

## BOOK REVIEW

### WALKING AWAY FROM EMPIRE

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McPherson, Guy R., *Walking Away from Empire: A Personal Journey*, Baltimore, Maryland, PublishAmerica, 2011, 230 pp. , ISBN 978-1-4626-3887-1.

“Teacher seeks pupil. Must have an earnest desire to save the world. Apply in person.”<sup>1</sup>

Guy R. McPherson is Professor Emeritus of Natural Resources and Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the University of Arizona. Here is how he introduces himself: “For the better part of a decade, I was the model professor, if only from the standpoint of university administrators. I taught more courses than I was asked, completed more published research than nearly all my peers, and had an active record of service to various mainstream professional entities. Then, realizing I had an obligation to the citizens paying me, I woke up and started doing work of some import. As with most of the students in my classrooms, the citizens didn’t appreciate me, at least not upon initial inspection.” (p. 53) So, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May 2009, twenty years to the day after he was hired, “in the wake of considerable angst,” he opted out of Western civilization. (p. 9) *Walking Away from Empire* chronicles this bold move. The conundrum it addresses is the following: “If we continue to burn fossil fuels, we face imminent environmental collapse. If we cease burning fossil fuels, the industrial economy will collapse.” (p. 15)

What are the data? Scientific forecasts are getting worse year after year: “Late in 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) announced we were

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael. An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit*, New York, Bantam Press, 1992, ch. 1.

committed to warming the planet by about 1° C by the end of this century. [...] In 2008, the Hadley Centre for Meteorological Research provided an update, indicating that, in the absence of complete economic collapse, we're committed to a global average temperature increase of 2° C. [...] In September 2009, the United Nations Environment Programme concluded we're committed to an average planetary temperature increase of 3.5°C by 2100. [...] In October 2009, Chris West of the University of Oxford's UK Climate Impacts Programme indicated we can kiss goodbye 2°C as a target: four is the new two, and it's coming by mid-century. [...] In November 2009, the Global Carbon Project added to the increasingly miserable news by concluding that we're on a direct path to 6°C by 2100. The Copenhagen Diagnosis chimed in a couple weeks later with a scenario of 7°C by 2100. [...] The International Energy Agency added to the agony in November 2010 when, in its World Energy Outlook 2010, it concluded the average global temperature on the planet will increase by 3.5°C in 2035. The United Nations followed up a month later with their latest and most dire assessment: 6.4°C increase by 2050. In other words, human extinction looms within a generation." (p. 60)

Since the publication of McPherson's book, the trend continues: in 2012, the otherwise conservative International Energy Agency's World Energy Outlook reported that we are on track to reach a 2°C increase by 2017. Peter Wadhams, professor of ocean physics at Cambridge University, warned that the Arctic may be ice-free in summer as soon as 2015. In October 2013, the Arctic Methane Emergency Group reported that we will lose habitat for most humans on Earth by 2040. In November 2013, the International Energy Agency predicted a 3.5°C increase by 2035. In 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's fifth assessment came out and it was so dire that an edited version had to be prompted.

Now, McPherson diagnosis is precious because it is *not* produced by a climatologist but by a mainstream ecologist who works in the largely unploughed intersection of conservation biology and philosophy. Climatologists have obviously a rough idea of where we are aiming (rhetorically: Venus's atmosphere) but they do not really know how and even less exactly at what pace. Ecology so to speak simplifies the stakes: a two degree increase of the average temperature will break the food chain and its collapse guarantees prompt human extinction, full stop. In the meantime, we are likely to have faced economical collapse because of the end of cheap petroleum: "I know no energy-literate person who thinks we'll be able to avoid the post-industrial Stone Age by 2025." (p. 165)

The collection of essays is made of four parts: "reason," "the economic collapse," "action," and "hope." Here are the broad lines of the argument.

If there was such a thing as “**reason**,” it would argue for the (ecological) culture of life, not the (industrial) culture of death supported by the so-called Enlightenment and by faith in a monotheistic creator of sorts. Two main points are made in this section.

On the one hand, the culture of death is epitomized in militarism and especially in neo-colonialism. In the Age of Entitlement, like in any other age, all wars are resource wars. “Supporting the troops is pledging your support for the empire. Supporting the troops supports the occupation of sovereign nations because might makes right. Supporting the troops supports wanton murder of women and children throughout the world. And men, too. Supporting the troops supports obedience at home and oppression abroad. Supporting the troops throws away every ideal on which this country allegedly is founded. Supporting the troops supports the ongoing destruction of the living planet in the name of economic growth. Supporting the troops therefore hastens our extinction in exchange for a few dollars. Supporting the troops means caving in to Woodrow Wilson’s neo-liberal agenda, albeit cloaked as contemporary neo-conservatism (cf. hope and change). Supporting the troops trumpets power as freedom and fascism as democracy.” (pp. 29-30)<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, thinking the apocalypse—human extinction looming within a generation—has never been an easy task and the consequences for living humans are staggering: “Why do you think I rarely sleep? What do you think occupies my mind, every moment of every day and most nights? For starters, unimaginable suffering. [...] The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: War, Conquest, Famine, and Pestilence.” (p. 51) Hence, McPherson clarifies his understanding of the relationship between reason and religious belief. Of course, he would be “a big fan of Christianity if Christians lived as Jesus did,” (p. 27); given the circumstances largely documented since Nietzsche, McPherson is “largely an ascetic:” “to an increasing extent, I live as we all must die: alone.” (p. 45) More precisely: “I try not to believe. Instead, I try to think. But it’s sometimes difficult to separate the two, and it’s often difficult to marshal enough evidence to allow thought to proceed unimpeded by belief. I suppose I’m skeptical, even about my skepticism. [...]. I do not believe in spirits, so I can understand the common conclusion about the former. I think organized religions are, to a great extent, absurd, violent, and immoral. [...] I believe all life is loaded with religiosity.” (pp. 42-43) No religious faith, only the evidence of the intrinsic value of all forms of life pilots his thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. “You keep supporting the troops, and trying to convince yourself you’re fighting terrorism in the process. If doubt creeps in, turn on the television. Listen to the news anchors and the politicians, the characters, and the commercials. Immerse yourself in the ultimate hallucination.” (p. 32)

The **economic collapse** has already been evoked. It stands both as part of the disease and as its hypothetical solution.

On the one hand, the state of our economies indicates the absurdity and non-sustainability of its current policies. We passed Hubbert's Peak for world oil supply in 2005 and yet "we'd rather reduce the planet to a lifeless pile of rubble than slow economic growth." (p. 91)

On the other hand, an early economic collapse could allow us to avoid the imminent ecological catastrophe: "Global climate change threatens our species with extinction by mid-century if we do not terminate the industrial economy soon. Increasingly dire forecasts from extremely conservative sources keep stacking up." (p. 94)<sup>3</sup>

What about **action**? Its principle can be very simply stated: one should seek "to terminate Western civilization before it terminates us." (p. 100) The first step is of course to mobilize citizens: denial runs deep in the empire and most do not understand why they should bother investing in durability and secure for themselves oxygen, water, food, body temperature and adequate information while fostering human community.

Since our current society is not redeemable, McPherson argues for a ten-step plan for furthering a civilization worthy of that name (pp. 128 sq.). 1: Expand our horizons beyond the question of how we will run the cars by means other than gasoline. 2: Produce food differently. Industrial agriculture is destined for disaster, and will leave in its wake sterile soils. 3: Inhabit the terrain differently. The American suburbs and the interstate highway system are designed for a culture that has no future. 4: Move people and things differently. 5: Transform retail trade. 6: Reindustrialize. 7: Artists, musicians, storytellers, playhouses and live performance halls are needed. 8: Reorganize the educational system (decentralize primary and secondary schools while higher education is doomed to fail for myriad reasons, including terminal indifference

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. "when I made my 2007 "new Dark Age" prediction by the end of 2012 (at which point the price of oil had yet to exceed \$80/bbl, the industrial economy appeared headed for perennial nirvana, and everybody who read or heard me thought I was insane); of the fifty or so energy-literate scholars I read, nearly all indicate the new Dark Age starts before the end of 2012; Get over it. This war has two sides, finally. This revolution needs to be powerful and fun, and we cannot afford to lose. We cannot even afford to worry about seeking credibility from those who are having us murder every remaining aspect of the living planet on which we depend for our survival. Credibility? Respectability? It's time to stop playing by the rules of the destroyers. We need witnesses and warriors, and we need them now. It's time to terminate western civilization before it terminates us." (p. 100)

of the academy to societal needs). 9: Reorganize the medical system without power-hungry high-tech tools. 10: Relocalize our entire socio-economic and political system.

In sum, “we have a moral imperative to terminate the industrial economy, the apex of which is city living.” (p. 226) McPherson hammers his point: terminating the industrial economy is a moral act. “There’s no going back. Once you recognize the industrial economy is omniscidal, once you recognize the United States as the most evil empire in the history of the world, once you recognize that politicians are simply imperial tools in the ongoing economic mirage, there’s simply no closing your eyes to the culture of death.” (p. 178)<sup>4</sup> But is there any **hope** to implement such a program?

On the one hand, the full awareness of the danger is still missing—and understandably so: “When you jump off a 100-story building, everything seems fine for a while. In fact, the view just keeps getting clearer as you get closer to the ground. What could possibly go wrong? Well, maybe one thing. It’s not the fall that kills you. It’s the sudden stop at the bottom.” (p. 203)

On the other hand, the flame of hope will never die as long as there is some friendship, i.e., as long as the common good lures our actions. “My optimistic response to the question of Schopenhauer [How to get through a life not worth living?] has two primary components: friendship and hope.” (p. 207) McPherson borrows from Aristotle his definition of friendship: “a relationship between people working together on a project for the common good.” (p. 207) Hope is the left-brain product of love, it is not simply wishful thinking (cf. p. 209).

Where do we go from here? The wit and wisdom of Guy McPherson is good read, but it is difficult not to be frustrated by the absence of a synthetic argument addressing systematically all the dimensions of climate change itself and the actual modalities of the proper line of action. His variegated chronicle of the Age of Entitlement is nevertheless important in the context of the current mediatic silence. It is a work of freedom. As Orwell wrote: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” (cf. p. 201)

Though the course of his analyses, three main possible outcomes of the climate crisis are brought to the fore.

First, every large system will fail but “the common good” could somehow prevail, with or without the remainings of a “church:” “I can imagine one possible exception,

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<sup>4</sup> “There can be little doubt that a system that enslaves, tortures, and kills people is wrong. Industrial culture does all that with stunning efficiency. [...] The criminally rich get richer through crime: that’s how America works.” (p. 174)

one large system that may not collapse as we enter the new Dark Age: the Church.”<sup>5</sup> If only we could start working on adequate socio-political alternatives, perhaps that *something* could be saved.

Second, “humanity will be restricted to a few thousand hardy scavengers living near the poles within a few decades.” (p. 205) In other words, the challenge we face is so immense that no form of benevolence will do. Dark will be the dark age.

Third, since August 2011, McPherson uses the term “near-term human extinction,”<sup>6</sup> to argue that the Earth will soon (the current estimate is 2030) enter a post-anthropocene era that will basically be an entomological age: only very “primitive” (by our standards) types of living beings will survive the climate change that is currently unfolding. The philosophical consequences are flabbergasting: most people are cautious to avoid any awareness of their finitude, but when they do contemplate their death, they still somehow take refuge in the comforting everlastingness of the world they leave behind. The most sophisticated of us know that life on this planet is doomed (for instance, by the death of our sun), but this is such a remote possibility that, when it comes to mind, it is immediately followed by considerations about interstellar travel, transhumanism or whatever. So thinking the inevitability of near-term human extinction in a materialistic culture basically involves the total and definitive eradication of all signs of humanity. “With man gone, will there be hope for gorilla?” Unfortunately no.

This third thesis is rhetorically the most important one because, somewhat paradoxically, it is perhaps the most likely to lead to collective mobilization. Only mass political resistance would make the difference. Given the circumstances it is not surprising—but still amazing—that scientists are (almost) the only one begging commoners to react. The problem is that, as the crises deepen, the only citizens who seem to support political change do it for anthropocentric reasons, totally bracketing the ecological ones. This means that, even when they support left-ish parties or programs, they do not question the basic principles of capitalism, and especially not the idea that only growth will save the economy and its benefit will eventually trickle down to the bottom of the pyramid.

By means of conclusion, five remarks are expedient in order to assess these possible futures.

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<sup>5</sup> “I can imagine one possible exception, one large system that may not collapse as we enter the new Dark Age: the Church. Because religions deal in the transport of ideology, rather than Wheaties and widgets, I fear they might assume the same power they did during the last Dark Age. I fear the rise of the Church not because I am opposed to other peoples’ spirituality, but because I believe the problems we face can be solved only with secular approaches, not with wishful thinking.” (p. 133)

<sup>6</sup> <http://guymcpherson.com/2011/08/three-paths-to-near-term-human-extinction/>

While the pace of climate change is increasing, the awareness of its consequences is still very limited and shallow. The few people who have gained some knowledge of the issue have only a trivial understanding of the stakes: usually, they are convinced that Westerners will not suffer too much from the higher temperatures, flooding, food scarcity, etc. Climatologists themselves are often stuck with statistics feeding a mechanical model that is remote from our organic environment. They are the victim of what Whitehead called the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: substituting abstractions and speculative modelization for the stubborn facts. Where are the systemic scientists?

New forecasts are also constantly springing from new observations. It is not just a matter of refining previous measurements and of updating the statistics: loads of data are missing because scientists are not looking for them. For instance, most studies are especially concerned about the evolution of the Arctic; some are now focusing on the Antarctic Ice Sheet (were it to melt completely, it contains enough water to raise sea level by roughly 60 m)—but they concentrate only it seems on the *East Antarctic Ice Sheet*.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the melting of ice sheets and the consequent rise in sea level affects not only the thermohaline circulation, but also the distribution of mass on the Earth's surface, causing the North Pole's location to drift and perhaps the Earth's axis to shift. Are such consequences duly probed?

Food insecurity is the cornerstone of all meaningful arguments on climate change. It is lurking in the IPCC reports, in RAND and Pentagon studies, in the research programs of the agribusiness—but it is totally absent of most mainstream reports.<sup>8</sup> McPherson is here in the good company of Jared Diamond (*Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, 2005) and James Howard Kunstler (*The Long Emergency Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century*, 2005).<sup>9</sup> There are two main dimensions to this crucial problem: on the one hand, the collapse of the natural food chain due to the demographical pressure, the increasing levels of pollution and, indeed, the speed of the climate change; on the other hand, the breakdown of the cultural food chain (agriculture and all forms of animal husbandry, such as aquafarming) due to peak oil and the consequent energy scarcity.

The equation is quite simple: according to technoscientists, the expected failure of our natural food chain is not an issue since we will be able to rely upon GMO's, intensive farming and even newly synthesized proteins. Plant genetics was

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<sup>7</sup> H. Jesse Smith, "More Than We Thought," *Science* 24, January 2014: Vol. 343 no. 6169 pp. 352.

<sup>8</sup> With the notable exception of "Climate Change Seen Posing Risk to Food Supplies," that made the front page of the *New York Times* of November 1, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. David. S. Battisti and Rosamond L. Naylor, "Historical Warnings of Future Food Insecurity with Unprecedented Seasonal Heat," *SCIENCE*, 9 JANUARY 2009 VOL 323, pp. 240-244.

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comparatively of little import for the Green Revolution of the sixties (the increase of the world grain production by 250 percent) but it could become essential to cope with a climate change that is happening too fast to allow crops to adapt themselves. Wheat, rice, and soybeans tend to accommodate higher levels of CO<sub>2</sub>, but not abrupt temperature change. For instance, genetically engineered trees were debated at the 2008 UN Biodiversity Convention and edible insects were discussed by the FAO in 2013. Unfortunately, even in the absence of climate change, peak oil condemns us to famine. One should not forget indeed that the so-called Green Revolution was possible only thanks to fossil fuel inputs: fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, harvest... The mycoprotein used to obtain products such as Quorn is extracted from a fungus grown in sterile fermentation tanks (bioreactors) operating upon electricity and entirely relying upon our complex industrial network.

In light of all this, it becomes now optimistic to conceive of a one hundred years state of emergency accompanied with a tight control of green house gases. The fact is that the only scholars who take the political consequences of climate change seriously advocate a war economy of sorts giving immediate and total priority to survival. The best example being perhaps James Lovelock, who is of course able to toy with the insularity of the UK and the logistics of WW2...

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