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Freedom after the Fall? A Structured Feeling for the *Anthropocene*

> ***We know*** *that there have been geologic conditions under which human life was impossible on this earth.* ***We know*** *that they must return again. Even now, as the earth circles on her appointed orbit, the northern ice cap slowly thickens, and the time gradually approaches, when its glaciers will flow again, and austral seas, sweeping northward, bury the seats of present civilization under ocean wastes, as it may be they now bury what was once as high a civilization as our own.*
>
> —Henry George (1879, emphasis added)

> *"My you chivalric fool, as if the way one fell down mattered."*
> *"When the fall is all there is, it matters."*
>
> —The Lion in Winter

I: Introduction

On a perfectly warm summer evening in Chicago I sat down for a few beers with a friend of mine from college. Both of us being doctoral students—he in political theory and I in planning and public policy—our conversation veered quickly into a jumble of feigned indignation, bombastic claims, and counterpoints based upon our sparsely overlapping canons. We meandered between philosophy and current events (agreeing to disagree on a definition of "fictitious" commodities; agreeing to agree that Chris Christie is an asshole). Then our conversation subsided momentarily, and the chatter of others enveloped us. Looking down at his near-empty pint glass, he said, *"We are so fucked, man. Its not even funny."*

I burst out laughing. It was actually kinda funny. My laughter drew glances of curiosity, scorn, and envy. After a few seconds, he started laughing too.
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This paper is an inquiry into the politics and meaning of freedom in the *Anthropocene* (Crutzen 2002). The assertion that humanity faces a species-defining, mortality-confronting epoch and a potentially apocalyptic future is trending on both the right and left edges of popular politics and culture in the United States—although the reasons for such feelings and assertions could hardly differ more. Those on the right wing of the American political spectrum prefer to locate the agents of their end-time narratives in the decay of the hetero-patriarchal family structure and

the creeping totalitarian tyranny of federal regulation of health insurance markets. The left, meanwhile, locates its end-of-days narrative in a combination of ecological as well as social and political trends, including CO_2 emissions and ice cap melting, domestic and international wealth and income inequality, unbridled global consumerism, and the (neo) imperialism of the "American way of life". In describing these phenomena, notable authors in the US left have adapted the concept of the *Anthropocene* in slightly different ways to encapsulate their arguments about the unsustainable impacts of global capitalist civilization built on the consumption of fossil fuels (Chomsky 2014; Klein 2014; Solnit 2014; McKibben 2010; Scranton 2013; Nevins 2014).

The authors above enumerate a jaw dropping panoply-bordering-on-surfeit of scientific data that describe an economic, political, and ecological trajectory unsustainable for human society in its current form. Like Henry George in the epigraph above, the *Anthropocene* and the consequences of global climate change are something we can "know." On this they all agree. The difference—and here is the rub—lies in whether the "deadline" for action on climate change has already past or not. *How to confront* such a reality philosophically and politically becomes the key problematic, as suggested by the second epigraph from *The Lion in Winter* (Goldman 1966).

The concept of the *Anthropocene* and "ecological overshoot" (WWF 2012) as an "endgame" or "posthuman" (Scranton 2010; Szerszynski 2012) stage of human civilization as currently practiced and constituted "sound an important warning about the need to seek alternative forms of *thinking about, and action toward*, the world around us" (Ogden et al 2013 p. 346, emphasis added). This leads to some tricky philosophical and political problems for those who are actively working for a more just and egalitarian future: *is it politically feasible, much less ethically responsible, to motivate urgent action to avert catastrophe if the "deadline" for such action to have a tangibly ameliorative impact has passed?* In other words, if we're all inevitably headed for the same collective and infernal end, what is the point of acting to avert catastrophe? This political problem of action in the context of a deadline that may either be just ahead or already behind us is the same that my friend and I casually and fleetingly confronted that night in Chicago, or—more eruditely—as Calvino described in his exquisite *Invisible Cities*. *The Great Khan looked through his atlas,* Calvino wrote,

> *over the maps of the cities that menace in nightmares and maledictions: Enoch, Babylon, Yahooland, Butua, Brave New World. He said* 'it is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us'" (Calvino 1974 p. 165).

I submit that the problematic of the *Anthropocene* is the 21st century's "Great Transformation." I thus argue that Karl Polanyi can help us with this dilemma of knowledge and action. Rather than approaching Polanyi's body of work as a set of immutable truths, I find greatest meaning in Polanyi's work in the manner described by Peck: to read his legacy "in a cooperative and creative spirit, *not for iron-clad rules and finished formulations, but for its methodological potential*" (2013 p. 1564, emphasis added). Rorty expressed this sentiment similarly, urging us

in matters of philosophy to "skip lightly past the predictions, and concentrate on the expressions of hope" (1998 p. 205). This paper argues that Polanyi's interpretation of the meaning of freedom, as outlined in the final chapter of *The Great Transformation*, is invaluable to strategically navigating the politics of urgency, knowledge, and action in the *Anthropocene*. What are the implications for our understanding of, and more importantly, our active use of freedom in this context of doom and gloom? Polanyi asserted that the meaning of ultimate freedom in a complex society was borne of resignation: an individual and collective resignation to the loss of a prior notion of freedom in the face of the reality of the complex society. In the final paragraph of *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi writes (p. 268):

> *Man accepted the reality of death and built the meaning of his bodily life upon it. […] He resigns himself, in our time, to the reality of society, which means the end of that freedom. But, again, life springs from ultimate resignation.*

Concurring with Polanyi, I argue that "resignation", rather than inevitably promoting fatalism, can lead to hope and action. Such interpretations rely on epistemologies and philosophies of hope and pragmatism, rather than scientific or romantic notions of finality and totality (Law 2004; O'Hara 2003). Thus, rather than being "inimical" to action (Malm and Hornborg 2014), I argue that the problem of the *Anthropocene* can be adapted to different forms of knowledge and action.

In section two below, I briefly outline some recent literatures and critiques of the *Anthropocene*. What becomes clear is that the "problem" of the *Anthropocene* is ideological "by default, if not by design" (Malm and Hornborg 2014 p. 6). It is thus not a naturalized or objective problem that has a technical or scientific solution that can be "fixed". Neither is it, as some would have it, a permanent end, or "fall" from a prior state of grace.

The third section follows from the framing in section two and approaches the *Anthropocene* and popular discourses around global climate change as problems not just of knowledge of but of action—i.e. politics. Using examples from contemporary scholars and writers on the left wing of US politics, I critique concerns over ecological, social, and political turmoil and degradation that either posit that catastrophe can be averted through urgent action, or that complete annihilation and catastrophe is inevitable and thus action to avert it is pointless. In doing so, I concur with Scranton (2013) that these two options are not our only choices. By way of conclusion, the fourth and final section eschews the romantic approach and suggests a pragmatic approach to reconciling resignation with action and knowledge in the *Anthropocene.*

II: The *Anthropocene* as a Knowledge Problem

What kind of forklift is required / to raise our souls from this muck and mire?

—Sunni Patterson

While the Anthropocene appears at first as a problem of science, it in fact is more constructive to engage with it as a problem of knowledge. This confusion arises from an age-old debate

between the natural and social sciences, and within the social sciences, as to the nature and role of scientific knowledge. In making the jump from the *Anthropocene's* original "home" as an eco-geological phenomenon to a socio-political one, it becomes necessary, as others have already begun to argue, to also shift our epistemology of *the kind of problem the Anthropocene is* (Alberts 2011; Malm and Hornborg 2014).

The concept of the *Anthropocene* is outlined succinctly in a 2002 in brief for *Nature*. The paper argued that the effects of industrialization, beginning in the late 18th century, lead to the conclusion that "global climate may depart significantly from natural behaviour [*sic*] for many millennia to come" (Crutzen 2002 p. 23). The key indicator for this label, Crtuzen argues, is that analyses of air trapped in polar ice caps began to show significant elevations of carbon dioxide. Even in 2002, the statistics that Crutzen marshals as evidence of human impact on the ecology of planet earth is staggering. From population growth to land cultivation to methane and greenhouse gas emissions, to deforestation, to depletion of global fisheries and the enlarging of the Antarctic ozone layer, Crutzen still claims that it could have been worse, and that it has thus far been more through luck than wisdom that such a fate has been evaded. Crutzen's brief offer of a pathway to "fixing" the problem of the *Anthropocene* is indicative of his background as an atmospheric chemist. He writes,

> *a daunting task lies ahead for scientists and engineers to guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene. This will require appropriate human behavior* [sic] *at all scales, and may well involve internationally accepted, large-scale geo-engineering projects, for instance to 'optimize' climate* (ibid).

A daunting task indeed. This concluding passage from Crutzen's paper produces several important questions. Dr. Crutzen suggests that the problem of anthropogenic climate change is a mostly a matter of technical knowledge, rather than one of political debate and struggle across the globe (but perhaps most polarized in the United States). The implications of a technical solution to "sustainable management" leads to the apotheosis of humanity's fantastical quest to dominate and control the world around us: the control of the weather. The fact that controlling the weather is considered the logical and reasonable conclusion of scientifically supported "sustainable management" should lead us to consider whether the *Anthropocene* is in fact *primarily* a "scientific" or technical problem at all, or whether it might be more useful to think of it as a different kind of problem altogether.

The idea that there is indeed a class of problems with "no technical solution" comes from a source quite credible to Dr. Crutzen: biologist Garrett Hardin, author of the 1968 article "The Tragedy of the Commons" in *Nature's* peer publication, *Science*. While Hardin's article became (in)famous for its egregiously simplistic description of the commons in modern society, the article was actually primarily a discussion of the "problem" of population growth. Hardin's argumentation has, perhaps not surprisingly, important consequences for how Crutzen interprets the problem of the *Anthropocene*. "It is fair to say," Hardin argued, that most approaches to population control in his time were focused on "trying to find a way to avoid the

evils of overpopulation without relinquishing any of the privileges" of modern society. "They think that farming the seas or developing new strains of wheat will solve the problem—technologically. I try to show here that the solution they seek cannot be found." (1968 p. 1243).

My affinity for Hardin ends here, however. Hardin's eventual case for "Lifeboat Ethics" in 1974 as a response to population growth was just as misguided as Crutzen's fantasy of human control of the weather through technology. As Malm and Hornborg note, explosive population growth is at the heart of the scientific case for the *Anthropocene*, (2014 p. 3), rather than disproportionate resource consumption and wealth disparities. Indeed, Crutzen places population growth at the fore of his case for describing human impacts on earth's climate processes. He even makes the concession, absent from Hardin, that only about one fourth (25%) of humanity is responsible for these harmful effects. Yet, like Hardin, he fails to note how unequal resource consumption and wealth distribution across the globe are implicated in these processes. This leads Malm and Hornborg to ask a critically important question of the Crutzen and the *Anthropocene*, echoing Marxist critiques of Hardin's conception of the "population problem". If "globalized technological systems [dependent on fossil fuels] essentially represent an unequal exchange of embodied labor and land in the world-system" and the result of this unequal exchange is that under 20% of the earth's population is responsible for over 70% of greenhouse gas emissions, "are these basic facts reconcilable with a view of *humankind* as the new geological agent?" (2014 p. 3, emphasis in original). This leads Malm and Hornborg to the conclusion that the *Anthropocene* concept "sinks the fossil economy into unalterable conditions" and has become embraced by humanists "lock stock and barrel, oblivious to its anti-social tendencies" (2014 p. 5). These critiques are well-taken and are important for engaging with the *Anthropocene* in its full complexity. Yet they are, as a criticism of the humanist embrace of the *Anthropocene,* also incomplete.

It is important to recognize that it is not simply "humanism" that Malm and Hornborg criticize, but rather a "romantic structure of feeling" that that is often infused into humanist work. This structure of feeling approaches complexity by simplifying tales of human activity as inevitably tied to a "fall" from a prior state of grace. The romantic structure of feeling, Williams argues, is "the assertion of nature against industry and of poetry against trade: the isolation of humanity and community into the idea of culture, against the real social pressures of the time…"(Williams 1973 p. 79). As an example, Williams notes that "There is a sense in which the idea of the enclosures, localized to just that period in which the Industrial Revolution was beginning, can shift our attention from the real history and become an element of that very powerful myth…in which the transition from a rural to an industrial society is seen as a kind of fall, the true cause and origin of our social suffering and disorder." Williams concludes "It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this myth in modern social thought" (p. 96). Indeed, O'Hara agrees that the "prophetic discourses" occurring now in humanist and posthumanist writings, echoing those that Williams surveyed in the 1970s, are infused with a "deeply humanistic Romanticism" (O'Hara 2003, in Scranton 2010). In other words, O'Hara argues that however romantic or modernist the origins of concepts like the *Anthropocene*, supporters and critics alike "too often lose sight of their…fictional status as works of the imagination" (2003 p. 121). This important dressing-down, or deconstruction, of the Anthropocene is only worthwhile if it is

reconstructed into something useful. And it is here that a pragmatic approach to "moral inquiry" (Lake 2014) becomes useful for the *Anthropocene.*

Acknowledging as I did above that "responding to the challenges of the *Anthropocene* is not simply about human beings finding a technological or normative fix that will control and restore the Earth" Gibson-Graham and Roelvink argue in their chapter in the appropriately-titled volume *The Point is to Change it* (2010) that the response to the Anthropocene "It is about human beings being transformed by the world in which we find ourselves– or, to put it in more reciprocal terms, it is about the Earth's future being transformed through a living process…" (in Ogden et al 2013 p. 346).

The concept of moral inquiry and moral knowledge, rooted in the pragmatism of John Dewey, allows us to draw a critical distinction from the Marxist critique offered by Malm and Hornborg. For them, the *Anthropocene* is an ideological fiction, and as such, is immobilizing against their more accurate representations of reality. The concept of moral inquiry and moral knowledge helps us sidestep the question of the objective truth of the *Anthropocene* (or some other more appropriate Marxist construction) as a representation of reality and into the important realm of how useful it is—its instrumentality. Rather than romantic narratives of closure, moral inquiry encourages "narratives of possibility" (Elshtain 1998 p. 54, in Lake 2014 p. 7). Along these lines, the purpose of moral knowledge is to help us "better answer the integrally interrelated questions of what kind of reality we want to create and which practices best advance its creation" (Lake 2014 pp. 5-6). This also echoes Polanyi's comment in the final chapter of *The Great Transformation* that the differences between liberalism on one hand and fascism and socialism on the other is "not primarily economic. It is moral and religious" (1944 p. 267). In other words, Polanyi argued that the goal of economics to represent the realities of systems of economic thought by calculating their relative efficiencies was insufficient to determine their differences. When we consider systems of economy as questions of moral values, we are exposed to the idea that we have choices after all—that the reality we have inherited is not inevitable or inherent. The space for action thus emerges from this pragmatic frame. It is these crucial political questions—questions of action—that I address in the next section.

III: *Anthropocene* as a Problem of Action and Politics

We pulled on our bootstraps / so hard that they broke.
—Rise Against, "Disparity by Design"

In the preceding section I proposed an alternative pragmatic frame for the *Anthropocene* as a problem of moral, or instrumental knowledge, rather than a representation of an objective reality with a technological fix. In this section I use a typology for action in the context of path-dependent structural violence as a guidepost for evaluating contemporary political authors' writings on the *Anthropocene.*

Writing in 2002 on the "future of the capitalist state", sociologist Bob Jessop (2002) outlines the structural changes in the welfare state over the second half of the 20th century, describing

changes from a Keynesian national welfare state to a "Schumpeterian Workfarist Postnational Regime" based fundamentally on the socio-economic "capital relation." Rather than positing a theory of an alternative case to capital accumulation as the primary organizing principle of society (which he notes would be undemocratic to offer as the act of a sole "inveterate" theorist [248]), he argues for a "requisite reflexivity, requisite variety, and requisite irony" (246). In short, his conclusion is that, in the face of the unstable and reconfigured neoliberal global capital regime, we may not have the power to change much, but we should have a sense of humor (or at least some hope) about it. He also endeavors to differentiate this sense of "irony" from cynicism and fatalism. While irony corresponds to the necessity that "social forces must recognize the likelihood of failure but proceed *as if success were possible*", cynics "anticipate failure but seek to further their own interests if and when failure occurs". This is further differentiated from fatalism, which anticipates failure and thus uses this as an excuse to refrain from acting (emphasis added, 246). This diverges slightly, but not substantially, from Rorty's claim that "hopelessness has become fashionable on the left—principled, theorized, philosophical hopelessness" (1998 p. 37). Likewise, Peter Frase writes that, while the ruling class claims the future is "inevitably bright", "curmudgeons" on the left "reassures themselves with…conviction that it's inevitably gloomy. He concludes that "We don't win from playing this game, taking our meager emotional returns while our opponents take their payment in a much more tangible form" (2014). Like Malm and Hornborg and Rorty, I agree that gloominess poses a political and philosophical problem for the left in the United States. Yet the concept of the *Anthropocene* has still managed to yield a cohort of mostly hopeful leaders despite the generally acknowledged fact that humanity has passed the "point of no return" as far as catastrophic climate change (McKibben 2010, cited in Nevins 2014 p. 211). If we use Jessop's typology, there isn't really much cynicism on the left: those who acknowledge catastrophe but merely seek to further their own interests in such a context. Thus we are really left with a spectrum that runs from fatalism, which is content to use the Anthropocene as an excuse for not acting, and those who act with "irony", but which I will label hope instead.[1]

Among the more visible proponents of the fatalist category is Noam Chomsky. Writing in September 2014, Chomsky takes to pondering the task of "interpreting the era of human civilization, which may not be approaching its inglorious end." Using as his evidence the rise of ISIS in the Middle East and a report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which warns of "severe, pervasive, and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems" in the coming decades. He provides additional gloomy evidence from other current events and IPCC reports, leading to the final conclusion that we are a "sad species" whose time is at an end, condemning ourselves to our own extinction as the asteroid ended the age of the dinosaurs. It is not worthwhile to criticize Chomsky on the facts. He is rarely one to skimp on rigorous research. But what are we to make of this conclusion—and what room is left for action? In such a view, Chomsky uses the Anthropocene as a device to mediate on the worst elements of the human species—war, destruction, avarice, while providing no opportunity or

[1] In the context of the fad of globalizing urban hipsterdom, it seems irresponsible to associate the word "irony" with anything.

avenue for action. Such a fatalist interpretation gives credence to Malm and Hornborg's criticism that the *Anthropocene* is "inimical" to action.

A younger generation of luminaries poses the problem in ways more amenable to action, however. Joseph Nevins, in his excellent review (2014) of the *Anthropocene* as a set of "socio-geographical" conditions produced by an unsustainable "dys-ecologism" among the denizens of the Global North, argues that there is room for a mixture of individual and collective actions. For example, drawing on Timothy Mitchell's work on "Carbon Democracy" and Bill McKibben's call for "new habits for a new world", Nevins balances the need for small personal actions that reduce reliance on fossil-fuel powered machines, as well as larger scale collective political action against materialism, militarism, and imperialism (2014 pp. 221-2). This is a definitive improvement on Chomsky, since it calls attention to the need for action at multiple socio-spatial scales, rather than merely meditating dispassionately on the human capacity for destruction. Yet there is also a certain specificity lacking here as well. Who is to act, and how? Is it not just as feasible to assemble and mobilize a global social movement against materialism and imperialism—against the "American way of life"—as it is to produce and sustain human control of the climate and weather? Given the debilitating evidence of destruction marshaled in these pieces, calls to action in the *Anthropocene* require a more flexible and multi-faceted approach to action.

Progressing further away from fatalism and towards "ironic" (see Jessop above) hopeful and purposeful action in the Anthropocene are Rebecca Solnit and Naomi Klein (both 2014). Solnit and Klein both emphasize the role of collective social movements uniting feminism and racial justice with environmental justice movements promoting action on climate change. In so doing they provide some substance and nuance to the urgent call for global action to destroy the American way of life that Nevins articulates. "We've already lost a lot, and we're going to lose more," Solnit writes, "but there's a difference between terrible and apocalyptic." She writes, however, that "we are running out of time" even to make this level of difference. "We can do it." Solnit argues. "And *we* is the key word here. The world is not going to be saved by individual acts of virtue; it's going to be saved, if it is to be saved, by collective acts of social and political change."

Solnit and Nevins thus agree on the necessity for collective action, while Solnit is more explicit about the role that hope plays in writing an unwritten and uncertain, if hazardous and dangerous, future. Yet even here she may press the case too far, arguing "only collective action can save us now." She concedes "only is a scary word, but when the ship is sinking, it can be an encouraging one as well. It can hold out hope." The sense of hopeful urgency, connected concretely to building broad-based social movements to address intersecting systems of oppression is an excellent articulation of the action(s) needed to confront the problems of the *Anthropocene*. Yet I would also argue that the word "only" is not alone in being a scary word. The other potentially problematic word that Solnit uses is "save". Klein's work is also framed with this sense of urgency: "can we pull off these changes in time?" she asks (2014).

In the context of the *Anthropocene*, the concept of ecological or political salvation is difficult to sustain, because so much energy is (rightly) being directed towards articulating the irreversibility of our current global trajectory. Thus even those like Solnit and Klein, who point to important victories and purposeful, visionary, and transformational social movements, are still caught in a trap of their own making when they posit the possibility of salvation. The trope of "saving" the earth has been in existence in popular environmental discourse for decades, and is therefore not new. What is problematic in this case is that leaders who are to alerting us to the grave necessity for immediate action are afraid of letting go of the idea that there is something that can still be saved of our current way of life. The challenge they face is how to present an accurate portrayal of an irreversibility catastrophic and unrecognizable *Anthropocene* future, while still inciting a strong and urgent call to action and thus avoiding the romantic fatalism encapsulated in the Chomsky piece.

The last approach to action in the Anthropocene that I wish to examine will sound, familiar to scholars of Polanyi and *The Great Transformation*. Writing in the New York Times in 2013, Iraq War veteran Roy Scranton observes

> *The biggest problem climate change poses isn't how the Department of Defense should plan for resource wars, or how we should put up sea walls to protect Alphabet City, or when we should evacuate Hoboken. It won't be addressed by buying a Prius, signing a treaty, or turning off the air-conditioning. The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront this problem, and the sooner we realize there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the hard work of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality.*

In this passage, Scranton unites the problems of knowledge and action in the *Anthropocene* through the prism of philosophy. As an approach, it does not foreclose action, indeed quite the opposite, but rather argues for a different "attitude of mind" (or "structure of feeling", per Williams) for action in the *Anthropocene* (Dewey 1916, cited in Lake 2014 p. 8). What Scranton relinquishes is the idea that collective action can bring salvation. And yet he does so without eschewing a call for determined and difficult collective action. Adaptation will be difficult, but if we "learn to see each day as the death of what came before, freeing ourselves to deal with whatever problems the present offers without attachment or fear" (Scranton 2013), we can learn to live in the *Anthropocene*, the Great Transformation of our time.

Scranton's articulation and imagery recalls Polanyi's invocation of Robert Owen at the conclusion of The Great Transformation. "The post-Christian era of Western civilization had begun, in which the Gospels did not any more suffice, and yet remained the basis of our civilization" (1944 p. 268). The gospels of our time, Scranton argues, are no longer sufficient either: philosophical reconstruction to adapt to the premises of a new reality is necessary: not because it will save us, but because it is what will make us free. Like Scranton, Polanyi argues, "Uncomplaining acceptance of the reality of society gives man indomitable courage and strength to remove all removable injustice and unfreedom [*sic*]" (ibid). The urgency of the

previous approaches outlined above thus remains, but is pivoted towards a different task. We are called to accept the dissolution of the idea of salvation, yet continue to act without fear of our new and transformed reality. This is the challenge of freedom in the *Anthropocene* that Scranton has articulated, and which Polanyi helped us to foresee.

IV: Hope, Resignation, and Freedom

Resignation was ever the fount of man's strength and new hope.
—Karl Polanyi[2]

In this paper I have followed in the pragmatic tradition in order to grapple with the problems of knowledge, action, and freedom in the *Anthropocene*. Following Colin Koopman, "I understand pragmatism, and find it at its best, as a philosophical way of taking hope seriously," since it "refocuses philosophy on the differences we humans can make." He concludes, "Hope is the *mood* in which we expect that we can make the requisite differences." (2006 p. 106, p. 111, emphasis added). Just as Polanyi argued that freedom springs from our acknowledgement of death, we cannot address resignation without also addressing hope.[3] In response to the Great Khan's brooding over his civilization being drawn inevitably in "ever-narrowing circles" towards an infernal end, Marco Polo provides a powerful rejoinder:

> *The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one it is what is already here, the inferno we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space* (1974: p. 165).

It may be true, as Malm and Hornborg note, that only a small fraction of the human species is responsible for the changes that have birthed the *Anthropocene* (2014 p. 4). It is helpful, as they note, to conceive of global climate change as "sociogenic" rather than "anthropogenic"—as an immutable characteristic of the human species. This ideological reframing, however, does not alter the irreversibility of the changes it suggests. It is perhaps necessary, but insufficient. Rather than the socio-geological alternatives to the *Anthropocene* that they suggest, such as *Econocene* (citing sNorgaard 2013), *Technocene,* or *Capitalocene,* I think that the *Anthropocene* is more useful for identifying humanity as the collective agent that can change ourselves and our world (Palsson et al 2013), while still helping to push us beyond the concept of "saving" it. The *Anthropocene* provides a space for us as mortal agents act to confront the challenges that we have been bequeathed. It is this kind of instrumental, moral knowledge that will be more effective in pushing us to action than only relying upon Marxist analyses of economic self and

[2] 1944 p. 268

[3] Reviving the philosophy and intellectual tradition of hope is even more important in the aftermath of Barack Obama's usurpation and subsequent squandering of hope as a popular motivating concept in progressive American politics. In order to avoid a "post-hope" age, it is a matter of certain urgency. But it is also a matter for another paper.

class interests. As Henri Bergson wrote, forceful action flows from knowing and feeling, which technology and capital cannot do[4]:

> *True mystics simply open their souls to the oncoming wave. Sure of themselves, because they feel within them something better than ourselves, they prove to be great men of action, to the surprise of those for whom mysticism is nothing but visions, and raptures and ecstasies. That which they have allowed to flow into them is a stream flowing down and seeking through them to reach their fellow men; the necessity to spread around them what they have received affects them like an onslaught of love.* (1935/1977 p. 99)

A similar argument to the pivot from economistic to more broadly humanist knowledge arises in Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, from which the introductory epigraph is excerpted. It challenges the idea that "self-interest" is the greatest motivator of human action. George writes that Adam Smith was indeed right that economic self-interest was a "potent" motivator, "capable of large and wide results." But there is also another force, "which melts and fuses and overwhelms; to which nothing seems impossible." It may be that a man will give all that he has in exchange for his life, George notes "—that is self-interest. But in loyalty to higher impulses men will give even life" (1879/1992 p. 462). Polanyi followed suit decades later, writing that man "resigned himself to the truth that *he had a soul to lose and that there was worse than death*, and founded his freedom upon it" (p. 268, emphasis added). The argument presented here thus does not seek to withdraw or elide the necessity of urgent and determined collective political action that confronts the problems of our time, including staggeringly unjust maldistributions of wealth, or to suggest that all individual human beings bear equal responsibility for these problems. It rather seeks to describe an approach to knowledge and action that is suited to pursuing action in an atmosphere that is constructed—whether by Crutzen or Chomsky—as impending or "terminal".

Death's enduring conception as a moment of closure, end, or "fall" has not managed to make it anything less than fiercely terrifying. As Scranton (2013) notes, "the human psyche rebels against the idea of its end." But human experience and imagination has also yielded ways of confronting it as an opportunity, or an opening as well: by transforming death as an inevitable end into a moment that we put behind us in order to live. Take the example of La Crosse, Wisconsin. A feature article in Forbes examines how La Crosse, Wisconsin (pop 50,000) looks at how the entire town has embraced an aggressive but family and individually-sensitive approach to end of life care. In so doing, the article notes that 96% of the town has executed an "advanced directive" on their end-of-life care, compared with roughly 25%-30% nationwide. How was this accomplished? The authors conclude that "intimate conversation and reflection" between and among family and health care providers "about how we want to live as we die" is the most critical component (Hatkoff et al 2014). In other words, death with "mortal humility" (Scranton 2013), grace and dignity[5] doesn't happen by seeing death as a final end, but rather by resigning and accepting the reality of death through continuous conversations, both public and

[4] Assertions of corporate personhood—the apogee of the ideal of *homo economicus*—notwithstanding.
[5] And, not insignificantly, lower costs for both family and nation.

private. Echoing Lake, who urges us "give up science as a method of analysis in favor of science as a conversational style" (2014 p. 9), the people of La Crosse, Wisconsin have given up on the pursuit of longer life through control and technology in favor of life as a conversation on learning how to die better. This is an example of resignation as action and the practice of freedom: undoubtedly contentious, painful, and difficult—but also powerful, deliberative, and deeply political structured feeling that is relevant to the time in which we live.[6] It presents a small glimpse of the meaning of freedom in an age beyond salvation and silver bullets.

V: Coda

In the final moments of Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*, the protagonist Milkman faces down with his best-friend-turned-enemy Guitar in a ravine. Guitar has a rifle and is searching for Milkman to train his sights on his head. Recognizing the finality of the situation, Milkman liberates himself from fear and stands to face Guitar. Guitar recognizes his courage and sets down the rifle. The two stand facing each other, alone in the wilderness.

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. He could just make out Guitar's head and shoulders in the dark. "You want my life?" Milkman was not shouting now. "You need it? Here." Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride *it* (1977 p. 337).

Morrison leaves the ending purposefully vague. But the final words of the novel after Milkman's leap are most critical. Polanyi saw utmost freedom and life in resignation to the realities of a complex society. Scranton adapted this wisdom for the 21st century. Others will follow. How we choose to confront the problem of freedom and action in the *Anthropocene*, in an age defined by a preponderance of death, will have great consequences for life. Perhaps if we surrender to the age, we can hope to we ride it.

[6] For those who doubt the feasibility of such an epistemological and political re-orientation toward moral inquiry, I would kindly ask them to return to Dr. Crutzen's solution, which the editors of *Nature* deemed sufficiently practical and reasonable*:* a global project to scientifically geo-engineer a climate that is "optimized" for human habitation. The task of identifying whether "the spirit and content" (Polanyi 1944 p. 267) of this paper is more or less practical than Dr. Crutzen's solution I leave to the reader.

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