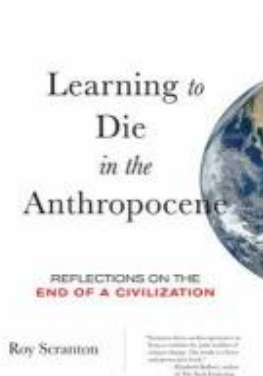


Death, Politics, and the Anthropocene

July 22, 2016



Rather than start his book about climate change with a solitary man contemplating a streambed run dry or taking in the eternal wonders of an old-growth forest, Roy Scranton begins *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* in occupied Iraq in 2003, where Scranton served as a private in the U.S. Army. As his convoy drove into recently bombarded Baghdad, he entered a world in which “the government had collapsed, walls were going up, tribal lines were being drawn, and brutal hierarchies were being savagely established” (13). Baghdad, with its shattered infrastructure and escalating violence, was a vision of our future.

How do we live together—or live at all—in a world so hostile to civilization? What can pull us through ecological, and possibly civilizational, collapse? After summarizing the science that makes clear that such a future is increasingly likely, Scranton draws his answers to these questions from his life as a soldier. Taking advice from a 300-year-old manual for samurai, he writes that “instead of fearing my end, I practiced owning it. Every morning, after doing maintenance on my Humvee, I would imagine getting blown up, shot, lit on fire, run over by a tank, torn apart by dogs, captured and beheaded. Then, before we rolled out through the wire, I’d tell myself that I didn’t need to worry anymore because I was already dead” (22).

Those of us living through the Anthropocene—a clumsy term for our current, human-influenced geologic period—must learn to die as well. In order to fully confront and survive an uncertain future, we have to reckon with both our individual and civilizational mortality. Our civilization will not survive, and we might not either. Reminding ourselves of this—a process that Scranton terms “learning to die”—is the only way to exist in the chaotic years to come. But apart from recognizing our mortality, what exactly does “learning to die” entail? Scranton writes, “Learning to die as an individual means letting go of our predispositions and fear. Learning to die as a civilization means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success, and progress” (24).

For Scranton, the figure most capable of “learning to die” is not a soldier, but a humanist philosopher. This figure is “the one who is willing to stop and ask troublesome questions, the one who is willing to interrupt, the one who resonates on other channels and with slower, deeper rhythms” (24). Scranton fixates on the concept of the philosopher as “interrupter” as opposed to disrupter. The interrupter does not smash a system of social production, but interrupts its flows and might even succeed in reinterpreting the world around us. The value of this perspective, Scranton argues, is that it helps us “respond autonomously to social excitation” rather than reacting to it and ultimately passing it on (87-88). If we truly want a more stable and sane world, we must engage in this refusal of excitation. It is our only hope for carrying humanity through the coming chaotic decades and centuries.

As part of a return to humanist philosophy in the face of civilizational collapse, Scranton also makes a plea for the preservation of humanity’s store of knowledge: “As biological and cultural diversity is threatened across the world by capitalist monoculture and mass extinction, we must build arks: not just biological arks, to carry forward endangered genetic data, but also cultural arks, to carry forward endangered wisdom” (109). Instead of fruitlessly scrambling to save the physical remnants of a dying civilization, Scranton urges us to save what we can of humanity’s accumulated wisdom

and use it as a beacon during a long, dark future.

This is a different kind of climate change book. Not so much an elegy for things lost as a plea for a different kind of preservation, Scranton's text is at once deeply realistic and woefully blind to the forces that will shape the coming decades. Apart from the problems with the concept of the Anthropocene—mainly that it imagines a uniform, undifferentiated "humanity," rather than a social system, at the root of the climate crisis—which have been best elucidated by Andreas Malm¹ and Jason W. Moore², *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene's* biggest shortcomings are its evasion of questions of power and ultimately, its confused insistence that the politics of our current historical moment are a dead end.

While Scranton's call for humanist philosophy in the face of civilizational destruction is laudable—particularly amid the chorus of mainstream voices calling climate change a technical problem with a technical solution—it's missing something big. In a recent piece on the Anthropocene and human meaning-making published in "The Stone" blog on the *New York Times* website, Scranton wrote, "We need to work together to transform a global order of meaning focused on accumulation into a new order of meaning that knows the value of limits, transience and restraint."³ Even if this sounds appealing, how might it be accomplished? How does an "order of meaning" replace an order of accumulation? The fuzzy figure of the "interrupter" doesn't seem capable of building it alone. So how will it be done?

A look at Scranton's commentary on the climate movement shows us how he believes it will *not* happen. Scranton draws on Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011) to make the argument that the climate movement is all but hopeless. Mitchell links the emergence of democracy to the process of extracting and distributing coal. Since many workers were involved in this process, their ability to shut down the flow of energy to the economy gave them leverage to demand greater political power for the masses. Oil, which is extracted and distributed with much less human labor, creates a different political context for resistance. Scranton argues that social movements cannot force change at this point in history because "they cannot put their hands on the real flows of power, because they do not help produce it. They only consume" (60).

Both Mitchell and Scranton argue persuasively that this is a serious problem for the climate movement and all movements that hope to create a more just social order. But Scranton's critique is not just that it is difficult to wage battles at the point of energy production, it is that the problem runs deeper than ownership and control of energy production. After reporting on the failings of the People's Climate March and the subsequent Flood Wall Street demonstrations, Scranton wrote, "Across the spectrum ... nobody seems to have the tools, clout, or conceptual framework we need" to deal with climate change "or even to come up with a good plan to protect ourselves from the greatest dangers" (67). Faced with this dire situation, Scranton writes, "The problem is nobody has real answers. *The problem is that the problem is us*" (68).

In other words, organized efforts to change the way we collectively live are doomed because *we* are the problem. To hell with politics, we have to get busy dying.

The main problem with disavowing politics is that everything is political. Scranton is correct in pointing out that no one with the power to seriously take on or even mitigate our current crises has yet emerged, but does that mean collective action is now futile dithering? Declaring that "the problem is us" necessarily dismisses any effort to collectively imagine a decent, or even livable, future. Scranton instead suggests we "learn to see each day as the death of what came before" (27).

How such a lofty, vague call to detach ourselves from history (while still somehow holding on to the humanities) can be seen as the *true* imperative, while reimagining and fighting for our collective

future has become a doomed undertaking in the name of realism, is baffling to me. Whether or not we've "lost" on climate change shouldn't determine whether we imagine a new world or retreat into ourselves. The climate's "tipping points" cannot be the points beyond which we disregard our political imaginations. And accepting societal "death" cannot be the precondition for imagining and working toward a new society.

But that's not really the main point to be made about Scranton's vision for our future. The point is that Scranton's vision is actually deeply political. Preserving the collected wisdom of the humanities, cultivating compassion and love, "interrupting" flows of ideas and commands—these are all obviously social projects. To hope they can be detached from politics might seem appealing in this dark time, but it's just as much a dream as the utopian political projects Scranton cavalierly dismisses. While Scranton doesn't specify who should pursue these political goals, the tone of the book suggests that the weight falls on individuals. The humanist philosopher as "interrupter" is his true agent of change, or at least of survival. At its worst moments this seems to fall into the worst currents of "fix yourself to fix the world" environmentalism, without the part about fixing the world.

Even if that's not Scranton's political vision, the goals don't really add up. The notion that we can pursue the twin aims of creating a humanity detached from immediate historical conditions and strike out on our own as apolitical "interrupters" while still cultivating "patience, reflection, and love" (27) seems bizarrely discordant. While many have wished that we can pursue these goals apart from any political framework that fosters them, that dream has never manifested itself. "Patience, reflection, and love" are fine things, but they're only words if they have no social context. "Interrupting" and transforming ideas apart from any political setting is similarly impossible. The reality is that the ambitious, multiple goals of *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* are not really apolitical, they're just incompatible and, ultimately, incoherent.

Still, Scranton's voice is an important one. He reminds us that the left should not be seduced by our own colorful protests or by international agreements that promise to save the world without a real plan. Baghdad is a better place to grapple with our collective future than a nature center. We just shouldn't make the mistake of thinking it's the only vision of our future.