

**Duncan Kelly**, *Politics and the Anthropocene*, Cambridge: Polity, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-509-53419-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-509-53420-3 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-509-53421-0 (ebook)

Growing consciousness of human-made climate and ecological breakdown has in recent years galvanised many to question the political order of our times. Yet, as Mike Hulme (2009) and others have argued, a shared sense of ominous change has not translated into a singular cultural framing of the crisis nor to political consensus about necessary actions. It is to this lively debate that Duncan Kelly's *Politics and the Anthropocene* contributes.

Innovatively, Kelly approaches this field through the history of 20<sup>th</sup> century economic and political thought and by framing the political problems of the "Anthropocene" through its competing temporalities and representative claims associated with modern liberal democracy. Such an approach, on the one hand, is testament to Kelly's theoretical engagement with Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) reflections on historicity, as well as David Runciman's (2013) writing on liberal democracy. On the other hand, Kelly's treatments of temporality and representational claims also refract 20<sup>th</sup> century debates about state debt, international and intergenerational justice, mass welfare and limits to growth. Here, Kelly pursues a thoughtful dialogue with interwar and post-war economists such as Arthur Pigou and Herman Daly and more recent interventions by scholars such as Thomas Piketty (2014), Diane Coyle (2015) or Dipesh Chakrabarty (2014, 2018, 2019). This makes for a timely intervention taking on equal measures of historical awareness and contemporary reflection, and effectively reframes the reader's sense of the political possibilities in the Anthropocene.

*Politics and the Anthropocene* is divided into a preface, six chapters and an epilogue. In the preface, Kelly discusses the concept of the Anthropocene, the idea of overlapping temporalities, and the book's overarching aims. The "Anthropocene", Kelly notes, was coined as a geological concept by the atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer around 2000. Interestingly, Kelly recalls how this concept emerged alongside preoccupations about "reverse geo-engineering" in the context of post-war industrialism, environmental degradation and fears of a nuclear fallout. For Kelly, such a

story already implies an interesting intersection in timeframes, namely the “deep time” of geological change to the “accelerated time” of post-war industrialism. To these two timeframes, he adds a third – “democratic time” – spanning from the 1780s onwards. The significance of these timeframes, Kelly writes, is in “issuing ... multiple regimes of historicity” for the Anthropocene, giving us different “ways of seeing what its force and content might be politically” (p.4). In a Koselleckian vein, Kelly seeks to exploit how historiographies structure “horizons of expectation” (p.27). With these preambles in place, Kelly then outlines the book’s overarching aims, namely to explore “what the history of recent political thought has to say about the emergence of the Anthropocene and the challenges it poses for modern, particularly representative, politics, and, conversely, how the Anthropocene might challenge some of the conventional wisdom of that history” (p.6). This ambition positions the book within the field of 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual history, asking both how this field could feed into, and be upset by, the conceptual struggles surrounding the Anthropocene.

Following this preface, the first chapter, “Timings”, engages more closely with what regimes of historicity may be helpful for the Anthropocene. Kelly opens by noting the early origins of environmental-and-democratic discourse in 18<sup>th</sup> century political economy (through a focus on husbandry and theories linking climate to constitutionalism), and in the “environmental utopianism” of post-revolutionary French socialists (p.9). Shifting forward, Kelly discusses the interwar natural scientist Vladimir Vernadsky’s twin conception of a biosphere and a noosphere, and nods to post-war ideals of scientific eco-management through “systems theory, complexity theory and cybernetics” (p.10). Scientific optimism, Kelly suggests, seems misplaced in the face of pervasive pessimism in environmental politics. Turning to the Anthropocene’s industrial roots, Kelly tracks how a succession of energy regimes entangled not only different fossil fuels, but also “ideas of active citizenship as the prerequisite for basic political equality” (p.13). Industrial times, simply put, coincided with democratic ones. Modern ideas of political equality, however, have been beset by multiple unresolved problems, such as the tension between “political equality and economic

inequality”, the “distancing ... between rulers and ruled” through the artificial person of the state, and the “temporal disconnect between expressions of popular will ... and the policy making process”, not to mention the gaps between the rights of present populations against future ones (p.14-15). These enduring disconnects in representative politics, Kelly argues, raise open-ended questions as to its adaptability and capacity to face new challenges. For the Anthropocene, having a sense of the dynamic tensions underpinning democratic temporalities may well be critical. Following this, Kelly calls attention to the question of “accelerated time”. Acceleration, he notes, is not a novel feeling in political thought. Koselleck, for instance, framed European history from 1750 to 1850 as a period when revolutionary events were accompanied by rapid conceptual evolutions and a radical reframing of the past, the present and the future in the political imagination (p.17). For the Anthropocene, Kelly notes, it has become commonplace to focus on the period after 1945 as one of “Great Acceleration”, under the aegis of nuclear power (p.19). For Kelly, the fears of nuclear fallout catalysed post-war environmentalism, such as in the case of William Vogt’s *The Road to Survival* (1948). Arguably, Kelly could have engaged with other post-war technological leaps in synthetic agriculture, infrastructure-building and mass consumption, especially given their significance to the emergence of mass environmentalism. This would have better supported his claim that accelerated time can show the “realities of technological stickiness and infrastructural inertia” (p.24). Lastly, Kelly turns to the politics of “deep time”. At worst, he cautions, deep time narratives can be deeply ineffective in incorporating a sense of modern politics. At best, however, such narratives can inform a granular revisionism, where a rediscovery of socio-environmental histories enables a sharper sense of the consequences of mismanagement and thus encourages more prudential attitudes in the present.

In his second chapter, “Ecological Inequalities”, Kelly seeks to probe 20<sup>th</sup> century debates on economic inequality with ecological reflections. Kelly’s starting point is to contrast interwar left-wing and neoliberal economists as opening an enduring debate opposing the “free market” and cybernetic planning as effective resource redistribution mechanisms. Sparked by thinkers such as Otto Neurath, Oskar Lange, Ludwig von Mises and

Friedrich Hayek in the 1930s, such debates echoed through to the 1970s with the opposing experiments of Salvador Allende's Cybersyn and the Chicago Boys' neoliberalisation of Chile. After the 1970s, Kelly argues, this context was further compounded by those seeing the planet as "an entropic steady-state organism ... [with] limits to growth" and tending towards environmental degradation (p.30).<sup>1</sup> After this, the chapter discusses recent works denaturalising soaring economic inequality, such as those by Anthony Atkinson (2014), Thomas Piketty (2014) and Danny Dorling (2015). Such efforts, Kelly writes, align with broader Marxian and Nietzschean appeals for non-naturalised history, a mode of critical thinking for troubling the Anthropocene's ecological narratives, as shown by Timothy Morton's *Being Ecological* (2018) (p.32-33). Considering the history of ecological economics, Kelly then signals controversy about where to place its origins, whether around the 1950s "Resources for the Future" think tank, amongst interwar welfare economical writing on negative externalities and pollution, or only at its "formal emergence in Stockholm around 1982".<sup>2</sup> Taking a broad view, Kelly discusses early interventions by Max Weber and W.S. Jevons on energy, economy and politics (p.34-38). Jevons's *The Coal Question* (1865), he argues, engaged creatively with the issue whether the British empire ought to consume resources exhaustively or husband them; a choice, for Jevons, between "brief but true greatness and longer continued mediocrity" (quoted on p.37). Lastly, Kelly comments on post-war debates about income inequality, initiated by Simon Kuznets and renewed recently by Thomas Piketty (2014), Walter Scheidel (2018), and Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson (2016). Here, Kelly makes two critical notes: that Kuznets' work implied a "rejection of Marxist 'catastrophist' readings of modernity" (p.39); and that the contemporary dormancy of Scheidel's "levellers" may well be a testament to "modern democratic political success and stability, an unintended consequence of a system that itself relies upon minimal participation and the competitive circulation of elites" (p.40-41).<sup>3</sup> Such points return to

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<sup>1</sup> These terms seem drawn from the economic thought of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Herman Daly.

<sup>2</sup> The sources referred here include Pearce (2002) and Martinez-Alier (1987).

<sup>3</sup> Broadly, Scheidel's overarching argument is that in the past, major compressions of inequality only happened through the pressure of violent shocks, such as war, revolution, state failure, systems collapse or natural catastrophes. For his scepticism of democracy's equalising potentials, see Scheidel (2018:365-366).

Kelly's overarching aim to erode the catastrophist and fatalist strains of Anthropocene discourses and explore the prospects and problems of modern representative politics.

In his third chapter, Kelly engages with debates on "limiting growth". Curiously, Kelly entry-point is Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2014) critical reframing of Marxian arguments about capitalism's "metabolic rift". Shifting to the 1970s, Kelly presents Fred Hirsch's *Social Limits to Growth* (1976) and Foucault's studies of sexuality as resonant calls for "the structural need to pull back from economic self-advancement" (Hirsch quoted on p.50). In parallel to this, Kelly also retraces the neo-Malthusian arguments of the Club of Rome, Paul Ehrlich and Jay W. Forrester. With hindsight, he argues, such debates collectively "presupposed the possibility of the transformation of values surrounding growth", thus rescuing "eco-security" and a "new approach to human well-being" (p.53).<sup>4</sup> At one level, this eased returns to arguments for achieving an economic "stationary state", such as rehearsed by John Stuart Mill, John Maynard Keynes and later by the ecological economists such as Kenneth Boulding. The crux here seems to be around regulating against runaway inequality and undercutting scarcity-driven conflicts. Interestingly, Kelly argues that John Rawls's vision of a just society shared these premises. Returning to economic thought, Kelly then engages the ecological economics of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Herman Daly and their concerns about entropy and stability. Politically, Kelly argues, "stationary state" debates have fed myriad post-capitalist imaginations, not least of which around models of "eco-socialist semi-autarky" (p.61).<sup>5</sup> Eco-socialists, Kelly tells us, have objected to steady-state ideas due to the emphasis on population management. Instead, eco-socialists have committed to a "de-growth agenda", reversing "land scarcity" and fostering a great re-wilding (p.61-62). For Kelly, "this sort of 'global Cuba' strategy might be a rational solution to an irrational international system, ... [but] still sounds rather austere" (p.62). Eco-socialist autarkies, he deems, share much utopianism with older, ill-fated ideals such as Fichte's "closed commercial state" (p.62). By contrast, Kelly lauds Dieter Helm's (2018) more recent "pragmatic geo-energy vision" as engaging with the real trends of "energy policy and

<sup>4</sup> An interesting source here is Coyle (2015).

<sup>5</sup> This phrase is taken from Frankel (1987).

international politics” and proposing climate reforms through fossil fuel taxation. Yet, Kelly warns, even such a vision may prove insufficient, with stringent restrictions on carbon emission fuelling a greater sense of scarcity, national protectionism and trade wars. A challenge to this predicament, Kelly suggests, may be found in engaging with the colonial roots of global inequality through the language of ecological indebtedness.

In Chapter 4, “Ecological Debts”, Kelly reflects on what the history of political and economic thought might bring to current debates on climate change, debt and global justice. Opening his discussion, Kelly notes the constitutive character of debt in the emergence of modern states, not least in terms of financing war and precipitating great revolutions. Interestingly, he then turns to the interwar economist Arthur Pigou and his work on reparations and avoiding regressive inter-generational taxation. Pigou, Kelly notes, proposed “massive capital levies on profitable firms and those who had done well financially out of wartime”, thus inspiring future arguments for taxing against negative externalities (p.67). Within the Anthropocene, such arguments find ample use, not least because of those framing this era as one of externalities “striking back”, after decades of ecologically irresponsible profiteering. For Jason Moore and Raj Patel (2018), Kelly notes, this view feeds into a grand narrative of capitalist modernity, where Western colonialism appears as the mainspring of an expansive extractive model wreaking environmental impoverishment on conquered regions. In principle, Kelly comments, this vision underlines past injustices, reframes them as debts, and advocates forms of “reparation ecology” (p.70). Such a vision, Kelly rightfully emphasises, “presumes the construction of a ‘representative claim’” to be bargained for by politicians (ibid.). The potential for bargaining, however, Kelly argues, is beset by realpolitik critiques deeming injury claims as toothless against the great interests structuring international politics. In this light, Kelly retells Mann and Wainwright’s (2017) four scenarios of climate breakdown and international transformation, from a global state imposing adaption but sustaining inequality (“Climate Leviathan”), to a reactionary denialist great power (“Climate Behemoth”), to a radically democratic and anti-capitalist assemblage (“Climate X”), or regional anti-capitalist blocs (“Climate Mao”) (see also Wainwright and Mann 2013).

For Kelly, what these geopolitical imaginaries underline is the idea that climate change will always be refracted through three modes of response: mitigation, adaption *or suffering*.

Shifting back onto debates on inter-generational and international debts, Kelly poses the centrality of Anglo-American “historical emissions debt” and relates it to post-colonial efforts for “reversing the arrow of indebtedness” (p.76-77). Discerningly, Kelly points to the proposal for a “Debt Treaty” associated to the 1992 Rio Summit, which launched the conceptual innovation of an “ecological debt” owed to those suffering the consequences of extractivism. Such innovation, Kelly notes, galvanised economists to cost negative externalities and think of incentives to repayment, whereas philosophers “cast doubt on the possibility of adequately identifying who should pay, and when” (p.78). Here, Kelly recalls Pigou’s writings as a tool for thinking through how negative taxes might, or might not, be funnelled into “progressive public purposes” (p.78). With this aside, he also justifies the philosophers’ doubts as opening up questions of collective responsibility and the issue of pecuniary compensation vs. political action. With a practical eye, Kelly reminds us that “the concept of ecological debt ... signals a wider set of distributional conflicts” (p.78). At its most radical, Kelly argues, the notion of unpaid debts has been mobilized by “eco-terrorism” disrupting pipelines and fracking, with activists challenging established representative claims. In some ways, Kelly suggests, such forms of sabotage share much with the interwar struggles of syndicalist movements (p.80). On a final note in a rich chapter, Kelly argues that “debt-financed borrowing for climate change is impossible” and that taxation hikes on consumption, “support for income-driven substitutional goods” and taxation for environmental policies are better options (p.80-81). Within this, he imagines a “carbon import duty” could be levied to discourage transport intensive trade (p.81). Such “bottom-up” measures, Kelly writes, would perhaps be more effective than grand international agreements on redistribution. Be this as it may, such reforms face great political challenges, not least as politicians would “need to explain to people why they will have to pay more for less” and refrain from proposing “a mythical world of painless choices and perpetual growth” (p.81). In any politics of pain, of course, one is left to wonder who suffers.

Chapter 5, “Population Futures”, engages with 20<sup>th</sup> century debates on population growth, mass quality of life and ecosystem limits.<sup>6</sup> Such debates, as is familiar to all geographers, are shaped by Malthusian idioms and have well-defined lineages of political resistance. Intriguingly, Kelly begins by lamenting how the post-1980s revival of American evangelicals missed the opportunity of embracing Christian narratives of earthly stewardship. Such a thought, we might add, could be disturbed if recalling the Christian roots of Malthus’s thought, one of many Christian iterations since that combined narratives of stewardship with disaster and mass exclusion. This points to an old Christian quandary, i.e. who saves the damned? Anyhow, Kelly then turns to the neo-Malthusians of the 1960s, from Paul Ehrlich, to Kenneth Boulding and Garrett Hardin. In engaging with Hardin, he notes some racist underpinnings of his arguments on relative quality of life and personhood. By contrast, Kelly recalls Elinor Ostrom’s and John Broome’s defences of managed commons, from local to planetary scales. Beyond Malthusianism, Kelly notes, modern population politics have deep historical connections with eugenics and racialism. At a broader level, adopting Diana Coole’s (2018) ideas, Kelly suggests that population politics have been marked by competing narratives of scepticism, declinism, decomposing, and fatalism (p.88). This framing deserves further engagement by geographers. After this, Kelly turns to political debates on population politics, humanitarianism and global justice. Noting the challenges that philosophers such as Peter Singer or Charles Beitz levied against Hardin’s lifeboat ethics, Kelly then turns to Carl Schmitt and Koselleck’s critiques of appeals to “humanity” in modern politics as “little more than a moralized mirage” (p.90). Lastly, Kelly considers Marxian thinkers for whom “the prospective trope supplies perennial grounds for optimism” (p.91). Signalling to Rosa Luxembour, Walter Benjamin and Claude Lefort, Kelly comments on the idea of “socialism or barbarism” and its framing of capitalism as catastrophism. Contrasting this, Kelly reviews Derek Parfit’s critiques of (Marxian) utilitarianism and levelling, not least in terms of reconciling the maximization of welfare with growing populations. Closing, Kelly reflects on “discounting” as a tool to balance the values of the present with those of the future, as argued

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<sup>6</sup> A key source here seems to be Bashford (2014), a useful book for all geographers.

amongst economists such as Nicholas Stern and William Nordhaus. Such debates, Kelly argues, once more underline the significance of competing temporalities.

In the sixth and final chapter, “Value”, Kelly tackles debates surrounding how an Anthropocened politics might challenge contemporary value-systems. Starting with Partha Dasgupta, Kelly returns to the issue of how environmental costs, perhaps even ecosystem services, could be integrated into GDP accounting and social discount rates. Following this, Kelly engages with recent calls by George Monbiot and China Miéville for new grand social narratives, reframing what ought to be valued and displacing the ruling mythologies of economic performance. Pithily, Kelly sees such efforts as “a full-bodied constructivism of the intellect amid a continued pessimism of the will” (p.101). Gramsci’s left to turn in his grave.<sup>7</sup> At worst, Kelly adds, such efforts can lapse into “pseudo-eschatological melodrama, wherein either Gaia or Mother Earth needs to be saved by her delinquent human children” (p.102). For Kelly, such apocalyptic narrations cannot lead to a stable politics. To erode the “pathologies of fatalism”, he argues, it is necessary to denaturalize “end times” narratives and appreciate the complex manners in which modern politics are already Anthropocened (p.102-103). From this line, Kelly then considers authors claiming that an Anthropocened politics must begin at reconceiving “what the earth actually is” (p.103). Here, Kelly discusses Timothy Clark’s (2013) proposals for an “ecophenomenology”, as well as Bruno Latour’s (2017) writings on Gaia and Donna Haraway’s (2016) revisions of kinship in the Chthulucene (103-108). An interesting addition here could have been the classic geographical interventions by Denis Cosgrove (2003) and Clarence Glacken (1967). In closing, inspired by Amitav Ghosh, Kelly suggests that, given the re-emergence of Eastern great powers and the erosion of Eurocentric myths, politics in the Anthropocene might be marked not by a clash of civilisations but by multiple “crises of civilization” fuelled by environmental disasters (p.110). Such predicament, he writes, might demand defter “thinking about [how] plural time-frames, spaces and political ideas” are used in the wake of environmental disruption. Ultimately, Kelly argues, pluralizing “the temporalities of our political worlds” is critical

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<sup>7</sup> See Antonini (2019).

precisely because it helps us “avoid the pitfalls of either pessimistic or optimistic fatalism” in reaction to the epochal shift of the Anthropocene (p.111).

Drawing to a close, Kelly offers his final thoughts in an epilogue on the “Historical Possibilities for an Anthropocened Politics”. Here, he returns to the question of the Anthropocene as a new regime of historicity, contending with different temporalities, from the geological to the apocalyptic, to the mechanic and accelerationist times of late industrialism, and, most significantly of all, with the political timing of democracy. Seaming these temporalities, Kelly writes, feeds a “sceptical awareness of the need to contextualize ideas in their own time in order to trace their inscription in the present, because politics and political judgement are not the sorts of things that admit a timeless response or absolute clarity” (p.114). With historicist scepticism praised, Kelly then sums his book as leading to “three major modes of thinking about climate change – *mitigation*, *adaptation* or *suffering* – offering *technocratic-legalist*, *crisis-response* or *basic adaptability* forms of politics for the modern nation state” (p.114). Technocratic-legalist responses, he explains, can be seen in the arguments for forms of “constitutional environmentalism”, where legal innovations would redistribute the burdens of environmental disruption, enshrine new ideas of ecological rights, and thus incentivize conservation (p.115). This pathway would employ the language of representative politics and operate through a “realistic utopia” offering “a regulative ideal ... [to] work towards” (p.117). In this model, Kelly adds, “domestic autarky” seems unviable, not least because refusing international competition would likely translate into intolerable costs for any isolated nation (p.117). “Being ecological”, in sum, can only work if embedded into “the norm of a strategic and relational approach to government” across different domestic settings (p.118).<sup>8</sup> Crisis-response politics, in turn, would follow a model centred on “new forms of functional internationalism”, pooling sovereign funds and expertise to address a “preliminary rectification of historical injustices and ecological debts” (p.118-119). Such a model, Kelly grants, “may sound ... wildly utopian” yet could nevertheless offer creative opportunities to address inter-generational indebtedness and connect reparative schemes with

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<sup>8</sup> This is a passing reference to Bob Jessop’s (2017) framing of political action in a structured context (i.e. “the strategic-relational”).

progressive public investment, in a Pigouvian spirit (p.119). Lastly, basic adaptability politics, Kelly argues, could build on “older traditions of political economy and welfare economics” and produce “new forms of accountancy and management” better suited to valuing human and ecological well-being (p.120-121). With these three directions at hand, Kelly restates his matrix: an Anthropocened politics must serve “complex decisions about the past, present and future” and “involve many representational claims” (122). Such a vision, he claims, avoids beliefs of being “beholden to something so fickle or so fixed as ‘fate’” (p.122), and creates a critical sphere for representative politics to make a virtue of the Anthropocene’s complexities, using their challenge to transform and reinvigorate “established narratives of a liberal world order” (p.122).

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At first read, *Politics and the Anthropocene* can feel as a somewhat meandering and open-ended meditation, yet as the above summary suggests, there is more here than meets the eye. Some of the wealth of Kelly’s arguments, for instance, is uncovered by paying attention to his references, which weave together a well-curated context for reflection, conjoining texts from intellectual history, political thought, economics and environmental studies. Here, geographers will find fruitful lines of flight, such as in the ecological economics of Joan Martinez-Alier, Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen and Herman Daly, or in critical texts that ought to be integrated into the geographical curriculum (e.g. Bashford 2014; Coole 2018; Coyle 2015). Beyond this “hidden” web, much in Kelly’s argument can also be gauged through some leitmotifs, such as the discrediting of optimist or pessimist fatalism, be it amongst scientific or socialist utopian thinking, or amongst environmentalist doomsayers. Through these leitmotifs, *Politics and the Anthropocene* can at times feel almost like an ethos-building enterprise, persuading readers to share in a certain disposition towards the epochal discursivities of the Anthropocene. This inevitably implies a framing of what politics work

well and what policies might be realistic, something which ultimately appears as a commitment to a reformed liberalism.

For geographers, and those who identify with *Antipode's* radical agenda, *Politics and the Anthropocene* offers much to mull over and contend with. Hopefully, many more critical readings will be made of this thoughtful and useful book, but let me, for the remainder of this essay, focus on two points for reflection: i) the politics of ecological economics; and ii) the critique of eco-socialism.

Geographers have often bemoaned economists for their taste for relatively abstract accounts of wealth and welfare, which routinely abandon placed and grounded considerations in favour of disembodied aggregates and the grand theories of macro-economics. Given the idiographic affinities of much human geography, this continued mismatch is somewhat unsurprising...yet it is also singularly unfruitful. Given their titanic policy influence, we'd always be better off trying to understand what it is that economists think they're doing. Here, *Politics in the Anthropocene* offers an unexpected ally in an overdue task. Kelly's insightful and accessible accounts are helpfully focused on the moral and political preoccupations underlying many competing projects in economic thought. For geographers, this may be nowhere so useful as in the realm of ecological economics, with its conceptions of steady-state systems, inter-generational equity and reparations. Indeed, questions of inter-generational justice are particularly ripe to be cross-fertilized with geographers' enduring concerns with spatial justice. Geographers have a part to play in theorizing these timely questions, but only by acknowledging the terms that have dominated discussion and challenging them with an equally encompassing and policy-oriented vision.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that geography's grounded studies have had nothing to offer. Indeed, if there was one body of literature that seemed singularly absent from *Politics in the Anthropocene*, it was political ecology. Engaging this field would have been particularly useful due to its timely and necessary accounts of how the distribution of environmental goods is struggled over

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<sup>9</sup> For successful examples of this see Hulme (2009) or Dorling (2015).

across several scales. Despite this absence, Kelly's approach remains a useful example for geographers to rethink the promise of economic thought in the Anthropocene.

A last point to consider concerns the ethical ambitions of *Politics and the Anthropocene*. Kelly's central contention is that we must avoid narratives underpinned by optimistic or pessimistic fatalism and embrace a sceptical-historicist view, which acknowledges and utilizes the dys/functions of representative politics. At one level, this critique of fatalism is directed broadly at any accounts falling into technological hubris, catastrophist "pseudo-eschatological melodrama" (p.102), or *certain* forms of political utopianism. Indeed, Kelly accuses present-day politicians of peddling deceitful myths of perpetual growth and painless choices (p.81), in a sort of demagogic cornucopianism. Conjoined, such lines of critique all seem to lead to the same cornerstone question: how can one be realistic about progressive political change? Kelly's solution is in a reformed liberalism re-organising representative claims and distributive devices. Tellingly, as Kelly puts it, the contrast here is between advancing the "realist utopia" of liberal internationalism constitutionalism, and welfare economics, as opposed to the unreasonable utopias of others. Such a framing implies a second level in criticizing the pitfalls of fatalism: the ideological.

Indeed, whereas liberalism features as a perfectible wellspring (despite its colonial and idealist pasts), socialism is positioned as the perennial seedbed of misguided politics. This bias appears palpably in specific utterances as in argumentative structures where socialists or Marxian thinkers are engaged with and then argued against (cf. p.9, 39, 62, 91-92). Thus, Chapter 1 opens by linking scientific optimism to French "utopian socialism", and then argues that only representative politics can address Anthropocenic quandaries. Chapter 3 argues eco-socialists offer "rather austere ... semi-autarkies", by contrast to more "pragmatic geo-energy visions" employing fossil fuel taxation (p.62-63). Chapter 5 implies that proponents of the "socialism or barbarism" slogan naively married a catastrophist view of capitalism with a "prospective trope suppl[y]ing perennial grounds for optimism" (p.91). The underlying sense emerging out of this is that socialist thought has been enduringly affected by

“un-realist utopias” which have seen themselves renewed, once more to barren fruits, across debates on the Anthropocene.

Irrespective of how much these specific assessments hold water; it is arguably the case that they participate in an unhelpful “regime of historicity” (to put it in Kelly’s Kosseleckian terms). In that regime, socialists are beyond the pale of representative politics, perennially distrustful of international trade, and suffer from a rare species of utopianism seeing all that is past as subdued to capitalist catastrophism and all that is future somehow hiding reasons for optimism. To believe such a picture, socialists belong in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, stuck in an always-near/never-here, entertaining us depressingly. What if, instead, we imagined that socialists could be reasonable, that is, no less subject to the delusions common to any and all?

Two key approaches may be helpful here: i) to acknowledge socialist pluralism and porousness; and ii) to consider whether socialist visions could be interpreted as “realist utopias”, i.e. “regulative ideals to work towards” (p.117). Such a direction may equip us with a more charitable and critical interpretative tack, not least because it may helpfully underline the many proximities between past socialist and liberal thinkers, as well as take present-day socialist proposals more seriously. With regards to ongoing lively debates on green transitions this would be particularly advisable, not least in terms of acknowledging the policy proposals appended to the promises of the Democrats’ Green New Deal, UK Labour’s Green Industrial Revolution or the international social movements linked to Extinction Rebellion. Through these contexts, many left-wing debates could have been fruitfully engaged, from public investment, taxation, international development, labour strategy, democratic devolution and quality of life. Such novel policy proposals matter not because they are left-wing, but precisely because they are not self-contained and are part of reshaping political debate and action across the board. In terms of Kelly’s reflections, these might have been useful especially in emphasising the issues of tax avoidance and corporation taxes, as well as public-interest nationalisations, public investment banks, and the manner in which consumer tax proposals have generally been accompanied by substantive proposal to ensure

any regressive aspects of VAT are counter-balanced by radical reforms in labour and social rights, so as to pursue an environmentalist policy concomitant with the end of austerity. In more philosophical terms, this signals the enduring commitment of the left and socialists to think of democracy as a political regime of mass welfare or quality of life. Such a view, unquestionably, has led to many historical variances, reformist or revolutionary, towards reforming modern representative politics and its balancing of interests.

With these reservations stated, *Politics in the Anthropocene* remains an excellent and suggestive intervention, which geographers will likely find useful and enjoyable to read and return to. Kelly's fresh, accessible and critical writing offers a good example of how to speak to public debates and mobilize a historicist approach to denaturalize and challenge contemporary narratives. In this respect, Kelly's focus on the intellectual and political history of the long 20<sup>th</sup> century is particularly fruitful given clear continuities in concerns and discourse. For geographers who have believed our subject to produce a "history of the present", Kelly's work brings home the important insight that any valuable presentism must be accompanied by a well-calibrated historicism. Happy readings!

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