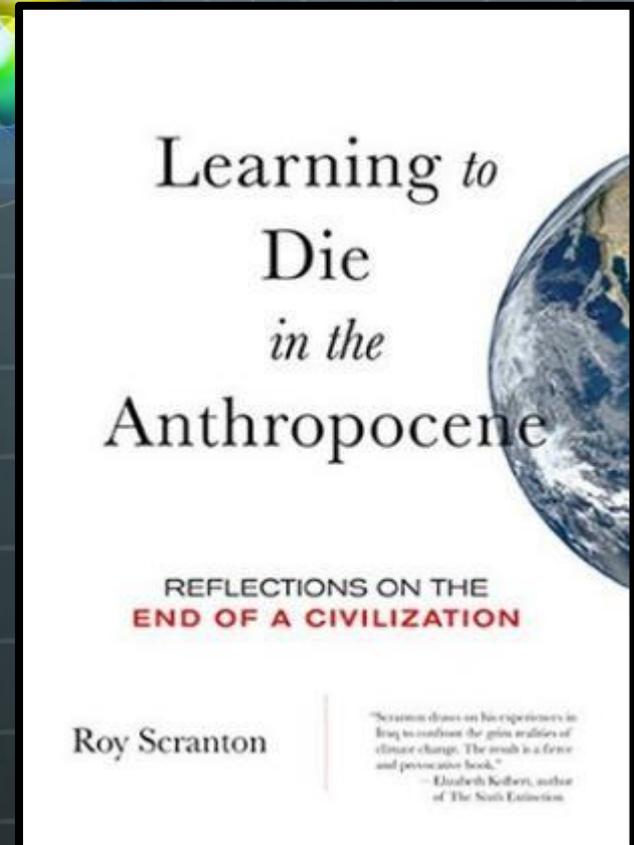


Learning to Die in the Anthropocene

Reflections on the End of A Civilization

Roy Scranton

Andrew Rusnak



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END OF A CIVILIZATION

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"Scranton draws on his experiences in Iraq to confront the grim realities of climate change. The result is a fierce and provocative book."
— Elizabeth Kolbert, author of *The Sixth Extinction*

The 'Anthropocene' is a term widely used since its coining by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the present time interval, in which many geologically significant conditions and processes are profoundly altered by human activities.

The “anthropocene” and the “6 Extinction” are two overlapping concepts, that humankind’s presence on earth and the reliance of carbon-based fossil fuels is causing the next great extinction event.

Use Years of Living Dangerously vids – Jack Black, Matt Damon, Don Cheadle, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Harrison Ford

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CXebPookoLg> English student project of Scranton’s Anthropocene Book

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L32FS_B2dLI Scranton, We’re Doomed, Now What, Roy Scranton

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z9gHuAwxxwAs> The Sixth Extinction, 9min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=suEzmyKazcE> The Sixth Extinction: Elizabeth Kolbert on How Humans Are Causing Largest Die Off Since Dinosaur Age, 12 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvgG-pxlobk> Welcome to Anthropocene, 3:30

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/see-how-humans-have-reshaped-globe-interactive-atlas-180952971/> The Age of Humans Living in the Anthropocene, Smithsonian

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dAozZds7FRs> Generation Anthropocene Is Upon Us: Mike Osborne and Miles Traer at TEDxStanford 14 minutes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Axdrh9F3Kqo> (2014) Noam Chomsky: The Anthropocene Period and its Challenges, 8 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4KRWoubPEo> A meteorite is not the greatest danger of environmental change - THE SIXTH EXTINCTION, 50 min

Coming Home ...

Scranton starts his book off with this quote from Baruch Spinoza: *A free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a mediation of life, not death.*

p.15: President Obama's 2010 National Security Strategy, the Pentagon's 2014 Quadrennial Defense Review, and the Department of Homeland Security's 2014 Quadrennial Homeland Security Review all identify climate change as a severe and imminent danger. More recently, the Pentagon's 2014 Climate Change Adaption Roadmap warned: 'Rising global temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, climbing sea levels, and more extreme weather events will intensify the challenges of global instability, hunger, poverty, and conflict.

From the intro, "Coming Home" (p.19): In order for us to adapt to this strange new world, we're going to need more than scientific reports and military policy. We're going to need new ideas. We're going to need new myths and new stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality, and a new relationship to the polyglot transitions of human culture that carbon-based capitalism has vitiated through commodification and assimilation. Over and against capitalism we will need a new way of thinking our collective existence. We need a new vision of who we are. We need a new humanism—a newly philosophical humanism, undergirded by renewed attention to the humanities.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dUgYElw271s> Did Climate Change Cause The Syrian Civil War?, 2:30

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oApHopOcAOQ> U.S. Military Pressed to Prepare for Climate Change Wall Street Journal, 1:30

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GP5L5jAEmeg> Will 'Climate Change' Forever Alter U.S. Military Policy?3:30

Human Ecologies ...

In “Human Ecologies,” Chapter 1, Scranton plots the evolution of energy and how it is linked to the evolution of humans as agricultural and industrial beings.

P. 31, “Human Ecologies”: Sometime between 100,000 and 50,000 years ago, we developed the key social technologies that have proven to be our most substantial predatory advantages: culture and symbolic reasoning.

A Wicked Problem ...

In “A Wicked Problem,” Chapter 2, Scranton calls (p.53) “global warming a ‘wicked problem’ because it doesn’t offer any clear solutions, only better and worse response. One of the most difficult aspects to deal with is that it is a collective-action problem of the highest order. One city, one country, even one continent cannot save it alone. Any politician who honestly and frankly worked to detach her nation/s economy from oil and coal would not survive in any kind of democratic or oligarchic government, because the rigorous austerity necessary to such an effort would mean either economic depression and poverty for most of her constituency, a massive redistribution of wealth, or both. Moreover, any leader who forced her country to accept the austerity and redistribution necessary to end its dependence on cheap carbon would also be forcing her country into a weak and isolated position politically, economically, and militarily.

Carbon Politics ...

In Carbon Politics, Chapter 3, Scranton delves deeper into the politics of carbon-based fossil fuels. (p. 67) *“This seems to be the situation we’re stuck in. on the (political) left and right, among diplomats, energy company executives, investors, scientists, anarchists, clergy, and activists, serious people are worried about global warming and feel the urgent need to do something about it. Across the spectrum, however, nobody seems to have the tools, clout, or conceptual framework we need to fix it, or even to come up with a good plan to protect ourselves from the greatest dangers. There is not ‘reset’ button for civilization, and no viable plan for transforming global infrastructure, agriculture, and energy networks in the next ten to twenty years. And while smart, dedicated, and thoughtful people fumble with political machinery that doesn’t work, such as carbon-pricing markets, protests, and the United Nations, all of us in the Global North go about our business, driving, flying, leaving the lights on, running heaters and air conditioners, eating meat, charging our devices, living unsustainable lives predicated on easy consumption.*

“Easy consumption” means that It is too easy to live as we are living now, in this capitalism of easy consumption, that we fail to see that it is causing our destruction.

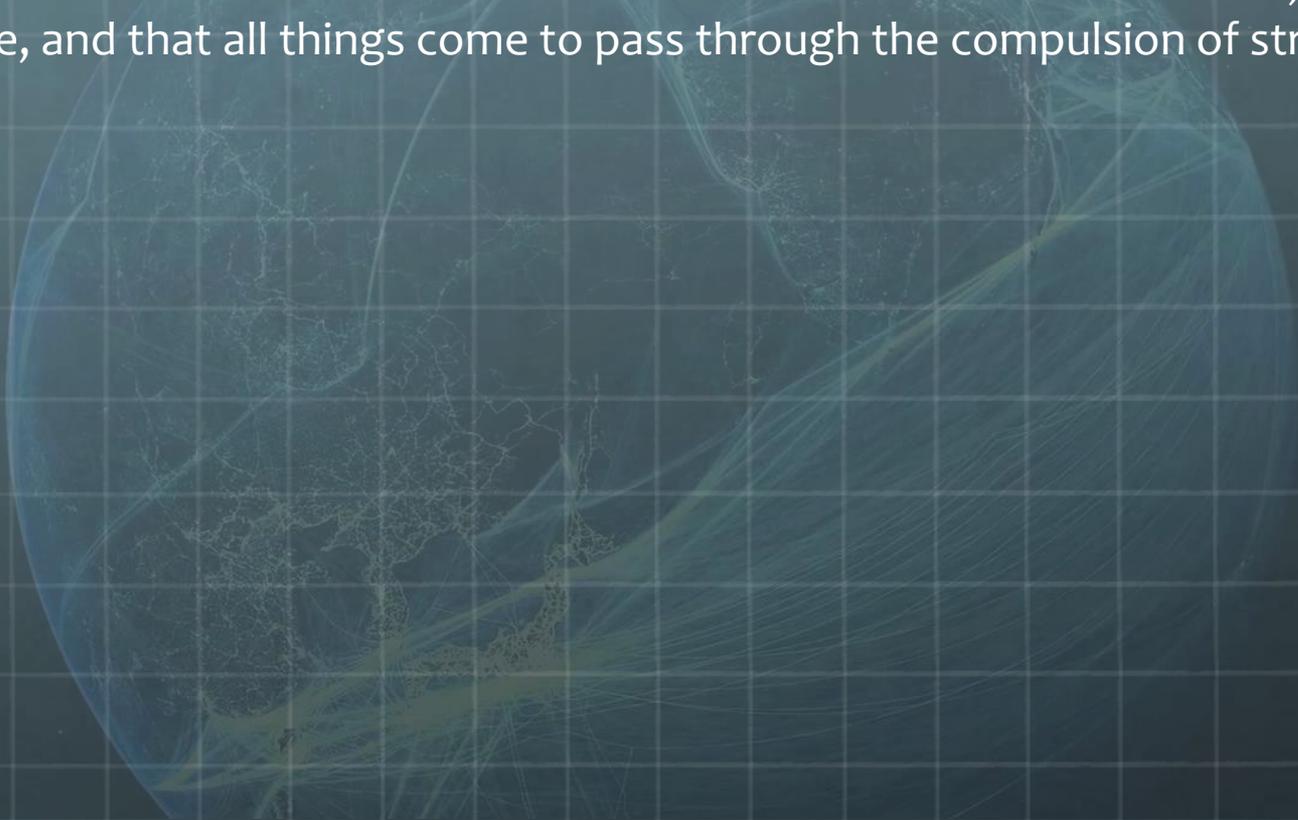
The Compulsion of Strife ...

Chapter 4, “The Compulsion of Strife” is perhaps the most penetrating, poignant, and revealing chapter in the book, ironic because this is what it proposes to guard against. Let’s look at and analyze some quotes:

p.75, For most of human history, violence has been a central element of social conflict. The first clear evidence of mass human violence is as old as civilization; the first evidence of its end has yet to be seen. According to bioarchaeologist Philip Walker, “As far as we know, there are no forms of social organization, modes of production, or environmental settings that remain free from interpersonal violence for long.” As Freud wrote in his famous debate with Einstein on the question of war, “It’s a general principle ... that conflicts of interest between men are settled by the use of violence. This is true of the whole animal kingdom of which men have no business to exclude themselves.” The long record of human brutality seems to offer conclusive evidence that both individual and socially organized violence are as biologically a part of human life as sex, language, and eating, that aggression and the drive for dominance are neither vestigial atavisms nor social maladaptations but rather species traits, and we have little reason to hope that war and murder might someday disappear.

The Compulsion of Strife ...

p. 76, Heraclitus: “It should be understood that war is the common condition, that strife is justice, and that all things come to pass through the compulsion of strife.”



A New Enlightenment ...

p. 91, Philosophical humanism in its most radical practice is the disciplined interruption of somatic and social flows, the detachment of consciousness from impulse, and the condensation of conceptual truths out of the granular data of experience. It is the study of “dying and being dead,” a divestment from this life in favor of deeper investments in a life beyond ourselves. In recognizing the dominion of death and the transience of individual existences, we affirm a web of being that connects past to future, them to us, me to you. “One is responsible to life,” wrote James Baldwin. “It is the small beacon in that terrifying darkness from which we come and to which we return. One must negotiate this passage as nobly as possible, for the sake of those who are coming after us.”

p.94, The only inherent trait of the human ape that differentiates us from other animals is our knack for collective, symbolic manipulation. Other species besides *Homo sapiens* communicate with language, organize socially, build structures, use tools, laugh, and show emotions. Even fire and simple technologies were part of an inheritance (transfer) passed down from *Homo erectus* and the Neanderthal. Sometime in the ice depths of prehistory, through, our species began developing advanced symbolic communication beyond anything that had ever been seen before. We learned how to make the dead speak, and to speak ourselves to the yet unborn.

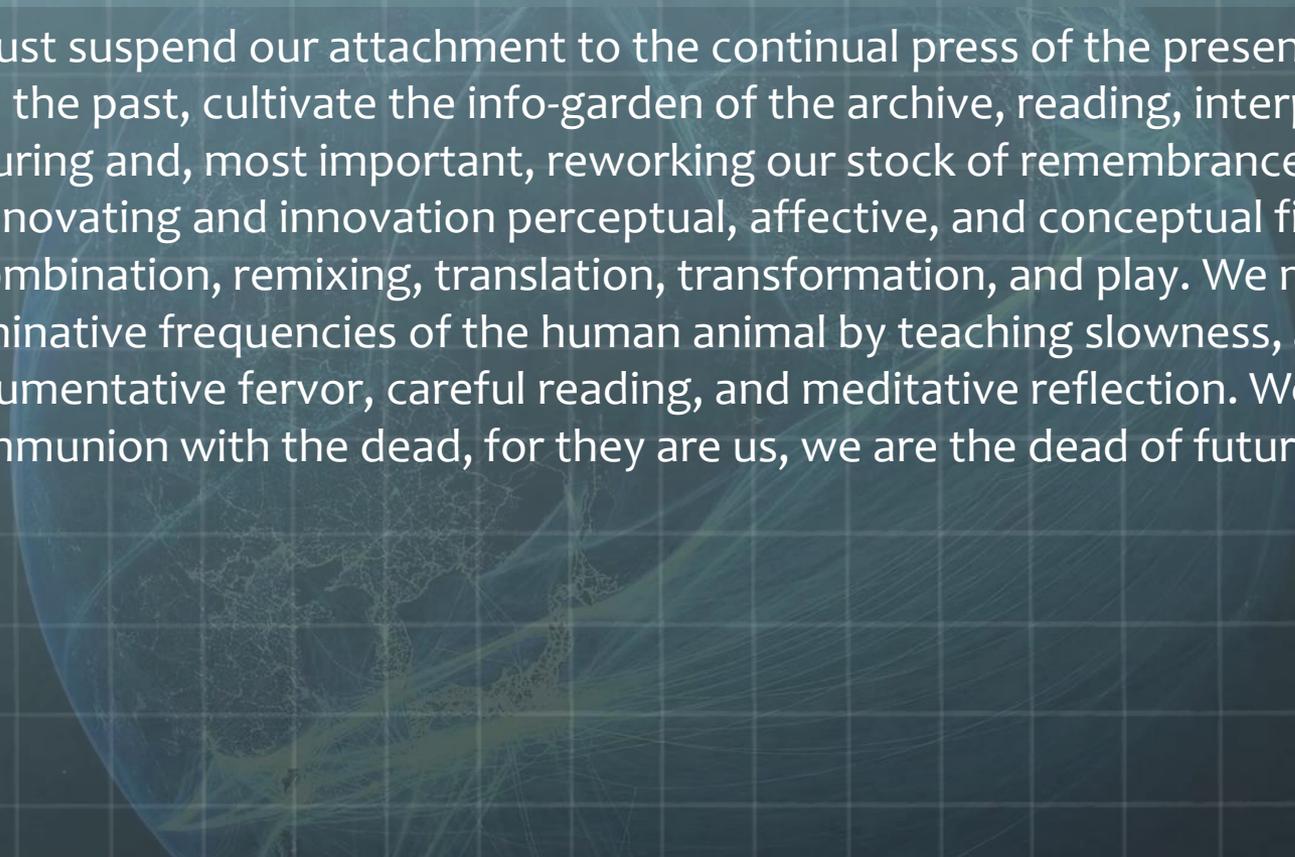
A New Enlightenment ...

p. 99, Hannah Arendt: “If it is true that all thought begins with remembrance, it is also true that no remembrance remains secure unless it is condensed and distilled into a framework of conceptual notions within which it can further exercise itself. Experiences and even the stories which grow out of what men do and endure, of happenings and events, sink back into the futility inherent in the living world and the living deed unless they are talked about over and over again.”

p. 107, Just as those older technologies offered both great potential and great danger, so too do the newer technologies of photohumanism. *Homo sapiens*—perhaps now *Homo lux*—remains biologically reactive, easily panicked, all too quickly stirred to hatred. Jaron Lanier warned in 2006 of what he called “digital Maoism”: “It is at least possible that in the fairly near future enough communication and education will take place through anonymous internet aggregation that we could become vulnerable to a sudden and dangerous empowering of the hive mind. History has shown us again and again that a hive mind is a cruel idiot when it runs on autopilot.” The dangers of collective madness, witch hunts, and totalitarian war exist in new social networks as much as or even more than they did in early 20th century radio broadcasts, newspaper stories, and cinema reels.

A New Enlightenment ...

p. 108, We must suspend our attachment to the continual press of the present by keeping alive the past, cultivate the info-garden of the archive, reading, interpreting, sorting, nurturing and, most important, reworking our stock of remembrance. We must keep renovating and innovation perceptual, affective, and conceptual fields through recombination, remixing, translation, transformation, and play. We must inculcate ruminative frequencies of the human animal by teaching slowness, attention to detail, argumentative fervor, careful reading, and meditative reflection. We must keep our communion with the dead, for they are us, we are the dead of future generations.



Coda: Coming Home ...

p. 112, Planets do not decide to spin. Stars do not will themselves ablaze. The universe into which we have been born breathes and burns by intricate, mathematical logic, yet while the Earth's formation had causes, it did not have reason or meaning. Heraclitus: "The universe, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be—an ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures." ... [N]o intention gave rise to *Homo sapiens* and no outside form grants its value. The causality behind our human bloom is the same causality behind rainfall, quasars, and the roll of the dice.

p.116, It may be that we have crossed the summit of our knowledge and power, and the brief explosion of human life in the Holocene will turn out to have been as transient as an algae bloom. It may be, on the other hand, that we'll find a way to survive the Anthropocene, perhaps even find ways to maintain human civilization in some recognizable form.