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Elizabeth Kolbert (2014). *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., print. 319 pages. ISBN 9780805092998

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While the aged have famously always tended to complain that the world is going to hell in a hand-basket, it has usually been the social, not the natural world they had in mind. Although the roots of the environmental movement lie much earlier (see: http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_history_of_environmentalism), with Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962) and Dorothy Dinnerstein's (1976) *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, the idea of man-made environmental disruption and crisis entered our everyday consciousness. In light of science writer Elizabeth Kolbert's review of the five previous major extinctions (End-Ordovician, Late Devonian, End-Permian, Late Triassic and End-Cretaceous) and the growing evidence of the prospect of a sixth (End-Anthropocene?) due to anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD), the threat ceases to be a premonition: it is increasingly evident that we are destined soon to go the way of the dinosaurs and the great auk, together with species currently on the way out such as the Panamanian golden frogs, the bats, the Sumatran rhinos, the coral reefs ... rats and cockroaches possibly excepted. Unlike the various life-forms previously rendered extinct by events such as a giant asteroid crashing into the Yucatan peninsula, we will have only ourselves to blame.

Although Kolbert's book is well-written, the science being reviewed in a manner accessible to the lay reader through accounts of the author's varied expeditions to exotic research sites and interviews with cutting edge researchers from around the

world, I found myself constantly putting it down and having to force myself to pick it up again in the interest of completing this review. Clearly, facing the evidence of disappearing species and the prospect of human extinction makes me anxious. But this is no ordinary death anxiety *á la* Ernest Becker (1973) and terror management theory: facing individual extinction is hard enough; the thought of the complete destruction of human life and all the achievements of humanity on this planet generates anxiety and grief of a different order altogether. In this connection I recall Sartre's (1963) revelation in his short biographical essay *The Words* how untouched he was by death anxiety when his friends who were reading Heidegger were struggling with it, until with the explosion of the atom bomb it came home to him that not merely he would perish but his books as well.

If there is a general tendency on the part of individuals and society toward the denial of death, how much greater is this proclivity in the face of mass extinction? Despite warnings such as that offered by Stanford ecologist Paul Ehrlich, "In pushing other species to extinction, humanity is busy sawing off the limb on which it perches" (quoted by Kolbert, p. 267), given the short-term economic benefits of business-as-usual and the neoliberal celebration rather than condemnation of our greed, widespread resistance to recognition of ACD will likely continue until people begin to directly and painfully experience its consequences, by which time it will be too late, if it isn't already, to do anything much about it.¹

¹While the rich may for a time be more able to evade such consequences they are already being felt by ordinary folks, such as those in the greater Toledo area who have been advised not to drink, boil or bathe in local tap water due to contamination from a giant toxic algae bloom in Lake Erie owing to a combination of factory/industrial farming, fertilizer run-off and climate change (see: <http://www.counterpunch.org/2014/08/04/dont-drink-the-water/>).

In the recent (2014) Hollywood blockbuster by that name, *Noah*, deviating from the standard narrative, concludes God intends to exclude humanity from the new beginning, knowing that if we survived our fatal flaw would inevitably lead to the same corruption and destructiveness all over again. As Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979) among others has explained, the rise of human consciousness puts us out of sync with and disturbs natural systems. As Kolbert herself puts the point: "With the capacity to represent the world in signs and symbols comes the capacity to change it, which, as it happens, is also the capacity to destroy it" (p. 258). In this vein Thomas Hardy (1919) concludes his dark poem *Before Life and After* with the lines: "But the disease of feeling germed and primal rightness took the tinct of wrong. Ere nescience shall be reaffirmed, how long, how long?"

(Doesn't look like it will be long.)

Without succumbing to the nihilism that would write us off as hopelessly destructive and welcome our extinction, we could recognize the deep existential and psychosocial roots of our overreaching and seek to rigorously limit ourselves and our destructive effects on fragile ecosystems. After all, many First Nations peoples long practiced a type of eco-spirituality that expressed gratitude toward and an attitude of conservation and husbandry toward the gifts of the earth—until we avidly destroyed their “backward” cultures. While such restraint and limit-setting is incompatible with the profit motive and the endless quest for “growth” and “expansion,” and while capitalism must bear a considerable degree of responsibility for our crisis, its roots are to be found in a dynamic underlying both capitalism and many of its socialist alternatives. It was only late in his career that, under the influence of D.T. Suzuki, Erich Fromm (1960) became interested in Zen Buddhism and began to correct for the characteristically Western bias toward activity and mastery

expressed in Marx's concept of man as an active producer (Fromm, 1961). While not yet relinquishing his unfortunate definition of mental health as a *productive* (as distinct from a receptive, exploitative, hoarding or marketing) orientation to life (Fromm, 1947), in distinguishing *being* from *having* Fromm (1976) seemed on the way to distinguishing it from *doing* as well. I wish he had defined health in terms of one of his own most prominent characteristics: a *caring* orientation to life.

Although neo-liberal capitalism represents one of its most toxic manifestations, the dynamic of industrial society as such and the instrumental consciousness underlying it must shoulder a considerable portion of the blame for our current predicament. We have not been very good at setting limits to desire or anticipating the (hence, unanticipated) consequences of our actions. In his existential neo-Marxism Sartre (1960) tried to get at this through his concept of "the counter-finality of the practico-inerte" whereby on entering a complex field of forces and counter-forces our pursuit of envisioned goals is often thwarted, bringing about conditions other than and even opposite to those intended, boomeranging, as it were, against us—an insight Robbie Burns memorably conveyed in "To a Mouse" (1785): "The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, Gang aft agley. An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, for promis'd joy!"

Kolbert offers few grounds for hope, devoting little attention to such upbeat scenarios as our "reengineering the atmosphere" or "decamping to other planets." Does she hope to shock us into reparative action? Might her work have the opposite effect of inducing a pessimism that serves as justification for inaction on the grounds that since our fate is sealed we may as well just party on? Personally, I find it difficult to gauge how much of the pessimism I am left with after reading her book is that of a seventy year-old man's conflation of his own impending de-

mise with that of our species and how much is justified by the dismal facts she reviews.

Fortunately, moral action has always enjoyed a certain autonomy with respect to questions of utility. My mortality has never seemed to constitute much of an excuse for bad behaviour. We were given a gift, but proved to be poor caretakers. Even if it is ultimately too late to save ourselves, we ought to curtail our destructiveness toward nature, other species and one another simply because it is the right thing to do.

For Melanie Klein (1937), in psychic reality “Mother Nature” is exactly that: a projection of our first landscape, mother’s body. A sign of our evolution beyond the primitive, narcissistic universe of the paranoid-schizoid position is the emergence of depressive guilt for our attacks upon her and anxiety lest it be too late to make reparation. Kolbert’s book has certainly stimulated depressive guilt and anxiety in me. We must weep for what we are losing and have lost.

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Films:

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Internet Resources:

Timeline of the history of environmentalism:

en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_history_of_environmentalism

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