid terraforming efforts: Titan sells its excess nitrogen to Mars so both can create a suitable atmosphere. Their cooperative effort produces benefits which extend beyond terraforming, helping them “band together in the face of Earth’s recidivist imperialism” and “heal ... old problems” (614). Because Earth still holds the majority of the human population, it retains vast political significance and its problems drag the entire system’s economy down. It would be functionally impossible for an individual space colony to tackle the issues on Earth, but collectively they can resist its turmoil and provide meaningful aid. In one of Robinson’s retrospective passages, a writer from a future after 2312 notes how the Mondragon Accord was able to “unify much of Earth” and help Mars reimplement its democratic system (630). By describing the situation from a retrospective view, Robinson instills certainty into his prediction that a cooperative economy will win out over a capitalistic economy. Notably, he emphasizes its ability to sustain a democratic society and end the Balkanization with unity rather than competition. Evidently, the adversarial environment on Venus is detrimental to the system whereas the new trade agreements and unity hold vast potential in restabilizing twenty-fourth-century humanity.

Robinson’s far-future science fiction novel depicts a remarkably relatable story to his twenty-first-century audience regarding societal organization and sustainability. His critique of the modern market system inevitably forces his readers to take an active role in his story as he describes economic nightmares and dreams. Every element in the novel, from the individual events the characters face to the plot as a whole, parallels what Robinson sees is the current global state of affairs: the lack of unity and community has degraded the environment and social condition, drowning out the voice of the people and stymieing development. The conclusion of

the novel appeals to his audience to adhere to his warning about the unsustainable nature of capitalism. As Tim Kreider puts it, “Robinson is realistic about human beings but nonetheless optimistic about our capacity for change,” indicating that Robinson writes his works with the intent that his readers will take his realization and apply it to their analysis and interaction of their lives. As with many of his other science fiction novels, the purpose of *2312* is to provide a seed of hope and a goal to aim for given a specific critical lens to analyze modern society. A society of cooperation, in Robinson’s eyes, fares far better against the test of time and promotes the desires of the people more accurately compared to a society of competition.

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