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# A Time to Die: The « American Way of Life » in the Anthropocene

*Une mort prochaine : le « mode de vie » américain à l'Anthropocène*

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# *A Time to Die :The « American Way of Life » in the Anthropocene*

(UNE MORT PROCHAINE : LE « MODE DE VIE » AMÉRICAIN  
À L'ANTHROPOCÈNE)

**Joseph NEVINS**\*

*ABSTRACT – We live in a time of multiple, overlapping ecological crises, ones that threaten the very foundations upon which the contemporary world sits. This article asserts that the source of these crises is what we might call the “American way of life.” This way of life is tightly linked to high levels of consumption and consumerism, as well as to a particular form of political economy closely associated with the United States. Yet the way of life and the political-economic and military power that enables and upholds it go far beyond U.S. territorial boundaries. This is because they are embedded in a global constellation of socio-geographical relations; it is also because populations beyond the United States, members of what we might consider the planet’s ecologically privileged class, embrace and practice the high levels of consumption and consumerism that reflect and reproduce the “American” lifestyle. It is a lifestyle predicated on dys-ecologism: the appropriation of an unsustainable and socially unjust share of the biosphere’s resources and, relatedly, the grossly unequal allocation of life and death circumstances across the planet. Thus, while the “American way of life” certainly benefits many, it contributes to the premature death of many more of the Earth’s denizens. It is, therefore, unsustainable in both an ecological sense and a socio-spatial justice one as well. For this reason and more, the article argues, the “American way of life” must be made to die.*

Keywords: *American way of life, dys-ecologism*

*RÉSUMÉ – Nous vivons à une époque de multiples crises écologiques qui se chevauchent et menacent les fondements mêmes sur lesquels repose le monde contemporain. Cet article affirme que la source de ces crises est ce que nous pourrions appeler le « mode de vie américain ». Ce mode de vie est étroitement lié à des niveaux élevés de consommation et au consumérisme, ainsi qu’à une forme particulière de l’économie politique étroitement associée aux États-Unis. Or, ce mode de vie et le pouvoir politico-économique et militaire qui le permet et le soutient s’étend bien au-delà des limites territoriales des États-Unis. C’est parce qu’ils sont insérés dans une constellation globale de relations socio-géographique, c’est aussi parce que des populations en dehors des États-Unis, membres de ce que nous pourrions envisager*

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*comme une classe écologiquement privilégiée de la planète, a adopté et mis en pratique les niveaux élevés de consommation et le consumérisme qui reflètent et reproduisent le style de vie "américain" . Il s'agit d'un mode de vie fondé sur le dys-écologisme : l'appropriation d'une part insoutenable et socialement injuste des ressources de la biosphère et , en corollaire , d'une distribution très inégale des conditions de vie et de mort à travers la planète . Ainsi, tandis que le « mode de vie américain » bénéficie certainement à beaucoup, il contribue à la mort prématurée de beaucoup plus d'habitants de la Terre . Il est donc insoutenable à la fois un point de vue écologique et en termes de justice socio-spatiale. Pour cette raison, et d'autres, selon le propos de cet article, le « mode de vie américain » doit être mis à mort.*

Mots-clés : *Mode de vie américain, dys-écologisme*

We live in a time of multiple, overlapping ecological crises—with dangerous levels of soil depletion [Montgomery 2008] and diminishing supplies of potable water across the globe, the rapidly decreasing viability of the earth's fisheries [Roberts 2012], high extinction rates of plant and animal species, and rising average global temperatures [National Research Council 2010] (among other signs). They are crises that characterize what many have come to call the Anthropocene, a geological epoch associated with the rise of the industrial revolution and the unleashing in a very brief time of the power of fossil fuels. As the very term Anthropocene suggests, there have been such profound human-induced transformations of the biosphere that the planet human beings now inhabit is fundamentally different from that of just two centuries ago. The making of this new planet has involved, author Bill McKibben asserts, a series of ecological transformations that are “completely unprecedented in the ten thousand years of human civilization” [McKibben 2010, p. 45]. As such, “*The planet on which our civilization evolved no longer exists. The stability that produced that civilization has vanished; epic changes have begun. . . . The earth that we knew—the only earth we ever knew—is gone*” [McKibben 2010, p. 27].

McKibben is hardly alone in making such assertions. In a 2012 article in *Nature*, a team of 22 scientists from Canada, Chile, Finland, Spain and the United States says that, due to human-induced changes to the biosphere, the world is quite possibly approaching a “critical transition.” It is one “with the potential to transform Earth rapidly and irreversibly into a state unknown in human experience” [Barnosky & al. 2012, p. 52]. A significant decline in biodiversity, a fossil-fuel-use-induced growth in atmospheric greenhouse gases, deforestation, the melting of glaciers and large “dead zones” in coastal marine areas are just some of the myriad indicators of the extent to which

humans have altered the biosphere and the “drivers” of the planetary-scale critical transition, contend the authors. What explains the threat of this critical transition, assert the authors, is “population growth and per capita consumption rate,” which, they say, “underlie all of the other present drivers of global change” [Barnosky & al. 2012, pp. 52 & 54]. In other words (and putting population growth aside until later), the authors point to resource use, but in a manner that does not distinguish between widely disparate levels of consumption among people and places. As such, the authors suggest, at best, that all of the Earth's denizens are equally at fault, instead of highlighting the ravenous consumption of a global minority in bringing about the crises they decry.

Herein, I offer a different analysis, one that focuses the blame on what we might characterize as the “American way of life,” and on related “ways of seeing” [Berger 1980] and being. What constitutes that way of life – which is the subject of the next section – is a matter of some debate. Rather than try to resolve that debate, I simply assert herein that the “way of life” is tightly linked to high levels of consumption and consumerism, as well as to a particular form of political-economy. The related ways of seeing and being are, in terms of their genealogy, closely associated with, but, contemporarily are not limited to, the United States. This is because the United States and its resource use are embedded in a larger constellation of socio-geographical relations – a global political-economy, for instance – than that which unfolds within the country's territorial boundaries [Burger & al. 2012]. It is also because populations beyond the United States embrace and practice the high levels of consumption and consumerism and the attendant constellation of socio-ecological relations that reflect and reproduce the “American” lifestyle. It is one predicated on injustice in the form of the grossly unequal allocation of life and death circumstances, and states of existence in between, across the planet. Thus, while it certainly enlivens some, it contributes to the death of many. In this regard, I argue that the “American way of life” is not only unsustainable in an ecological sense, but also in a socio-spatial justice one as well, and thus must be made to die.

Focusing on the American way of life provides an alternative to what we might consider the two dominant schools of thought concerned with global ecological challenges. The first sees the challenges as emanating largely from inadequate government regulation and inefficient, market failures and underdeveloped technologies [Gilding 2011, Larkin 2013]. The second sees them as fundamentally related to, and a result of, industrialization and capitalism, or some combination thereof [Jensen & al. 2011, Williams 2010]. In other words, the former is primarily technocratic in its analysis, the latter structural and systemic.

Both schools can and typically do acknowledge in various ways, responsibility for these human-induced changes is not equally spread across space, time, and society. In the case of climate change, for example, it is a small slice of the world's population, one concentrated in particular areas of

the planet, that have been responsible for the lion's share of greenhouse gas emissions over the last 200 years or so, reflecting the larger set of inequities that characterize socio-economic relations between peoples and places across the world [Monbiot 2007, Roberts & Parks 2007, Satterthwaite 2010]. In terms of countries on the upper end of the socio-economic ladder, these inequities are most closely associated with the United States given that, over the course of the twentieth century, it had the world's largest economy and was, by far, the largest consumer of fossil fuels, among many other environmental resources.

Nonetheless, those who embrace the technocratic approach tend to ignore matters of power – and their institutional or systemic expressions (racism, imperialism and sexism, for example) – and how they relate to the aforementioned inequities. At the same time, members of the technocratic school tend to see technologies as mere tools and to disregard how they reflect and produce systems in which they are embedded [see Winner 1989]. In this sense, the technocratic line of analysis can serve to bolster the overall status quo.

Among the most significant limitations of the structural approach is its insufficient attention to geographical specificity; in other words, in emphasizing global structures and processes, the uneven geographies of their manifestations and sources can become lost. Simultaneously, the emphasis on the material often loses sight of how the ideal – in the form of particular ways of seeing – plays a role and is not simply derivative of these structures and processes. Finally, the focus on the structural can often be reductionist in that it effectively “blames” the system for what people do, thus absolving individuals for any responsibility for their everyday practices, while ignoring the complex array of factors that shape human behavior [Nevins 2013].

The focus on the “American way of life” helps to remedy these shortcomings by scrutinizing both the particular and the systemic, and by considering the dialectical interplay of the ideal and the material. In doing so, this paper utilizes a political (geographical) ecology perspective, which is concerned with, among other matters, the dynamic relationship between power and the distribution and control of environmental resources, as well as their spatiality—not least in relation to benefits and detriments.

### **1. (Un)Bounding the American Way of Life**

The very notion of a particular place assumes intrinsic characteristics and an associated delimited space. After all, how can one distinguish one place from another if it has no uniqueness and is not geographically differentiated? Nonetheless, geographer Doreen Massey insists that we conceive of places as progressive, as flowing over the boundaries of any particular space, time, or society; in other words, we should see places as processual or ever-changing, as unbounded in that they shape and are shaped by other places and forces

from without, and as having multiple identities [Massey 1993]. Reconciling the need to delimit a place – for among other reasons, simply to be in a position to name it and thus distinguish it from someplace else—with the need to appreciate its progressive nature so as to be able to talk about it with nuance and social, historical and geographical complexity requires that we, in essence, temporarily “freeze” a place. As geographer Don Mitchell argues, “place is the stopped frame in the continuous film of change” [Mitchell 1996, p. 24]. We can say the same thing about any society – not least because of the inextricably interrelated, co-productive or dialectical nature of space and society. Similarly, to talk about a (U.S.) “American Way of Life” suggests something that is enduring, monolithic, and spatially bounded. But like any “way of life” – one of the ways in which the very problematic category of “culture” is conceived [Mitchell 2000]—the one associated with the United States of America is dynamic, contested, fractured, multifaceted, and uneven across time and space. At the same time, that “way of life” is not limited, in terms of its influences and effects – to national space.

With these caveats in mind, I insist that there is a dominant “American way of life,” one in which consumption is central ideologically and materially—in terms of what is both hegemonic, or the reigning “common sense,” regarding that to which one should aspire, and how most people associated with the United States live. That consumption, and lots of it, is key to what the United States is, and aims to be, is hardly controversial—at least within the country’s political mainstream. Indeed, the very notion of the “American Dream” in its contemporary variant [Hunnicut 2013], and its promise of prosperity and abundance, is predicated on consumption. It is for such reasons that historian Lizabeth Cohen refers to the United States as a “consumers’ republic,” a country with “an economy, culture, and politics built around the promises of mass consumption” [Cohen 2003, p. 7]. Indeed to be a successfully “developed” country in the eyes that dominate U.S. political-economic discourse has long been synonymous with high levels of consumption. Walt Whitman Rostow, an academic and political-economic theorist who served as Special Assistant for National Security Affairs during the administration of Lyndon Baines Johnson (1963-1969), for example, explicitly championed such a viewpoint more than half a century ago. In his highly influential, Cold-War-inspired book, one in which he posited a teleological model of economic growth for all countries, he argued that the final stage of “development” (which, by the time his book was published in 1960, the United States had allegedly already achieved) was the “age of high mass-consumption” [Rostow 1960].

In addition to high-level rhetoric equating the United States with consumption, there is also a strong material basis for focusing on the United States in thinking critically about matters of consumption. The average U.S. American consumes more than 300 pounds of plastics a year [Freinkel 2011], for example, and 2,842 cubic meters of water, more than twice the annual

consumption of a typical resident of the United Kingdom [Mekonnen & Hoekstra 2011]. Although only 3.1 percent of the world's children live in the United States, U.S. families purchase more than 40 percent of the toys sold globally each year. Meanwhile, more than 50 percent of U.S. households own three or more televisions [Arnold et al. 2012, pp. 36 & 120], and more than 80 percent have a clothes dryer (in comparison to less than 4 percent in Italy [Steingraber 2011, p. 191]). There are also now more privately-owned cars in the United States than there are licensed drivers in the country [Mugenyi & Engler 2011]. All this “stuff” both reflects and necessitates ever-more space, which perhaps helps explain why the size of new houses in the United States grew 38 percent between 1975 and 2002, a period during which the number of people per household declined [Worldwatch Institute, undated]. According to 2005 figures, 1 in 11 U.S. households rents storage space outside the home for personal belongings (space which occupies a total of 1.875 billion square feet, or more than 43,000 acres – about the same size as the land area of Brooklyn, New York). Moreover, garages, in 75 percent of the homes that have them, are no longer spaces for cars, but for storage of household goods [Arnold et al. 2012, p. 44]. At the same time, U.S. Americans generate 942 kilos per capita annually of solid waste [Hoorweg and Bhada Tata 2012] – a manifestation of U.S. society's embrace of disposability and the perceived “need” to replace old products with new ones, and of efforts by corporate interests (known as “planned obsolescence”) to shorten the life of manufactured goods to increase consumption [Slade 2006].

In terms of the consumption of energy, the United States utilizes more for air-conditioning—7-10 billion gallons of gasoline per year simply for motor vehicles— than does the rest of the world combined, and more than the entire population of Africa (about one billion people) consumes for all purposes [Cox 2010, Cox 2012]. Moreover, the United States, with less than five percent of the world's population, uses about 25 percent of the world's fossil fuels (coal, oil, and natural gas) [Worldwatch Institute, undated].

Such a collective lifestyle is clearly unsustainable from the perspective of the planet Earth. As of 2012, the planet had 1.79 hectares of biologically productive land and water per person to supply resources and absorb waste, according to the Global Footprint Network. Yet the United States requires, as indicated by what it consumed during the years of the late 2000s, 7-8 hectares per person—somewhere around four times more than the planet can support in other words—thus undermining Earth's long-term capacity and effectively stealing resources from present and future generations.

## **2. The Ecologically Privileged**

The problem with speaking of consumption in such ways is that it assumes averages – in this case per capita consumption in the United States – are

meaningful, and helps to obscure the gross socio-economic inequalities that characterize the country [Buchheit 2013, Yen 2013]. At the same time, it ignores the fact that hyper-consumption is not a problem of the United States so much as it is of privileged classes – what I have called the ecologically privileged [Nevins 2013] – a group that transcends the territorial boundaries of any particular nation-state. In this regard, the work of international development scholar David Satterthwaite is helpful.

As Satterthwaite has pointed out in relation to climate change, the wealthiest twenty percent of the world's population—given their consumption and lifestyles, as well as the associated institutions and infrastructure—is likely responsible for more than 80 percent of all contemporary greenhouse gas emissions, and an even greater percentage of historical emissions [Satterthwaite 2009, Chakravarty & al. 2009]. This is not to say that population expansion does not matter at all. High rates of demographic growth among the global poor and related increases in consumption can and do have significant impacts on local resource bases. But to state what should be painfully obvious, these populations have a negligible impact on the global environment given how little they consume. According to Satterthwaite, for example, 18.5 per cent of the world's population growth during the 35-year period of 1980-2005 took place in sub-Saharan Africa, but its share of the growth in global carbon emissions was only 2.5 per cent. During that same period, Canada and the United States had 4 per cent of population growth, but were responsible for 13.9 per cent of the increase in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions [Satterthwaite 2009].

Grossly unequal responsibility for carbon emissions is a powerful manifestation of the associated, highly-internally-differentiated, international order. That said, high levels of consumption cannot be neatly bounded via the category of the nation-state (among others) given the importance of economic class, for instance, and associated consumption differentials within countries. Moreover, with the rapid growth of wealthy, high-consuming classes of typically urbanized people in countries like Brazil, China, India, and South Africa, it is too simple to suggest that large ecological footprints are limited to the denizens of the world's richest (in a per-capita sense) countries. It is for this reason that Satterthwaite argues compellingly for assigning greenhouse gas emissions—and thus efforts to reduce them—to households and individuals rather than nation-states [Satterthwaite 2009]. While this complicates the assertion that ecological privilege – and its inextricable flip-side, ecological disadvantage – is tied to particular nation-states, it does not fundamentally undermine it given historical-geographical concentrations of a grossly disproportionate share of global wealth and consumption in countries of “the West” such as the United States.

To contend that consumption is central to the U.S. way of life is not to suggest that it is the only key aspect. Certainly, there are myriad other ways to represent and understand the United States and its dominant ways of seeing



and being. Historian Niall Ferguson, for example, argues in relation to the United States in particular and “the West” more broadly that democracy/representative government, capitalism, the rule of law, and civil society are “the key components of our civilization” [Ferguson 2013, p. 11]. These factors are what explain for Ferguson the West’s prosperity and well-being over time, and the stifling of these factors (in large part due to what he sees as excessive government regulation) explains the more recent decline of the United States and its Western allies vis-à-vis countries like China. While Ferguson’s analysis is clearly very ideologically driven—previously he has found that, overall, British imperialism was a positive force for imposing modernity on much of the world (by bringing free-market capitalism and liberal democracy, among other things) and championed the United States’ playing a similar role [Ferguson 2003] – its highlighting of capitalism and democracy are useful to consider (in ways not intended by Ferguson) in relation to the notion of the United States as a “consumers’ republic” and its associated political ecological inequities.

### **3. The Political-Economic and Military Scaffolding of Global Inequality**

The inequity of wealth and consumption is tied to the very nature of the global political economy, one that United States has played an inordinately large role in shaping, and one over which it exerts a disproportionate amount of influence—in significant part through the U.S. military. It is also, relatedly, both reflective and productive of a world characterized by what I call dys-ecologism [Nevins 2013]. Dys-ecologism refers to the web of relations associated with the appropriation of an unsustainable and socially unjust share of the biosphere’s resources. It unfolds in a manner that concentrates benefits in the bodies and places associated with, a privileged minority, and detriments in those associated with a disadvantaged majority. As with any “ism” of accumulation and dispossession [Nevins 2009], it is inextricably tied to privilege and disadvantage. In other words, dys-ecologism is inextricably related to the existence and (re-) production of ecological injustice—in addition to other forms and systems of injustice that are socio-geographically embedded and that produce well-being for the relatively few and harm for the many. It is estimated, for example, that between several hundred thousand and almost two million people die prematurely each year as a result of growing carbon emissions [Jacobson 2008, DARA 2012, OECD 2012]. In the case of climate change, it is many of the world’s lowest-income peoples and areas – e.g., low-lying coastal zones and small islands, polar regions, Africa as a whole – which are and will be most harmed. This is a result of their already existing vulnerability and thus relative inability to adapt to or insulate themselves from the detrimental impacts associated with major environmental change; it is also a

function of geographic locations and the fact that the detriments – changes in water availability and agricultural productivity, for instance – are not evenly distributed across global space [Liverman 2007, DARA 2012]. As such, dys-ecologism is part and parcel of a constellation of socio-ecological relations, ones which embody the unequal distribution of life and death conditions for Earth's inhabitants.

Dys-ecologism is not reducible to the “American Way of Life,” and yet, at the same time, is inseparable from it in that the latter is also predicated upon and necessitates the consumption of a disproportionately large share of the Earth's resources. That “way of life” is also not limited to U.S. Americans—and it is one that U.S. Americans access in a highly uneven manner given the country's high levels of inequality and the insecurity that many experience [Buchheit 2013, Yen 2013]. But it is tightly tied to a particularly U.S. American political economy in that the United States both embodies that way of life—and iconically so more than any other country—and also is the nation-state most responsible for overseeing a global political-economic and military order that allows for the particular form of ecological politics that characterizes it.

One element of that political ecology is what Timothy Mitchell characterizes as a “*carbon democracy*”, a polity in its present-day incarnation very much dependent on oil. It involves “*a form of politics whose mechanisms on multiple levels involve the processes of producing and using carbon energy*” [Mitchell 2011, p. 5] This allows for a far-reaching state as well as “cheap” energy that fuels an economic system (one largely beyond the purview of democratic influence) that provides an abundance of consumer goods, and promises illimitable economic growth. Thus, for leading industrialized countries like the United States, their citizenries “*have developed ways of eating, travelling, housing themselves and consuming other goods and services that require very large amounts of energy from oil and other fossil fuels*” – “*forms of economic and political life that would not exist*” without oil and the energy derived from it [Mitchell 2011, p. 6]. While oil itself makes up a small percentage of the U.S. gross domestic product,(GDP), oil's availability and its relatively low price “is indispensable to a whole host of other industries, including automobile manufacture, road and highway construction, airlines, petrochemicals, agriculture, tourism, and suburban commerce” – sectors which, together, “*make up the heart of the American economy*” and by extension make possible the way of life associated with the United States [Klare 2004, p. xiv].

#### **4. Empire as a Way of Life**

Ensuring the success of this petroleum-fueled economy and the continuation of the associated way of life, argues peace and security studies scholar Michael Klare, is tightly tied to U.S. foreign and military policy, and has been ever

since the end of World War II. As such, “*American leaders—of whatever party affiliation—have felt compelled to do whatever was necessary to ensure that enough [oil] was available to satisfy our ever-expanding requirements*” [Klare 2004, p. xiv]. Among the better-known examples is the long-standing U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia, one which, ever since the 1940s or so, has rested on what is effectively an “*oil-for-protection arrangement*” [Klare 2004, p. xiii, Klare 2001, Mitchell 2011, Vitalis 2009].

Maintaining that relationship and ensuring the continuing flow of Persian Gulf oil led to an increasing geostrategic emphasis on the Middle East—and a growing military presence in the region—by the United States beginning in the mid-1900s. Perhaps no event embodies this shift better than the 1973-74 “oil shocks,” in the midst of which high-level U.S. officials spoke of using military force to ensure oil supplies in times of “peace” in order to maintain national economic health. This became public in 1975 when then-secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, told journalists that Washington was prepared to wage war over oil. While Kissinger expressed reluctance to use force in the case of disagreement over pricing, reports Klare, he stated that Washington would not hesitate to act forcefully “*where there’s some actual strangulation of the industrialized world*” [quoted in Klare 2001, p. 33]. President Jimmy Carter made official the thinking behind such practice in 1980. In enunciating the so-called Carter Doctrine in the face of perceived, great threats to U.S. geo-political and -economic interests—the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, and the overthrow of Shah Reza Pahlavi earlier that same year and the rise of an Islamic regime in Iran—Carter characterized as a “vital interest” the smooth flow of Persian Gulf oil of the United States while asserting that Washington would use “*any means necessary, including military force*” to ensure that flow [quoted in Klare 2004, pp. 3-4].

Such a global projection of state power is hardly controversial in the United States—at least within the country’s political mainstream. It is at the core of a U.S. foreign policy, one with roots in policies and practices that long precede the Cold War, that embraces “openness”—which translates into an openness to U.S. exports and investment—and that champion “free enterprise” economic systems and liberal democratic polities as part of a world order dominated by the United States [Bacevich 2002]. Such openness, in the form of nation-state boundaries porous to U.S. goods and capital, facilitates the practice of one of the most important manners by which capitalism attempts to resolve its internal crises: the “spatial fix” by which insufficient returns to capital investment in one location or area is remedied by moving that capital elsewhere [Harvey 1982].

The championing of “openness” is reflective of the dominant U.S. ideology within the country’s ruling class, at the center of which is a profound consensus among Democrats and Republicans about what retired U.S. Army colonel and international relations scholar Andrew Bacevich calls the

“fundamentals” of U.S. foreign policy [Bacevich 2002]. These include what he labels the American credo—the notion that the necessary job of the United States is “to lead, save, liberate, and ultimately transform the world” [Bacevich 2010, p. 12]. It sees the world in generally black and white terms, with obvious forces of good (the United States and its allies) and those that are indisputably nefarious. This credo dovetails with a “sacred trinity” of convictions that underlie US military practice: international peace and order require a global U.S. military presence, a military able to project power globally, and one that intervenes globally to counter existing or anticipated threats [Bacevich 2010].

This worldview dovetails nicely with the U.S. variant of empire, one that is largely a spatially embedded phenomenon with a definite geography, yet that does not correspond to the model of Western empires of old and their heavy emphasis on direct territorial control. As Neil Smith [2003] asserts, contemporary U.S. imperialism is fundamentally different from that exercised by western European countries during the era of formal colonialism. As opposed to the old imperialist view of space as absolute or as the endowment of natural resources of a particular territory, U.S imperialists – or at least a significant slice of the imperialist class [Glassman 2005] – perceive and treat space as malleable, the outcome (as well as constituent and constitutive) of particular political-economic processes, rather than primordial and unchanging. European colonialism facilitated the realization of this vision by helping to unite the world, integrating the “Third World” into a West-dominated world economy over which the United States would soon reign. World War II provided the opening for the United States to take advantage of the largely European-created world market. Smith characterizes this approach as one of “*global economic access without colonies,*” paired with a *geostrategic vision of “necessary military bases around the globe both to protect global economic interests and to restrain any further military belligerence”* [Smith 2003, p. 349]. In this regard, it is a mistake, asserts anthropologist David Vine, to see the “new” U.S. imperialism as one that eschews territorial conquest as it relies on many hundreds of U.S. military bases that exist in dozens of countries across the world. This global network of extraterritorial military installations facilitates, argues Vine, “*the control of territory vastly disproportionate to the land actually occupied*” [Vine 2009, p. 187]. Along with an enormous navy, this has allowed the United States, like previous empires, “*to dominate large swaths of ocean territory upon which global trade and economic expansion relies*” [Vine 2009, p. 187, Vine 2012].

While this militarized empire clearly has high costs in terms of war and violence – and the attendant human suffering – it also helps to bring about and maintain a global political-economy predicated on rapacious consumption as the Pentagon itself is the planet’s single biggest consumer of fossil fuels. The U.S. military consumes more than 300,000 barrels of oil per day, an amount greater than that consumed by any of the vast majority of the world’s countries,

and is thus a major contributor to global climate change – among other environmental ills. In other words, the U.S. military, and the “way of life” it upholds and enables, kills in a variety of ways.

### **Conclusion: A Time to Die**

Writing more than two decades ago in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall, Barbara Ehrenreich [1990, p. 79], observed that we would be able to establish the “deadline for capitalism,” the system’s demise in other words, “by the sound of falling trees.” This is an observation that equally applies to the “American way of life,” not least at a time when, due to the rapacious activities of humanity, and of the ecologically privileged in particular, trees are falling at frightening levels across the planet [Robbins 2012].

Referring to a large and growing body of literature in the sciences and public policy, Roy Scranton today speaks of a “*chorus of Jeremiahs [which] predicts a radically transformed global climate forcing widespread upheaval – not possibly, not potentially, but inevitably.*” As such, in terms of the viability of what we call civilization, he asserts, “We have passed the point of no return.” We thus “have to learn how to die not as individuals, but as a civilization” if we want to continue to live in the Anthropocene [Scranton 2013]. Scranton is clearly not talking about the types of death produced by the “American way of life,” but of a letting go, an abandoning of that which ideologically and materially produces such deaths—at least to the extent that they are tied to fossil fuel consumption.

Writing in a more modest fashion, Bill McKibben argues, “New planets require new habits. We simply can’t live on the new earth as if it were the old earth; we’ve foreclosed that option” [McKibben 2010, p. 47]. McKibben provides a few ideas as to what those new habits might be—he suggests, for example, that people need to forego trips by airplane given aviation’s high ecological cost [Nevins 2013] and instead take “trips” via the Internet. Similarly, biologist Susan Steingraber calls on her readers to use the power of evaporation, instead of fossil-fuel-powered machines, to dry their clothes, among other practices she advocates. At the same time, she recognizes that “Hanging laundry cannot stop global warming” [Steingraber 2011, p. 194]. Still, she insists on the value of such activities as part of a process involving “the denormalizing of fossil-fuel ways of living” [Steingraber 2011, p. 194]. In other words, the struggle to bring about a new, more sustainable and socio-ecologically just world, one not characterized by dys-ecologism, to move beyond the “American way of life,” necessitates, among other things, engaging in counterhegemonic activities, in efforts to build new dominant ways of seeing.

Of course, there are severe limitations to focusing on changing individual practices and our relationship to particular technologies, not least because dominant practices, like technologies, build the world in ways that

make them indispensable. As such, the effort to make change must also focus on systemic transformation [Cox 2010, Winner 1989]. In the case of helping to advance the death of the “American way of life,” this means challenging U.S. militarism, for example, and the pursuit of endless economic growth, materialism [Monbiot 2013] and increasing consumption as ends in and of themselves. But given the complex spatialities of such ecologically rapacious ways of seeing and being—in no small part due to the United States’ success in socially spatializing the dominant way of life associated with it—focusing on the United States in and of itself will not be sufficient. This is an undertaking that must necessarily unfold on multiple geographical scales, from the global to the individual—not least because of their interrelated and co-productive nature [Hyndman 2004].

Making life possible for all requires the end of that which denies it.

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