

Ecological uncivilisation: Precarious world-making after progress

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Abstract

Responding to the proposition that learning to live in the Anthropocene involves learning how to die, this article problematises the modes of world-making upheld in some of the contemporary proposals for the global reorganisation of societies towards just, socio-ecological transitions beyond the techno-fixes of geoengineering, green growth, and their attendant ideals of progress. Specifically, it critically examines one such proposal that, inspired by process philosophy, has proven deeply influential in China's recent shift in ecological (geo)politics: the idea of an 'ecological civilisation' based on principles of ontological relationality, democratic responsibility, and a new alliance between the sciences and the humanities. The article argues that while such a project rejects the substantive values of modern progress, its regulative notion of civilisation retains the modern story of progress as a mode of valuation and therefore reinscribes imperial, colonial values at the heart of ecology. In response, the article suggests that learning to die in the wake of ecological devastation requires making life outside the modern coordinates of progress, which is to say living without the ideal of civilisation. Seeking to expand the political imagination at a time of socio-ecological transformations, it calls for 'ecological uncivilisation' as a permanent experimentation with improbable forms of world-making and methodologies of life that are envisaged thanks to ongoing histories of decolonisation and not in spite of them; that strive to live and die well but not always better.

Keywords

China, civilisation, climate change, political imagination, process philosophy

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The difficulty is just this:— It may be impossible to conceive a reorganisation of society adequate for the removal of some admitted evil without destroying the social organisation and the civilization which depends on it. An allied plea is that there is no known way of removing the evil without the introduction of worse evils of some other type.

Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (1967, p. 20)

Introduction: The changing climates of progress

Writing in the Opinion pages of the *New York Times* on what later became the focus of his pithy *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015), army veteran Roy Scranton recalls a day, two and a half years after his return from Iraq, when, ‘safe and lazy back in Fort Sill, Okla., I thought I had made it out’ (Scranton, 2013). During the four years of his round in Iraq, he was terrified by the idea of dying. Baghdad, he writes, ‘seemed incredibly dangerous, even though statistically I was pretty safe. We got shot and mortared, and I.E.D.’s [Improvised Explosive Devices] laced every highway, but I had a good armor, we had a great medic, and we were the most powerful military the world had ever seen.’ His odds of coming home were, on the whole, good – maybe ‘wounded, but probably alive’. Yet none of that assuaged the ineluctable sense, every time he would go out on a mission, that death was the order of the day: ‘I looked down the barrel of the future and saw a dark, empty hole’ (2013, n.p.). After all, he had become ‘a private in the United States Army. This strange, precarious world was my new home. If I survived.’ He did survive, in spite of all. And for a while, the fact of finally having left Iraq meant the possibility of leaving that future behind, of returning to a more familiar temporal path. But on that day when it truly began to feel like he had made it out, Scranton (2013) turned on the television only to discover that Hurricane Katrina was hitting New Orleans:

This time it was the weather that brought shock and awe, but I saw the same chaos and urban collapse I’d seen in Baghdad, the same failure of planning and the same tide of anarchy. The 82nd Airborne hit the ground, took strategic points and patrolled streets now under de facto martial law. My unit was put on alert to prepare for riot control operations. The grim future I’d seen in Baghdad was coming home: not terrorism, not even W.M.D.’s [Weapons of Mass Destruction], but a civilization in collapse, with a crippled infrastructure, unable to recuperate from shocks to its system. And today, with recovery still going on more than a year after Sandy and many critics arguing that the Eastern seaboard is no more prepared for a huge weather event than we were last November, it’s clear that future’s not going away.

A civilisation in collapse. That, perhaps, is one of the meanings of this time of endings, this time of warming and of melting ice-caps, this time of extinctions and of extreme weather events, of droughts and climate migration, of carbon fuelled capitalism and ecological turmoil – a time otherwise now often marked by the name ‘Anthropocene’ (see Blok & Jensen, 2019). To think of it as a civilisation in collapse, as the end of that which we have called ‘civilisation’, is to make perceptible, of course, that no amount of technical fixes will do the trick (Nightingale et al., 2019); that the collapse is *ecological* in its most expansive sense, involving not only environmental ecologies but the ecology of the social, of the mental, of the cultural and of the political as well; that henceforth, as Félix

Guattari (2001, p. 28) put it, ‘it is the ways of living on this planet that are in question’, those very same ways of ploughing the Earth that not long ago we came to call ‘civilisation’. Which is why, beyond scientific reports and techno-fixes, beyond international agreements and climate targets, Scranton (2015, p. 27) makes the powerful proposition that, if ‘we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die’.

Learning how to die is not exactly easy. It might be said – as indeed has often been said, from Cicero to Montaigne – that philosophy itself was invented in response to this challenge, as an art in learning how to live and die well (Hadot, 1995). Confronted with the urgency of learning how to die as a soldier in Iraq, Scranton found a source of inspiration in the *Hagakure*, an eighteenth century *bushidō* manual by Yamamoto Tsunetomo, which advised that meditation on inevitable death ought to be a daily performance, leading to a becoming with one’s death in one’s thoughts and mode of living by learning to accept the transience of one’s own life. But if this was a difficult lesson, learned in the midst of flying bullets and ubiquitous IEDs, it was also his own personal lesson. While according to former US President George W. Bush (2001, p. 1361) it was *in order* ‘to save civilization itself’ that Scranton and others were eventually sent to Iraq, ‘[t]he rub now’, Scranton (2015, p. 21) poignantly observes in an ironic turn of events, ‘is that we have to learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization’.

This compounds the challenge. But as I will argue, this is not simply because ‘humans are wired to believe that tomorrow will be much like today’ (2015, p. 22). After all, whatever the lethargy in the implementation of the international agreements to which governments around the world have committed themselves, recent years have also seen no shortage of new, bold proposals and manifestos for global world-making projects and socio-ecological transitions emanating from divergent political, geographical and cultural traditions – including the Green New Deal, the Pacto Ecosocial del Sur, and even the Ecomodernist Manifesto, among others. Indeed, save for the intervention of an unforeseeable cataclysmic event that might puncture the fabric of time and bring it to an absolute end, perhaps one of the difficulties of learning to die ‘as a civilisation’ is that the end of what we call a ‘civilisation’ is more akin to a slow and protracted process of attrition and exhaustion than a punctuated cessation. As such, learning to die ‘as a civilisation’ poses a profound challenge to the political imagination: its own ending raises the speculative question of the ‘afters’ to which death might give way, and of the possible and impossible modes of world-making and forms of sociality that might emerge in its wake. Lured by the question of learning how to die today whilst seeking to expand our imaginations, in this article I critically examine one such speculative call and project of world-making that, in full acknowledgement of the need for an ‘after’ to *this* capitalist, growth-obsessed and ecocidal civilisation, calls for a radical transformation of the very foundations of human collective life so as to found a new, global ‘ecological civilisation’ based on principles of sustainability, ontological interdependence and relationality, liberal communitarianism, and a new alliance between the sciences and the humanities (e.g. Clayton & Schwartz, 2019; Cobb & Schwartz, 2018; Gare, 2017).

A number of tangled reasons make the proposal for an ‘ecological civilisation’ an especially interesting and instructive terrain – at once speculative, political and ecological – on which to explore the challenges to our political imagination that the question of learning how to die in the Anthropocene poses. Though it appears to have early roots in the Soviet

eco-Marxist notion of ‘ecological culture’ taken up by leading government figure Ivan T. Frolov in the 1980s (see Gare, 2021; Huan, 2016), the contemporary form of this proposal has been espoused by a collective of theologians, philosophers, ethicists and activists who for decades have sustained and cultivated a philosophical tradition that more recently has come to influence eco-cultural theory and the social sciences more generally. That is, the tradition of process philosophy associated with the work of Alfred North Whitehead, among others – a philosophical tradition that, in their words, rejects the dogmatic materialism of modern thought and provides a ‘broader, more realistic, nondual understanding of reality with implications for how we live’ (Cobb & Schwartz, 2018, p. 4; Gare, 2017). And while still marginal in western debates, the notion and project of an ‘ecological civilisation’ has already become the hallmark of the Chinese government’s approach to ecological politics and policy, inscribing the very concept into the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) constitution in 2012, and developing a whole swathe of far-reaching socio-environmental policies in its name (Geall & Ely, 2018; Wang et al., 2014) – a distinctly authoritarian form of ecological (geo)politics that some have dubbed ‘coercive environmentalism’ (Charbonnier, 2020; Li & Shapiro, 2020).

Finally, it may go without saying but not without noting that the project of an ‘ecological civilisation’ is an avowedly *civilisational* proposal, one that claims not simply to accept but to fully embrace the fact that modern industrial civilisation is currently writing the epitaph to its own demise and must be replaced wholesale by a new and better global principle of planetary organisation. In this sense, one would hope that the lessons a critical examination of the project of ‘ecological civilisation’ yields might also perhaps be of some allegorical value, complicating the political image of thought that pits ecological world-making projects, in their noble and innocent pursuit of the global common good, against forces of power and oppression. For if the slow process of civilisational collapse renders the question of learning how to die, of what modes of world-making might be cultivated in its wake, especially challenging, none find this more intractable, more unimaginable, than the heirs of those who, only in the eighteenth century, *invented* the concept of ‘civilisation’ as such and did so precisely in order to sum up, in Norbert Elias’s (2000, p. 4) classic words, ‘everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or “more primitive” contemporary ones’, everything that was said to constitute ‘its special character and what it is proud of: the level of *its* technology, the nature of *its* manners, the development of *its* scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more’. Indeed, created at the heart of the age of European empires, through the prism of the colonial encounter, as a word both for the process that rendered ‘man’ civilised *and* for the very culmination of that process, the notion of civilisation ‘entered the history of ideas at the same time as the modern sense of the word *progress*’, and they ‘were destined to maintain a most intimate relationship’ that would make it ‘essential to determine the precise phases of the civilizing process, the stages of social progress’ (Starobinski, 1993, p. 4).

This is why in what follows I make the proposition that learning to die in the Anthropocene might require that one learn to live outside of the modern coordinates of progress. And while, like many others thinking about socio-ecological transitions, proponents of an ‘ecological civilisation’ are critical of the extractivist, materialistic, growth-oriented and scientific principles that constitute the substantive values of progress of the

modern, capitalist world-system, the very ideal of an ecological *civilisation* has ‘progress’ – a global, boundless and upwards trajectory towards a future that, guided by a set of universal principles, will be ‘better’ than the present – built into it as a mode of valuation, thereby reinscribing imperial, colonial values at the heart of their world-making efforts. Which is also to say that learning to die ‘as a civilisation’ probably requires that one learn to live *without* the concept and ideal of civilisation. In other words, it requires a speculative activation of the political imagination which, rather than replace one civilisational model for another, rather than conjure the progressive horizon of a new global situation that would eventually substitute the current state of affairs, refuses the lure of progress so as to give itself over to an ongoing and unfinished experimentation with more precarious, fragmentary, subjunctive and inchoate forms of sociality on unstable ecological terrain. Inspired by the Dark Mountain Project’s (Kingsnorth & Hine, 2009) poetic experiment in ‘uncivilisation’, in this article I seek to activate our political imagination after progress by proposing *ecological uncivilisation* as a permanent experimentation with improbable forms of world-making and methodologies of life that are articulated thanks to the earth-wide precariousness that calls them into action and not in spite of them; that are envisaged thanks to ongoing histories of decolonisation and not despite them; that strive to live and die well but not always better.

Civilising the Anthropocene? Outline of an ecological civilisation

‘The term “ecological civilization”’, writes theologian and philosopher John Cobb in the preface to the primer on the matter written by Philip Clayton and Andrew Schwartz (2019, p. 1), ‘comes close to being an oxymoron’, for the very notion of civilisation ‘is partly defined in terms of humans altering their environment in favour of the immediate desires of their species. . . . In this sense, it might seem, a civilization is inherently anti-ecological. How then can we describe the goal for humanity as transitioning to ecological civilization?’ The answer to this question is usually couched in terms of a concern over the *form* such human alterations of the environment take, and the overarching philosophical, scientific and political principles by which they abide. Indeed, at the heart of the project for ecological civilisation lies a radical, if relatively uncontroversial, diagnosis: that the underlying causes of the present ecological turmoil are inseparable from the entire configuration of social, cultural, political and economic patterns that comprise modern industrial civilisation as such. ‘The massive inequality between the rich and the poor’, Clayton and Schwartz (2019, pp. 11–12) write, ‘is not separate from an economics of unlimited growth and the depletion of natural resources, extinction of species, or global warming. Contemporary civilization is designed to benefit the privileged elite at the expense of the poor and the environment.’

If ‘ecological civilisation’ could ultimately be redeemed from the sin of self-contradiction, it is because at its heart is precisely the attempt to lay out the philosophical, scientific and political foundations that could ground a new, global civilisation on thoroughly ecological principles. Key to this societal repatterning is the recognition that the hegemonic philosophical traditions that have come to dominate modern culture and its governing institutions, those that have emanated out of the rise, in the seventeenth

century, of a scientific materialism that bifurcated nature into two systems of reality – a realm of experiences, and a realm of the causes of those experiences – have rendered much of the natural and human sciences unable to respond to the consequences of the cultural and economic patterns to which they gave shape, patterns which reduce everyone and everything to predictable instruments of a global capitalist machine, thereby leading to ‘the degeneration of culture, the fragmentation of enquiry, the multiplication of disciplines and sub disciplines . . . ignoring each other, and a noise explosion hiding stagnation in intellectual life’ (Gare, 2017, p. 147).

In their enthroning of techno-scientific mastery and brute matter as the material of which everything is made, modern natural and human sciences have therefore committed themselves ‘to explaining away not only consciousness, but life itself, as nothing but physical and chemical processes, supporting a debased view of humanity and life that legitimates greed as the driving force of the economy and of the evolution of nature, imposing thereby a fundamentally flawed model of reality on humanity’ (Gare, 2017, p. 144). It is in order to replace such a flawed model and to lay the ground for ‘a new world-orientation’, that the proponents of an ecological civilisation argue that we must turn to another, more marginal western philosophical tradition that has rejected the bifurcation of nature and the scientific materialism that sustains it. Such philosophical tradition is none other than that of the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, and more broadly, the longer tradition – stretching back to the thought of F. W. J. Schelling – of ‘speculative naturalism’ in both philosophy and in the biological and ecological sciences, which would provide the foundations on which to develop an ecological ‘paradigm’ where ‘dualism and monism are replaced with a holism that portrays reality not as a collection of objects, but as a community of subjects – an interconnected whole, within which we are constituted by our relations’ (Clayton & Schwartz, 2019, p. 41).

This metaphysical holism of an interconnected community of subjects or organisms would, in the first instance, create the conditions for the development of natural and human sciences, as well as forms of agriculture and farming, that are consistent with the reality of organised complexity and its emergence as described by theoretical ecology, making the ultimate existents of the universe no longer bits of matter in motion but ‘creative processes, or durational self-constraining patterns of activity, and configurations of such processes at multiple scales in dynamic interaction’ (Gare, 2017, p. 178). As such, contemporary measurements of ‘productivity’, defined in terms of the volume of yields and hours of human labour, would be replaced by a concern for the ‘health’ and sustainability of the very creative processes and patterns of coordination through which soils, rivers, oceans, human and nonhuman animals, and the entire community of subjects that compose the biosphere, generate and regenerate themselves. The ‘health’ of a community of organisms, of the Earth itself, would thus be a function of the ‘mutual augmenting of the whole community and the component communities of each other, facilitating their continued successful functioning, their resilience in response to perturbations, new situations and stress, and for ongoing development and creativity to maximize developmental options, and can be measured as such’ (Gare, 2017, p. 180). No longer centred around capitalist values of productivity, in other words, such holism would instead measure and govern the ‘health’ of an ecological community as a function of its capacity for resilience, development and creativity.

But there is more. For a holistic metaphysics of organisational complexity seeking to repattern global social organisation cannot rest content with the very modern capitalist settlement that sought to parse out a separate realm of 'nature' as mere raw material for human consumption and cogitation. A 'paradigm shift', as some of its proponents label it, would also involve a correlative transformation of our philosophical anthropologies, rethinking what it means to be human in the wake of the 'recognition that humans are part of, and dependent upon, a living Earth' (Clayton & Schwartz, 2019, p. 99). Conceiving of the Earth as a community of subjects requires that one take seriously what biosemioticians have been arguing for decades (see Emmeche & Kull, 2011), that processes of sense-making are not the preserve of humans but pervade the entire world to varying degrees, such that every organism shapes itself and the pattern of its activity in response to its surrounding world. Humans, in this respect, constitute a difference not of nature but of degree, developing semiotic processes and capacities that enable them not only to respond to their immediate surroundings but

. . . to act back on the conditions of their emergence, and this implies the possibility of altering the trajectories of their natural and social communities. If the conditions are maintained for pursuing and disseminating the truth, it can be demonstrated we are not condemned to destroying the conditions of our existence. It is the commitment to truth and the conditions for pursuing it that could provide the ultimate foundation and unity for an environmental movement able to successfully challenge neoliberalism, or rather, managerialist market fundamentalism, and create a new, global civilization. (Gare, 2017, p. 164)

It is from the seeds of this philosophical anthropology that a sketch of a political philosophy makes itself perceptible, seeking to provide the socio-political and institutional architecture for the maintenance of 'conditions for pursuing and disseminating truth' with a view towards the creation of a global socio-ecological organisation 'where the destructive conflicts between tribes, civilizations, and nations will have been overcome' (Gare, 2017, p. 166). Accepting the fate of modern capitalist globalisation whilst lamenting the cultural 'fragmentation' which has derived from it, philosopher Arran Gare (2017, p. 166) and others argue that this will involve 'unifying the whole of humanity in a commitment to advancing the health of the global ecosystem and its subordinate communities'.

Such unification, we are told, would take place through a reformulation of globalisation along a multilayered federalism of 'communities of communities' overseen by international governing bodies, such as the United Nations, that would enable us to 'overcome the parochialism of each civilization and incorporate the major insights from all civilizations' (Gare, 2017, p. 184), thereby institutionalising universal 'recognition of the value of life, including non-human life forms and ecosystems, so that only those practices are allowed to flourish that augment ecosystems' (p. 181). According to Clayton and Schwartz (2019, pp. 106–107), such reformulation would require 'top-down' strategies that devise and implement policies, laws and regulations to 'encourage citizens and corporations to operate in ways that promote long-term sustainability and overall well-being', as well as some 'bottom-up' actions in which 'individual citizens, and local organisations, take on the responsibility of acting on behalf of the vision of long-term sustainability and overall well-being'. The aim, in any case, is clear: to cultivate virtues and modes of creative thinking, guided by a more holistic natural and social philosophy, that can foster 'the new social imaginary of

a global ecological civilization, and it is in relation to this that all other aspects of culture should be understood and evaluated, and acted upon' (Gare, 2017, p. 210).

This is of course but a brief outline, a theoretical silhouette drawn from two programmatically significant texts that give shape to the political imagination that an ecological civilisation limns. Whether one finds the proposal attractive or repulsive in theory will surely depend on one's political sensibilities, and on one's own interpretation of the process-philosophical tradition. For reasons that will become evident – if they aren't already – I diverge on both fronts (Savransky, 2016, 2021a). But it is not my intention to engage here in a counter-exegetical exercise. My interest, instead, is pragmatic – a concern for the world-making consequences that well-meaning ideas are capable of unleashing. For the fact is that these proposals no longer remain within the realm of philosophical speculation. As Gare (2010, p. 6) put it in an earlier programmatic text: 'The world should follow the lead of China.'

Progress after progress: The burden of an ecological civilisation

Alongside the significantly growing presence of process philosophy in China (Yang, 2010), 'ecological civilisation' made its debut appearance in 2007 at the CCP's 17th Congress and by 2014 was inscribed in its constitution and at the very heart of the Chinese government's awe-inspiring overhaul of political philosophy and governmental policies designed to make the People's Republic of China, currently the world's largest CO₂ producer and rising superpower, no longer beholden to the single capitalist imperative of economic growth and instead becoming a global leader in 'green development', recently announcing their aim of achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 (Geall & Ely, 2018; Wang et al., 2014).

Seen widely as an attempt to resolve the tensions between environmental protection and economic development through the creation of concrete policies of renewable energy, production, carbon reduction and reforestation, the notion of ecological civilisation in China frames the adoption of 'specific pathways, and has laid out pilots and a set of implementable changes in governance that can help achieve them', while simultaneously heralding 'the potential for a more assertive and confident China to assume a stronger leadership role in global environmental debates' (Geall & Ely, 2018, p. 1191). While paying close attention to the successes of the Chinese state to reduce carbon emissions and dependence on fossil fuels, as well as to implement massive programmes of afforestation – a staggering 25% of the planet's net increase in leaf area from 2000 to 2017 – and environmental conservation, Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro (2020, p. 23) remind us in their critical but remarkably detailed study of the politics of the recent Chinese environmental turn that the decisive pursuit of ecological civilisation in China cannot be disentangled from the increasingly authoritarian and repressive mode of governance that characterises its state-led environmentalism, such that 'in the name of ecological wellbeing, the state exploits the environment as a new form of political capital, harnessing it in the pursuit of authoritarian resilience and durability'.

This new 'environmental authoritarianism', as they call it, includes more than the deployment of geoengineering technologies for blue skies and rain, and policies

of ‘mandatory behaviour modification’ addressed to the middle classes of the wealthy eastern coast, controlled for instance through the deployment of ‘trash inspectors’ who actively police the appropriate disposal of waste, or through the piloting of ‘morality banks’ that award villagers credit points for recycling and practising a whole range of other ‘virtuous deeds’ while subtracting points for “‘extravagant’ funerals and birthday parties or other “acts of immorality”” (Li & Shapiro, 2020, pp. 69–71). It also involves forced displacements and dispossession of peoples for the sake of dam construction and hydropower development in the rural West, the mandatory ‘sedentarisation’ of herding nomads (including Uighurs, Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Kirghiz) in the name of ‘the win-win goals of poverty alleviation and grasslands restoration’, thereby making ecological migration ‘a centrepiece of China’s often elusive pursuit of ecological civilization’ (2020, p. 105).

But there is more still. To the extent that the project of ecological civilisation is also a means of repositioning China geopolitically, the panoply of domestic policies are only compounded by a host of international policies of ‘green’ investment, development and trade, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by reviving the old Silk Road across Central Asia as well as establishing new maritime paths along the coasts of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and now expanding ‘dramatically, both geographically and conceptually, with signatories encompassing about one-fourth of the global economy’ and a swathe of programmes that include but go beyond infrastructural development to encompass ‘anti-poverty programs, food and health aid, education, including scholarships for students from BRI countries to study in China and the stepped-up installation overseas of Confucius Institutes, which promote Chinese language and culture so as to create a friendly constituency of foreigners in China’ (Li & Shapiro, 2020, pp. 116–117).

What is interesting about Li and Shapiro’s incisive and well-informed examination, however, is that it is not quite a liberal critique of the authoritarian nature of Chinese state-led environmentalism, denouncing the non-environmental effects that such policies have upon ethnic minorities and the poor, and seeking to ‘unmask’ the hidden agenda of global imperialism behind China’s BRI programmes. As they rightly point out, so-called liberal democracies in the West are by no means strangers to coercive operations. Indeed, they were founded upon them (Lowe, 2015). The point they make, rather, is that for all of China’s achievements, coercive environmentalism is no guarantee, for ‘even the environmental successes are not always what they seem’ (Li & Shapiro, 2020, p. 23). Famously, the geopolitical influences of the BRI also enable the CCP to perform a form of ‘dirty migration’ whereby carbon outputs are displaced to other signatory countries, whilst Chinese dams across the Mekong Delta have deleterious implications downstream in Vietnam and Cambodia, ‘putting 64 species in danger and . . . limiting water flows on which millions depend’ (2020, p. 121). Domestically, their mass afforestation programmes are achieved by planting tree-monocultures that neglect the complex and situated requirements of specific ecological milieus thereby further degrading soils and wildlife habitats, whilst their politics of ‘ecological migration’ and sedentarisation of nomad collectives not only precipitate social and cultural dislocations but contribute to the parsing of grasslands to individual households which ‘results in ecologically worse outcomes than larger-scale grazing units comprised of

multiple households' (2020, p. 106). It is thus that Li and Shapiro (2020, p. 197) assert that, '[f]rom ecological civilization to low-carbon urbanism, these admirable terms frame the overall discursive landscape of Chinese state-led environmentalism. Yet, beyond their discursive qualities and propaganda functions, they offer little guide to the workings of the Chinese state.'

This, indeed, is a forceful conclusion. But it does not quite help us learn how to die. For while it provides a damning story of the dangers born of imperfect realisation, such a conclusion tacitly retains within its own indictment the ideal of civilisation as a mode of Anthropocenic world-making and political imagination, thereby reinforcing the habitual political image of an ecological politics for a global common good against forces of power and self-serving operations. Which is to say that what both the proponents and the detractors of the Chinese project of ecological civilisation share is the story of 'civilisation' as a long, universal march of human progress out of savagery through the refinement of culture, modes of conduct, laws and forms of socio-political organisation dating all the way back to the Neolithic revolution, as a 'way of living together with shared values' (Clayton & Schwartz, 2019, p. 16). The problem, however, is that this a quintessentially modern story, the product of a political imagination kindled by those who invented the concept of 'civilisation' in eighteenth century imperial Europe not only as its own self-admiring description in the face of non-European, colonised others, but also as a political and moral judgement, 'the criterion against which barbarity, or non-civilization, is judged and condemned' (Starobinski, 1993, p. 31). Indeed, I suggest Li and Shapiro's examination of the CCP's ecological record should perhaps lead us to the inverse evaluation – that rather than a corruption of the ideal of an ecological civilisation, China's recent environmental (geo)politics constitute *its very embodiment*. After all, the word 'civilisation' may have been invented in the mid-1700s as a term of jurisprudence, to describe the change from criminal to civil court. But this remarkably short-lived acceptance quickly gave way to a rival, non-judicial signified which would replace its technical sense so thoroughly that 'the word quickly ceased to be seen as new' (Starobinski, 1993, p. 2). Such, it turns out, is the birth of 'civilisation' in 1756, as simultaneously the process that rendered humankind civilised and the normative outcome of that process. And the fact is that the normative character that the notion of civilisation acquired at the heart of empire rendered 'civilisation' itself the name for a world-making project that – as historian Brett Bowden (2009, p. 224) nicely puts it in *The Empire of Civilization* – was always 'more uniform than universal'. It conferred upon the civilised the right and the duty – indeed *the burden* – to civilise the uncivilised, which is to say to 'rescue' the savages and barbarians from their primitive state by subjugating, re-educating – and failing that, extinguishing – them into the civilisational path of progress. Rather than a name for cultural and political sophistication, civilisation, to borrow Bruce Mazlish's (2005, p. 116) words, has since its birth always been 'a fighting word, a serious political matter'.

As such, if the manners by which imperial Europe has sought to bend the would-be universal arch of history towards 'civilisation' were those 'of the often violent and everly zealous civilising missions or *mission civilisatrice*, missions that were generally designed to ameliorate – where and when thought possible – the conditions of the world's savages and barbarians, usually through tutelage, training, and conversion to Christianity'

(Bowden, 2009, p. 130), then far from rendering it a hollow concept, the coercive environmentalism of the CCP is well and truly *civilising* indeed: relocating and reshaping minoritarian modes of living through forced ecological migration and sedentarisation, imposing ‘standards’ of ecological civilisation through BRI developmental programmes, and extending the civilising will to uniformity to the Earth itself by means of geoengineering and monocultural afforestation, among others forms of civilisational operation.¹ Which is to say ensuring that ‘only those practices are allowed to flourish’ that augment its form of socio-ecological organisation (Gare, 2017, p. 181). This, after all, is the burden of (ecological) civilisation in the face of planetary turmoil: the duty and imperative never to regress ‘to the agricultural civilization times when productivity was low and people struggled for subsistence’, but to *progress* to a global, ‘abundant, quality, and sustainable society of ecological prosperity and steady-state economy within development boundaries’ as well as ‘within resource and environmental boundaries’ (Pan, 2014, p. 209).

In the opening to his classic *History of the Idea of Progress*, Robert Nisbet (1980, p. 9) daringly writes that ‘we shall know shortly whether civilization in any form and substance comparable to what we have known . . . in the West is possible without supporting faith in progress that had existed along with this civilization’. Perhaps the answer, 40 years later, is ‘no’. Of course, as with many other Anthropocene world-making projects, the theorists and architects of ecological civilisation are fiercely critical of the market-centred, technocratic, growth-oriented and materialistic principles that constitute the substantive values of progress of the modern capitalist world-system, rightly denouncing them as ‘modern magic . . . made possible by fossil fuels’ (Clayton & Schwartz, 2019, p. 23). But the rejection of these substantive values never amounts to the abandonment of the faith in progress as a mode of evaluation. Progress, Arran Gare (2017, p. 209) writes, ‘will then be defined in terms of ecopoiesis, as augmenting life and the conditions for it, including human life and all the co-evolved lifeforms with which humans are participating in the global ecosystem’. Indeed, the very ideal of an ecological civilisation has ‘progress’ – a global, boundless and upwards trajectory towards a future that, guided by a set of universal principles, will be ‘better’ than the present – built into its political imagination, thereby reinscribing imperial, colonial values at the heart of their world-making efforts.

Social life beyond the pale: Fragments of a fragmentary cartography

It is in an effort to activate the political imagination otherwise that I suggest that, if the ‘next civilization – the next pattern of social organization – will be an ecological civilization if it is to be at all’ (Clayton & Schwartz, 2019, p. 30) then perhaps there needn’t be one at all. If learning to live in the Anthropocene involves learning to ‘die as a civilisation’, if it involves giving to this socio-ecological ending the power to transform the possible and impossible modes of world-making and forms of sociality that might emerge in its wake, the trials and tribulations of ecological civilisation rather indicate that we instead need to learn how to live *after progress*, which is to say *without* the concept and ideal of civilisation. In other words, it involves coming to terms with the *ecological* collapse of

what we have come to call ‘civilisation’ – one that implicates not only our habitats but also our habits and political imaginations (Savransky, 2021b). To borrow the words and inspiration from the founders of the Dark Mountain Project (2009), a literary and cultural collective who refuse to partake in the Hobbesian search for security and the fervour for global world-making that would ensure the continuity of progressive forms of life in the Anthropocene so as to give themselves over to a poetic experimentation with other forms of storytelling, of writing, and of thinking and being together after progress: ‘We tried ruling the world; we tried acting as God’s steward, then we tried ushering in the human revolution, the age of reason and isolation. We failed in all of it, and our failure destroyed more than we were even aware of. The time for civilisation is past. Uncivilisation, which knows its flaws because it has participated in them; which sees unflinchingly and bites down hard as it records – this is the project we must embark on now.’

It is thanks to their call for uncivilised writing, in refusal of the progressive horizons that the hope for a new and better civilisation binds us to, and in an effort to give to the death of what came to be called ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation’ the power to transform our political imaginations, that I take interest in projects, practices and methodologies of ecological uncivilisation. The imaginative call for ecological uncivilisation is not an appeal to primitivism, however. It is not a call for a ‘return’ to a pre-industrial or pre-agricultural condition where people supposedly lived in harmony with nature. For that too is the story of civilisation, the retrofitted backdrop against which ‘civilisation’ emerges as ‘human progress’. And the point is precisely that learning how to die requires that we learn to compose other stories, ones that may implicate us otherwise in the earth-wide condition of precariousness that characterises the present (Tsing, 2015). Not, that is, in order to securitise against it. For the drive for security against the more-than-human milieus in which we are inexorably implicated is at the heart of the modern world-system that has rendered the Earth itself precarious and now desperately strives to make its own impoverished mode of life sufficiently resilient to the very events it has brought about (Chandler et al., 2020). It is the imperative by which one becomes collectively impervious to the need to pose and experiment with the question of what learning to die well might mean today, instead making of the very idea of a better, ecological civilisation our progressive horizon and our uniformising home.

If I take inspiration from the post-environmentalism of the Dark Mountain Project in an attempt to rekindle our imaginations, therefore, it is because, rather than call for primitivism and securitisation, rather than an ode to nihilism or a project of global mobilisation, I read – and join – their efforts in what, in a lucid and wonderfully complementary discussion of their work, Jairus Grove (2019, p. 277) calls ‘an evacuation’. That is, an escape from a set of progressive ‘practices, organizations, and alliances’ which have shaped the modern political imagination and ‘have failed almost all of us’. While usually scorned by eco-activists as a form of giving up hope in the struggle for environmental progress on a global scale, the Dark Mountain Project (2009) and other such experiments in storytelling and methodologies of life are above all characterised by the refusal of the option to pile progress after progress, civilisation after civilisation. In their unflinching efforts to write this ending differently, ‘to live and die well in this world, regardless of how this world turns out’ (Grove, 2019, p. 277), contributors to the Dark Mountain Project (2009) make perceptible that to implicate ourselves otherwise in this condition of

earthly precariousness is instead to proffer propositions for something more risky and more interesting than either survival or civilisation, a hope for something more

. . . [h]umble, questioning, suspicious of the big idea and the easy answer. Walking the boundaries and reopening old conversations. Apart but engaged, its practitioners always willing to get their hands dirty; aware, in fact, that dirt is essential; that keyboards should be tapped by those with soil under their fingernails and wilderness in their heads.

Indeed, what after the Dark Mountain Project I'm calling ecological uncivilisation is a name not for nihilistic resignation, or even for the forms of environmental nationalism in which some of its founders have occasionally indulged, but for a speculative reactivation of the political imagination after progress: experimenting with possible and impossible modes of world-making and forms of sociality on unstable ecological terrain. Calling out this dim possibility just as what we have come to call civilisation writes its own epitaph, ecological uncivilisation is an active refusal to be taken further down the progressive path. It names an endeavour in learning to die by seeking, trying out, composing with others, modes of world-making otherwise: worlds that will never make a globe or aspire to be whole, more-than-human methodologies of life that are neither modern nor civilised but take seriously and intensify the moments of contingency and fragility when stories, forms of sociality and practices unforeseen spring up precariously in and as the process of civilisational collapse.

If contemporary thinkers imagining the philosophical and political outlines of an ecological civilisation appeal to Whitehead's process philosophy as foundation and ground, perhaps a different version of Whitehead's thought pulsates through this possible endeavour to learn to die so as to learn to live an uncivilised life. Less, that is, the systematising Whitehead (1967, p. 274) whose centre of vision would be found in his late proposition that it is in the presence of the five qualities of Truth, Beauty, Adventure, Art and Peace that the kernel of 'a general definition of civilization' may be found, than the one – the same one – who remarks that, though present in civilisation, adventures, those always precarious experiments in world-making and modes of living and dying well, also constitute the very *principles of uncivilisation*, the 'ripples of change' that sooner or later activate the imagination to sidestep the groove of progress, the order of the settled and the civilised, to reach 'beyond the safe limits of the epoch, and beyond the safe limits of learned rules of taste' (1967, p. 279). It is Whitehead (1929, p. 19) the pragmatist, in other words, who would always remind us that whatever the philosophical, political and ecological achievements of a programme of planetary unification, life is a bid for freedom and 'the good life is unstable', such that when an established methodology of life 'has exhausted the novelties within its scope and played upon them up to the incoming of fatigue, one final decision determines the fate of a species. It can stabilize itself, and relapse so as to live', which is to say to refuse the adventure of uncivilisation and 'relapse into the well-attested habit of mere life'. Or it can 'shake itself free' and give itself over to an ongoing and unfinished experimentation, without guarantees, reimagining what living and dying well might mean by seizing upon 'one of the nascent methodologies concealed in the welter of miscellaneous experience beyond the scope of the old dominant way'.

It goes without saying that such forms of uncivilised experimentation and methodologies of life on unstable ecological terrain are not new, they are not themselves a sign of progress. For they have been insisting and persisting all along, not in the systems of nations or through the progress of civilisations but in the interstices as in the rough edges of empires, in the form of what, after James C. Scott (2009, p. 8), we might call multiple zones of refuge, or *shatter zones*: collective and multifarious forms of living and dying made on rugged terrain, 'wherever the expansion of states, empires, slave-trading, and wars, as well as natural disasters, have driven large numbers of people to seek refuge in out-of-the-way places: in Amazonia, in highland Latin America (with the notable exception of the Andes, with their arable highland plateaus and states), in that corridor of highland Africa safe from slave-raiding, in the Balkans and the Caucasus'. Shatter zones are the spaces where uncivilised ecological experiments forge an outside to the progressive coordinates of the colonial project, where an otherwise makes itself felt, where an endeavour to learn to die in order to learn to live gets, perhaps, underway. For what 'drives' such collectives to seek refuge out-in-the-outside is not simply the endurance of state oppression or the event of some other calamitous situation. It is also the very lure of the outside, of becoming 'ungoverned barbarians' who elect, 'as a political choice, to take their distance from the state'. Shatter zones, in other words, are composed by and of those who choose to live beyond the pale, to engage in world-making through and as an ongoing ecology of state evasion, prevention and unmaking. This is also why, if such experiments could be called ecological it is not because they are 'good', or because their practices seek to either retrieve ancient environmental values or to found new principles for an alternative form of civilisation. It is, quite simply, because the complexities of migration, multiethnic cohabitation and subsistence that the gesture of life shaking itself free entails have always been formidable, making perceptible that the composition of an outside is impossible without insisting on the precariousness of one's existence as expressed in the need for the persistence of others, human and more, in order for our collective insistence to be sustained. As such, uncivilised life in the shatter zones means that living and dying well is a function of being in unstable, improvised and inventive relations to others without whom one is not, without whom 'mere life' is the best one can hope for, and not for long.

Where might such experiments in ecological uncivilisation be discerned? Scott's was a study of Zomia, a term that describes the highlands that traverse five Southeast Asian nations and four provinces of China, the largest remaining part of the world where people have not (yet) been fully incorporated into the collective life of states – or forcibly sedentarised into ecological civilisation. As such, it generatively resonates with fugitive, runaway and maroon communities elsewhere, from *Kisama* in Angola at the height of the slave trade, or the *quilombos* of colonial (and contemporary) Brazil, all the way to the precarious exercises in black commonism and autonomous food security in Detroit, and the efforts of political autonomy and self-determination in Rojava, among others. Yet, divergent and marginal as they may be, my sense is that the capacity of such experiments in ecological uncivilisation to transform the political imagination relies in part upon the possibility of nourishing other forms of historical and geographical attention. It depends, that is, upon the possibility of mapping an always fragmentary cartography of uncivilised life and (im)possible forms of sociality

outside the coordinates of progress, fragments of which I can only begin to trace here in the briefest of ways. For indeed, as I imagine it, shatter zones are not only composed by place-making attempts in the interstices and outlaw edges of the imperial formations of the Earth. They are also made through a history of minor cultural, philosophical, scientific, spiritual, ecological and political modes of uncivilised experimentation everywhere dedicated to the ongoing and unfinished composition of dissensual modes of coexistence and precarious methodologies for igniting a new taste for life beyond the limits of the civilised judgement of taste. Among others, such forms of precarious world-making would include, for instance, the *fin-de-siècle* emergence of a ‘metropolitan anti-colonialism’ which, as postcolonial historian Leela Gandhi (2006, p. 9) has superbly traced, brought into connection a motley crew of ‘Victorian radicals’ – including William James, Swami Vivekananda and Edward Carpenter – who wove together disparate forms of Utopian socialism, spiritual mysticism, pragmatism and continental anarchism to create generative alliances with anti-colonial efforts elsewhere so as to temporarily precipitate a ‘mutation of “internationalism” into a series of countercultural revolutionary practices’.

And indeed, fragments of ecological uncivilisation could also be discerned today, across a whole array of experiments at learning how to die in the Anthropocene so as to make life worth living on a precarious Earth. Among them, one might mention those who, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina – whose sighting on TV, we might recall, prompted Scranton to meditate on civilisational collapse – did indeed endeavour to learn how to undergo a certain death of land-based sociality so as to learn how to live an amphibious swamp life, outfitting homes, trailers, as well as bars and restaurants so that they could float off their foundations without having to give to the ever increased dangers of flood zones the power to determine where and how to live (Wakefield, 2020). On the other side of the Pacific, one might appraise the improvisational practices of a collective of Buddhist, Shintō and Protestant priests who, after the 2011 tsunami that devastated the northeast of Japan and amidst the inability of the state to respond to the experiences of sorrow and grief that the wave left in its wake, set up a mobile cafe to offer spiritual care both to the living and to the dead (Savransky, 2021a); or indeed, the efforts of those in and around Fukushima who, faced with the nuclear explosion that followed the earthquake, engage in projects – from DIY radiation monitoring and introducing medicinal diets and building communities off the grid – of learning how to die so as to learn how to live well with the multitudinous radionuclides the disaster forever unleashed (Kohso, 2020). And as the colonial toxicity of what we have come to call ‘civilisation’ now truly pervades the Earth, nascent methodologies of life are also cultivated in community gardens in the environs of Arusha, Tanzania, where an NGO has devoted itself to producing, at the interstices of medicine and agriculture, therapeutic foods and nutritious medicines to enable those living with chronic medical conditions – as with the toxicity of pesticides and herbicides in food, growth hormones in chickens, tissue cultures injected into banana plants, the aluminium in cooking pots, and the very pharmaceuticals that sustain their lives – to learn how to live and die well by implicating bodies into alternative configurations of people and plants (Langwick, 2018).

Ecological uncivilisation: Reactivating the political imagination after progress

The foods and medicines of the gardens of Arusha do not offer a ‘cure’, however, and neither can one discern in these experiments and methodologies of life the path to a wholly new and better common world to come, or the prospect of a future in which earth-wide precariousness will have been relegated (yet again) to a bygone past. Ecological co-implication is their (our) precarious condition – not the new name for a categorical imperative or a redemptive project for perpetual peace. If a fragmentary cartography of social life beyond the pale might enable one to learn something about how to die as a civilisation in order to learn how to live, it is not because such experiments prescribe lessons on ‘the good life’ but precisely because they affirm its radical instability. As such, they make of the need for multiple and divergent, out-of-bounds experiments in nourishing new tastes for life beyond the civilised judgement of taste *itself the lesson*. Rather than lament a historical process of ‘cultural fragmentation’ and yearn for a cosmopolitan, civilised future ‘where the destructive conflicts between tribes, civilizations, and nations will have been overcome’ (Gare, 2017, p. 166), therefore, such experiments are active vectors of divergence, profusion and dispersal: shards of ecological uncivilisation where (im)possible forms of sociality are improvised on rugged terrain, against an imperial history of devastation brought about by earth-wide homogenisation – the ecological production of a *world without others* in the name of progress and civilisation (Crosby, 1986). Which is why precarious forms of world-making and uncivilised life guarantee nothing, and they authorise nothing. If they fail to lay the grounds for a new, global civilisation, it is only because experiments in precarious world-making espouse such a failure as their very political vocation (Savransky, 2021a). Which is to say that they refuse, within their own forms of sociality, to assume the burden of the upward march of progress as a mode of valuation that would yet again present the future as a forking path between salvation and damnation, civilisation or ruin.

In the end, in the beginning, such nascent methodologies of life are affirmative bids for freedom, uncivilised attempts to learn how to die so as to learn how live well if not always better. What they might yet engender, what they still make resonate, is the possibility of reactivating the political imagination, of upending modern foundations and loosening progress’s grip on our imaginations so as to experiment with the possibility of inhabiting the present otherwise, to wager – against all odds – on the chance of rendering ourselves capable of thinking, improvising and imagining lives and worlds composed outside the receding horizon of progress and the settled formations of what we came to call civilisation. In the end, in their refusal of progress they force us once again to rethink the stakes of struggle. Yet they simultaneously provoke us to imagine the possibility that, on unstable ecological terrains, political work after progress might take an altogether more subjunctive, improvisational and inchoate form. It might require a commitment to an ongoing and divergent insistence rather than to a universal mode of existence, to an experience of fugitive activity in the midst of what has been settled, to a tingling feeling of difference and possibility, to an improbable ‘perhaps’ whose contours we may not be able to ascertain but in whose hold the composition of dissensual modes of coexistence – human and more – keeps on keeping on, out of

bounds in the shatter zone, precariously striving to make life worth living and death worth living for.

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1. On the introduction of the modern notion of civilisation in China, see Xingtao (2011).

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