

AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM IN THE ANTHROPOCENE:  
THE CYLCE OF DISRUPTION AND THE COLLAPSE OF  
THE HAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS

by

DANIEL SNELL

A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Classics and Philosophy  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

June 2020

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Daniel Snell for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the Department of Classics and Philosophy to be taken June 2020

Title: American Individualism in the Anthropocene: The Cycle of Disruption and the  
Collapse of the Happy Consciousness

Approved: Steven Brence, Ph.D.  
Primary Thesis Advisor

Geological science widely accepts that in the middle of the 20th century the Earth entered a new epoch: the Anthropocene. There is a key difference between the Anthropocene and previous geological epochs: Humans are the driving force of planetary evolution. During this geological transition the fabric of American society was massively disrupted by rapid industrialization and technological development. John Dewey recounts this destabilization in *Individualism Old and New*, and Herbert Marcuse describes the results of the destabilization in *One-Dimensional Man*. This essay will explore the characteristics of the Anthropocene and the implications it has for the American individual including the establishment of two predominant individualistic mindsets. Then, it will explain a four-step process called the Cycle of Disruption that I believe occurred after the industrial revolution and continues to this day. It will examine how the forces of the Anthropocene have influenced the two prevailing individualistic mindsets and where contemporary American society falls within the Cycle of Disruption; focusing on the disruption caused by the Internet and its accessory technologies. These concepts will be explored through the film *Assassination Nation*,

and the television show *Euphoria*, both by Sam Levinson. The goal of this essay is to suggest a potential reframing of the chaotic and nihilistic Anthropocenic forces in order to develop a more mature kind of individualism, and thus a more mature kind of Anthropocene.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my entire thesis committee: Dr. Steven Brence, Dr. Malcom Wilson, Dr. Caroline Lundquist, and Dr. Timothy Williams for the support and advice through the evolution of this thesis. Thank you, Dr. Brence, for introducing me to the philosophers that are at the core of this project and for your expert guidance and insight with both Dewey and Marcuse. I will remember the lessons you have taught me for many years to come as I continue to develop as a critical thinker and hopefully a genuine subject. Dr. Wilson, thank you for all of the times you pushed back on my ideas from an angle I didn't know existed and for sticking with me after my thesis completely changed course. Your guidance and assistance have been invaluable. To Dr. Lundquist, thank you for helping me clarify and refine the analysis and style of this project. Dr. Williams, thank you for your support and for teaching me many of the research and writing skills I needed to complete this project. The entirety of my committee has been crucial to the development and completion of this project, you all have my unending gratitude.

Thank you to my dear friend Maxfield for all the late dinners, essay edits, and insights you've shared over the years. The Anthropocene would mean much less without you. A special thanks to Li Tubman for suggesting that I read Habermas as a high school senior and for opening those first doors to philosophy. I will forever remember the time I was your student and the lesson you taught me both academic and not.

To all my other friends and family who had to deal with me only talking about this thesis for the last year, thank you. Finally, I would like to thank the University of Oregon and the Clark Honors College for facilitating an educational environment I could grow and prosper within. I will forever be thankful for the experience of writing this thesis.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: The Anthropocene	4
Chapter 2: Individualism in the Anthropocene	13
Chapter 3: The Cycle of Disruption and The Happy Consciousness	23
Chapter 4: The Disruption of The Happy Consciousness	35
Chapter 5: Towards a Mature-Anthropocene?	49
Bibliography	58

## Introduction

The Anthropocene, a name for the new geological epoch, has become a well-supported concept within the geology community. What this means is still being determined, but in a few words: we have entered a new period of time where environmental processes have departed from the norm that we have experienced for all of human civilization; a global *terra incognita*. Moreover, with the advancement of technologies primarily centered around the burning of fossil fuels, humanity has risen to a level of influence over the environment that rivals and in places greatly exceeds the passive forces of planetary evolution. An exact start date for the Anthropocene is nearly impossible to set. However, over the past decades, numerous international geological panels and organizations have determined the optimal start date as the mid-twentieth century; between 1945 and 1964.

In the years following the beginning of the Anthropocene humanity experienced The Great Acceleration, a period characterized by the exponential increase in the number of technological instruments that became available to the general population, and constant growth in the complexity of those technologies. These rapid advancements in turn rapidly changed American society and disrupted how individualism functioned on multiple levels. These shifts resulted in the dismantling or at least revealing the false consciousness-- the Marxist concept of a distorted experience with reality. György Lukács, a Hungarian philosopher, describes false consciousness<sup>1</sup> as "something which fails subjectively to reach its self-appointed goals, while furthering and realizing the

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that the development of the false consciousness as a concept originates with Engels and Marx. They described this phenomenon but Lukács was the first to formally use the term false consciousness.

objective aims of society of which it is ignorant and which it did not choose."<sup>2</sup> What Lukács means here, is that the vast majority of people are disconnected from the results of their actions. They go about their lives thinking that they are working in their own self-interest--that is to accumulate enough wealth to pacify the struggle for existence<sup>3</sup> and pursue more meaningful uses of time than seeking basic necessities. This, however, is not the actual result of the individual's actions. In fact, their actions on a day-to-day basis further perpetuate their own unfreedom and continue to reproduce the system of exploitation by serving goals dictated by forces outside of the individual's control. They perceive one interaction with reality when in fact they are participating in another unaware. This is a more traditional form of the false consciousness that typically applies to industrialized societies near the turn of the 20th century.

The technology of the industrial revolution caused wide-scale disruption of society and sent the American individual into crisis. During that crisis new and even more sinister forms of social control were developed. Following the dismantling of one social consciousness the technological instruments developed by the rapidly changing society allowed for the development of new social forces. Forces that acted on both system and individual alike. We can see analysis of this process by examining the works of John Dewey and Herbert Marcuse. In *Individualism Old and New*, Dewey recounts the crisis of individualism following the industrial revolution, and the development of a new social force: dominant corporateness. I believe that dominant corporateness eventually adapted into a more sophisticated social force. In *One-*

---

<sup>2</sup> Lukács, György. *History and Class Consciousness*. An Anthology of Western Marxism. Oxford University Press. 1989., 59

<sup>3</sup> When I say pacify the struggle for existence, I mean that the individual would not have to worry about whether they will have a roof over their head or food on their table. Marcuse believes this pacification possible through the use of automated technology which today is more advanced than ever.

*Dimensional Man*, Marcuse presents his concept of technological rationality: the belief that the real is rational. This adaptation of dominant corporateness was so powerful and influential it facilitated the construction of a whole new iteration of the false consciousness: The Happy Consciousness. In turn, this new false consciousness established new forms of social control over the American individual and re-established a status quo.

In the first chapter of this essay, I will define the Anthropocene in terms of geology and give context to the ways that the world has changed for the individual. The second chapter will be devoted to exploring the implications of the Anthropocene in terms of the individual, and to lay out the groundwork for two competing individualistic mindsets. In the third and fourth chapters, I will establish a four-step process I call the Cycle of Disruption that I believe follows large scale social disruption, and examine how we may be in the early stages of that cycle right now through Sam Levinson's film *Assassination Nation* and his TV show *Euphoria*. In the final chapter of this essay, I will address the two potential outcomes of the Cycle of Disruption that Dewey and Marcuse describe: The Great Abdication and The Great Refusal. I will explore both these concepts and their implications for the future. I hope that through this thesis I will be able to reframe the chaos and the nihilism of the Anthropocene in a way that might offer an escape from the Cycle of Disruption and that fosters a more fulfilling, stable relationship between human individuals and the Earth System.

## Chapter 1: The Anthropocene

In order to understand how the Anthropocene influences the American individual, we must first define what the Anthropocene is in geological terms and identify the Anthropocenic forces that have developed in the preceding decades. The forces of the Anthropocene appear to be steeped in chaos and short-sighted nihilism; this can be understood through the characteristics of the Anthropocene. Ian Angus's book *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System* presents a thorough picture of the characteristics of the Anthropocene. Angus provides a valuable window into what the Anthropocene means and the beginning of its impact on individuals.

For centuries, the Earth has been studied using various forms of biology, ecology, geology, physics, and many other disciplines. These studies, for the most part, were focused upon a specific part of the Earth and were rarely integrated. Since the 1980s earth scientists have been using a different framework. Instead of dialing in on the discrete parts of the Earth, the Earth is now viewed as an integrated planetary system. Ian Angus explains that this became a necessary way to interact with the Earth as it became more and more evident that humans, as part of the system, were having a titanic effect on the course of planetary evolution.

It became clear to the global science community that "nuclear weapons, ozone-destroying chemicals, and greenhouse gases could radically remake the world."<sup>4</sup> In 1986, the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) commissioned the International Geosphere Biosphere Program (IGBP) in order to "describe and

---

<sup>4</sup> Angus, Ian. *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System*. Monthly Review Press, 2016., 30

understand the interactive physical, chemical, and biological processes that regulate the total Earth system."<sup>5</sup>

Five-hundred scientists from around the world began planning and executing studies that when integrated would give us a window into how the Earth System is responding to the widespread exploitation of natural resources by humans on a global scale. This endeavor was important as it was the first step towards human awareness of our effect on the Earth System. Regardless of the details of the IGBP's studies, the goal was clear: identify how human society has changed the Earth System.

There is a common problem in American society regarding our place in nature. Americans tend to think of our society as something outside of nature, and that all of nature is thus meant to be at our fingertips. Frank Oldfield and Will Steffan, of the IGBP, offer a strong refutation of that concept with their description of humanity within the Earth System:

Human beings, their societies and their activities are an integral component of the Earth system and are not an outside force perturbing an otherwise natural system. There are many modes of natural variability and instabilities within the system as well as anthropogenically driven changes. By definition, both types of variability are part of the dynamics of the Earth system. They are often impossible to separate completely, and they interact in complex and sometimes mutually reinforcing ways.<sup>6</sup>

It is necessary to keep humanity's place in the Earth System close in mind when discussing human society and our effect on environments. It is important to note that when talking about "natural" processes, I am referring to processes of the Earth if humans were not the driving force of planetary evolution. Humans are natural, so all of our actions can be claimed to be natural, but that is not how I will be orienting my

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 30

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.,32-33

discussion. This is not to say that I am making any claim Humans are not nature, I am just making a differentiation between the deliberate processes' humanity undertakes, and the non-deliberate operations of the universe, and thus the planet.

At some point during their work, the team working on the IGBP decided to "record the trajectory of the 'human enterprise' through a number of indicators"<sup>7</sup> between 1750 and 2000. This ended up being a series of 24 graphs showing trends in areas like energy consumption, atmospheric CO2 levels, water use, and population. As the authors expected, every one of the graphs showed slow, gradual growth from 1750 until around 1950. However, after 1950, the researchers discovered something unexpected: a massive spike in every area. They noted that:

One feature stands out as remarkable. The second half of the twentieth century is unique in the entire history of human existence on Earth. Many human activities reached take-off points sometime in the 20th century and have accelerated sharply towards the end of the century. The last 50 years have without a doubt seen the most rapid transformation of the human relationship with the natural world in the history of humankind.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the results found by the IGBP, the United Nations organized the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MEA), tapping 1,400 scientists to compile an enormous report on ecosystem changes. After publishing this report, the MEA Board released a final statement that is important. Having already established that human society has always adapted the environment to fit needs they surmised that "throughout human history, no period has experienced interference with the biological machinery of the planet on the scale witnessed in the second half of the 20th Century."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 38

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 38-39

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 39

In 2005, Will Steffan and Paul Crutzen of the IGBP, alongside environmental historian John McNeill named that mid-20th century spike the beginning of the Great Acceleration. This is the point where the scale of human interaction with the Earth System began to drastically accelerate. The Great Acceleration was the result of the development of technology primarily focused around the burning of fossil fuels. Technology created the space for humanity to expand the way it did with the speed it did. During the Great Acceleration, a feedback loop between accelerating technology and economic expansion allowed for unimaginable levels of prosperity for a large number of American individuals. This well of seemingly limitless opportunity afforded by technology became a foundational aspect of American individualism at that time and would continue to be influential for the entire second half of the 20th century.

In terms of geology, it is important to establish a beginning to the Anthropocene in order to contextualize the subsequent societal discussion. There are two broad categories of starting dates for the Anthropocene. There are a dozen or more proposals for this date falling into either an Early Anthropocene or a Recent Anthropocene framework. This distinction depends upon where the start date is in relation to the current year. The concept of an Early Anthropocene was introduced by William Ruddiman, an American geologist. Ruddiman posits that the Anthropocene began between eight and five thousand years ago when human civilization developed large-scale agricultural practices in multiple locations around the world. Ruddiman believes that these farming operations produced enough carbon dioxide and methane gas to increase global temperatures slightly; enough to prevent the return of an Ice Age. This is but one of the Early Anthropocene proposals. Other scientists suggest the start date to

be when humans first enacted landscape modification on a large scale, or the extinction of megafauna near the end of the Pleistocene, or when the first Anthropogenic soils formed in Europe, or in 1610 during the initial Columbian Exchange and subsequent genocide. There are even archaeologists that propose extending the Anthropocene well back into the Pleistocene to begin at the first traces of human activity, others have made the suggestion that we entirely rename the Holocene the Anthropocene as it was in this time human civilizations developed.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of their specifics, Early Anthropocene models are problematic. The current discussion on the Anthropocene is not exclusive to human impact alone: it “is not defined by the broadening impact of humans on the environment, but by the active human interference in the processes that govern the geological evolution of the planet.”

<sup>11</sup> By this standard, none of the proposed Early Anthropocene options are viable. Moreover, none of them can point to a demonstrable shift away from the conditions of the Holocene. The recent changes in environmental conditions have led to the planet entering a period with no historical analog.

In response to the concept of an Early Anthropocene Climatologist James Hansen and colleagues wrote:

Even if the Anthropocene began millennia ago, a fundamentally different phase, a Hyper-Anthropocene, was initiated by explosive 20th-century growth of fossil fuel use. Human-made climate forces now overwhelming natural forces. CO<sub>2</sub> at 400 ppm in 2015, is off the scale... Most of the forces growth occurred in the past several decades, and two thirds of the 0.9°C global warming (since 1850) has occurred since 1975.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 54

Even if we set the Anthropocene to start 8,000 years ago almost all of the meaningful changes have occurred in recent decades.

The Breakthrough Institute, a conservative think tank known to support anti-environmentalist agendas, and other organizations like it are particularly fond of the Early Anthropocene model. It supports their claim that we have not experienced any recent quantitative environmental changes. With this logic, they assert that there is no need for a radical response as the environmental crises we are experiencing "represent an acceleration of trends going back hundreds and even thousands of years, not the starting point of a new epoch."<sup>13</sup> The Early Anthropocene argument is very attractive to conservative thought due to its inherent minimization of the changes the Earth System has recently experienced and because it disconnects human action from the trends in climate change. Experts in the field Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald explain:

It (the Early Anthropocene) "gradualizes" the new epoch so that it is no longer a rupture due principally to the burning of fossil fuels but a creeping phenomenon due to the incremental spread of human influence over the landscape. This misconstrues the suddenness, severity, duration, and irreversibility of the Anthropocene, leading to a serious underestimation and mischaracterization of the kind of human response necessary to slow its onset and ameliorate its impact.<sup>14</sup>

Considering all of these factors, the vast majority of the Early Anthropocene models have been carefully considered and subsequently rejected by a significant majority of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG). Their rejection of these proposed models was primarily due to them only addressing one aspect of the complex case for a new epoch; the impact of humanity on the Earth's ecosystems. Only examining human environmental impact limits the discussion to an anthropocentric geological view. The

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 54

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 54

importance of the Anthropocene is not in seeing the “first traces”<sup>15</sup> of our species interact with the environment; it is about the "scale, significance, and longevity of change (that happens to be currently human-driven) to the Earth system."<sup>16</sup> The changes in the Earth System extend beyond the environment that humans interact with. We have permanently changed the geological course of the planet’s evolution.

The AWG opted to support the argument for a Recent Anthropocene model. More than two-thirds of the AWG signed a 2015 article titled "When Did the Anthropocene Begin?: A Mid-Twentieth-Century Boundary Level Is Stratigraphically Optimal."<sup>17</sup> In 2016 that same majority signed an article titled: "The Anthropocene is functionally and stratigraphically distinct from the Holocene."<sup>18</sup> They support this claim by laying out the manner in which the conditions of the Holocene no longer exist. They are as follows:

Atmospheric concentrations of CO<sub>2</sub> have exceeded Holocene levels since at least 1850, and from 1999 to 2010 they have risen about 100 times faster than during the increase that ended the last ice age. Methane concentrations have risen further and faster.

For thousands of years global average temperatures were slowly falling, a result of small cyclical changes in the Earth's orbit. Since 1800, increased greenhouse gases have overwhelmed the orbital climate cycle, causing the planet to warm abnormally rapidly.

Between 1906 and 2005, the average global temperature increased by up to 0.9° C and over the past 50 years the rate of change doubled.

Average global sea levels began rising above Holocene levels between 1905 and 1945. They are now at their highest in about 115,000 years, and the rate of increasing is accelerating.

Species extinction rates are far above normal. If current trends of habitat loss and overexploitation continue, 75 percent of species could die off in

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,55

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 55

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 55

the next few centuries. This would be Earth's sixth mass extinction event, equivalent to the extinction of the dinosaurs, 65 million years ago.<sup>19</sup>

This does not represent the entire picture but shows the major shifts away from the conditions of the Holocene. In addition to this departure from Holocene conditions, the paper addressed an important geological question: Is there a distinct stratigraphic signature that was produced by human activity? The doubts of some in the geological community were dispelled as the paper reported a plethora of anthropogenic indicators:

Recent Anthropogenic deposits contain new minerals and rock types, reflecting rapid global dissemination of novel materials including elemental aluminum, concrete, and plastics that form abundant, rapidly evolving "techno-fossils." Fossil fuel combustion has disseminated black carbon, inorganic ash spheres, and spherical carbonaceous particles worldwide, with a near-synchronous global increase around 1950.<sup>20</sup>

It was not just the geological stratigraphy that showed distinction from the Holocene. Within both Anthropogenic Ice and sediment samples researchers found combinations of lead from gasoline, nitrogen and phosphorus, and carbon dioxide from fossil fuel combustion. Moreover, they reported "potentially the most widespread and globally synchronous anthropogenic signal...[being] the fallout from nuclear weapons testing."<sup>21</sup>

All of the stratigraphic signatures the AWG reported are clear departures from Holocene norms or are entirely new altogether. The authors of this paper ended with a recommendation to the International Commission on Stratigraphy that they accept our entrance into the Anthropocene.

---

<sup>19</sup> Zalasiewicz, J., Waters, C. N., do Sul, J. A. I., Corcoran, P. L., Barnosky, A. D., Cearreta, A., ... & McNeill, J. R. (2016). *The geological cycle of plastics and their use as a stratigraphic indicator of the Anthropocene*. *Anthropocene*, 13, 4-17.

<sup>20</sup> Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System.*, 56-57

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 57

This summary provides insight into the epistemological process of defining a new geological epoch. As the AWG's reports clearly note we have almost unilaterally departed from the conditions of the Holocene; even if the traditionally conservative International Commission on Stratigraphy has yet to affirm or reject these claims. Either way, the AWG writes that "The Anthropocene already has a robust geological basis and is in widespread use, and indeed is becoming a central, integrating concept in the consideration of global change."<sup>22</sup> Meaning that even if there is not an official declaration of the Anthropocene, it is not going away.

This means that humanity exists in a world like no other human being has experienced. The instability in the Earth's climate is ever-increasing, and the speed of globalization and technological advancement has only continued to accelerate as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have set off a series of events within the Earth System that are irreversible. Furthermore, we do not yet know the full extent of our actions and how they will propagate through the entire planet all but ensuring more chaos for the planet and for the individual.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 58

## Chapter 2: Individualism in the Anthropocene

Individuality is at first spontaneous and unshaped; it is a potentiality, a capacity of development. Even so, it is a unique manner of acting in and with a world of objects and persons. It is not something complete in itself, like a closet in a house or a secret drawer in a desk, filled with treasures that are waiting to be stowed on the world. Since individuality is a distinctive way of feeling the impacts of the world and of showing a preferential bias in response to these impacts, it develops into shape and form only through interaction with actual conditions; it is no more complex in itself than it is a painter's tube of paint without relation to a canvas.<sup>23</sup>

This is John Dewey's description of individuality in his book *Individualism Old and New*. He presents the individual as deeply complex and inexorably tied to the world and those within that world. This is the conceptual basis that I will be using in my discussion of American individualism. An important part of Dewey's description is the relationship between the world and the individual. Dewey claims that the individual is essentially nothing without interacting with external conditions. Just as paint has little meaning until dispensed onto canvas by the painter, the potential of individuality only becomes realized through interaction with the physical world and the other individuals within that world. This is important as our discussion of the individual is rooted in the false consciousness, i.e. a sort of barrier between the individual and real interactions with the world. They are missing a certain level of connectivity with the physical world that would allow deeper meaning for the individual. Like paint in the tube that has a limited meaning when not on canvas.

I intend to focus my discussion entirely on American individualism in this essay. I am sure that the seemingly insurmountable issues the American individual faces are

---

<sup>23</sup> Dewey, John. *Individualism Old and New*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1999., 81

by no means universal. There are two predominant individualistic mindsets in contemporary America, and while I am certainly not alone in this experience, I have experienced both paradigms deeply. For most of my life, my thought process was rooted deeply in social conservatism and in turn a sort of hyper-individualism. I adopted a wealth of ideas from this upbringing which I now diametrically disagree with. However, I can still understand what it is like to hold two ideas of what being an American means in my mind. I know what it feels like for both of these frameworks to be perceived as the truth. This, I believe, gives me a measure of inner self-awareness that may allow me to make wide-reaching normative claims about American individualism.

David Grinspoon, an astrobiologist, proposed a division of the Anthropocene into two phases: The Proto-Anthropocene and the Mature-Anthropocene. Grinspoon frames the Mature-Anthropocene as an aspirational ideal for humanity. He writes:

What makes the Anthropocene unprecedented and fully worthy of the name is our growing knowledge of what we are doing to this world. Self-Conscious global change is a completely new phenomenon. It puts us humans into a category all our own... it is self-aware world-changing that marks us as something new on the planet. What are we? We are the species that can change the world and come to see what we're doing.<sup>24</sup>

This idea of awareness is central to Grinspoon's claims. He outlines the Mature-Anthropocene as beginning "when we acquire the ability to live sustainably and become a lasting presence on this world. This epoch only arrives with mass awareness of our role in changing the planet. This is what will allow us to transition from blundering through inadvertent global changes to thoughtfully and deliberately controlling our

---

<sup>24</sup> Grinspoon, David. "Enter the Sapiezoic: a New Aeon of Self-Aware Global Change – David Grinspoon: Aeon Essays." Aeon, Aeon, 15 Feb. 2020, [aeon.co/essays/enter-the-sapiezoic-a-new-aeon-of-self-aware-global-change](https://aeon.co/essays/enter-the-sapiezoic-a-new-aeon-of-self-aware-global-change).

effects on the planet. It starts with the end of our innocence.”<sup>25</sup> It is the awareness of our own capabilities that raises human civilization to the next level.

It is clear that his description of the Mature-Anthropocene is nowhere near to our reality. Grinspoon offers a second name for the period of time where we have been “accidentally tinkering with planetary evolution.”<sup>26</sup>: The Proto-Anthropocene. According to Grinspoon, this is the phase of the Anthropocene that we live in right now. A time characterized by unwittingly driving planetary evolution, or at least being unaware of the scale of change we were enacting. For most of the seventy-five years since the approximate beginning of the Proto-Anthropocene, we have either been unaware or in denial of humanity’s role in changing the Earth System. At first, we really did not know how the mass use of fossil fuels would affect the world. We had no real experience with using fossil fuels to drive such a massive advancement in human control over our environment. In Grinspoon’s eyes, humanity has a moral imperative to strive for the sustainability and structure of the Mature-Anthropocene and to stop mucking about in the denial and chaos of the Proto-Anthropocene.

I propose that we have entered a place between his phases: The Demi-Anthropocene. The Demi-Anthropocene is a point in the evolution of the planet where parts of humanity are aware of our effect on the Earth System. The problem with this is that a sizable part of the population is in denial of the fact of changes in the Earth System. They are stuck in the mindset that permeated the Proto-Anthropocene: humanity doesn’t have anything to do with the changing climate, and we can continue along this path of rampant environmental exploitation forever.

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,

It is difficult to nail down when the Proto-Anthropocene shifted to the Demi-Anthropocene, but I would argue that shift started in the late 70s-80s with the discovery of the hole in the ozone, and the subsequent international effort by multinational organizations-- like the IGBP and the UN's MEA-- to understand the role of humanity in the Earth System and to categorize the damage already done. Humanity demonstrated its capability to come together to acknowledge and adjust to our own effect on the planet when governments banned the use of ozone-depleting substances. Unfortunately, that sentiment was short-lived and swallowed back up by the Proto-Anthropocenic mode of denial up until essentially now. In the last 10 years or so we as a society have become much more concerned with changes in the Earth System and our role in those changes as they have become more pronounced and extreme. However, we are still sadly nowhere near the level of awareness to significantly mitigate the potential devastation caused by climate change.

I agree with Grinspoon's vision of dividing the Anthropocene into discrete parts in order to better understand them. However, I feel his division is better applied to individualistic mindsets than to the geological time scale itself. Using his concept of division, we can outline two dominant individualistic mindsets that exist within America and the Anthropocene: The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset and the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset. These mindsets are represented by widely varying ideas of what it means to be an individual, and how one survives as an individual. I have personally experienced what it is like to be both of these people. For most of my life, I would have fit firmly into the Proto-Anthropocenic category. In the past 5 years,

however, I have almost unilaterally shifted my ideology to align with a more Demi-Anthropocenic view of the world.

I occupy what I believe is a unique space within my age group and my socio-political status. I have experienced, quite deeply, what it feels like to be immersed in the humiliation and confusion of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset, but now I am fully committed to its counterpart: The Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset. I came from one of the worst places a young man could be and have escaped the darkest and most dangerous aspects of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. I cannot put my finger on one specific event that broke me from that individualistic mindset, but it has granted me perceptive abilities that many of my peers might not have. I believe these experiences allow me to make the normative claims about both individualistic mindsets I present here.

For the majority of my life I subscribed completely to the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset, I felt that I was the most important individual there could be, and essentially everything I did was informed by that selfish hyper-individualism. I was, in my mind, the only thing that really mattered, so I was going to do anything and everything to make myself feel whole, and to feel like a worthwhile individual. My experience in that mindset drove me to become a hateful, spite-filled person that felt I had been born into the wrong time. The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset is antiquated. For me, it no longer functioned in the manner it originally did and my experience with society as a whole was toxic and unhealthy.

It is a way of thinking that originated in the mid-20th-century during the first years of the Great Acceleration. This mindset values rugged individualism above all. If it is not to the direct benefit of the individual, why should that individual care? I used

that logic to ignore and excuse a great deal of toxic and harmful behavior in my own life from climate-change denial to harmful social relationships. The Proto-Anthropocenic Individual is forever lost in golden age nostalgia and wishes to restore that perceived golden age. This focus on restoration is driven primarily by fear. Fear that they will be left out of changes, or that they will not get their "fair share." Generally, it is a fear of disadvantaging the self over others; particularly others that are perceived as foreign or as invaders.

That fear extends to essentially all parts of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset: fear of replacement, fear of uncertainty, fear of change. Ultimately, fear of the unknown is at the heart of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. That fear of the unknown drives their restorative desire. The thought process goes something like this: I remember things making sense 40 years ago. My life made sense, and I felt like I mattered. So, if we can force enough parts of society to abide by the same practices then it will all make sense again. I will feel whole and worthwhile and nothing will be wrong!

This is generally the core ideal of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. It is characterized by cultural, social, political, and economic expectations that are no longer being achieved in the changing social atmosphere. So, driven by fear they resort to toxic and dangerous methods of driving society backwards. Personally, I have countless memories of my adolescence wishing we could go back to when Reagan was president, or back to the 1920's both being places where my antiquated idea of the individual might thrive.

A cornerstone of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset is climate-change denial. The Early Anthropocene model is very attractive to the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. It

is a way to justify continued exploitation of the environment in the hope of recreating levels of opportunity that they remember. It makes the effect of humanity gradual and tries to shift the blame from humans onto geological patterns of warming then cooling. This view allows every one of these hyper-individuals to justify their continued exploitation of the environment. In their minds, the climate chaos we are experiencing is completely independent of human activity. The Rugged Individual is the archetypal hero for the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. A tough, independent man who built his own house and kills his own dinner each night. Instead, the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset produces hollow, tortured individuals who struggle to function in this world and are thus filled with hatred and rage. Independence is the core value of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset, and any idea that diminishes that perceived freedom is dangerous to them. It makes them incredibly susceptible to xenophobia and exclusionary social policies. They cannot rely on anyone but themselves or they are failures in their own eyes. Humiliation or fear of humiliation is a core drive. Fear that they will be exposed as a weakling that needs the help of others to get by.

This mindset seems to disproportionately be made of older, less educated rural members of our society. People who have been left behind and are no longer feeling fulfilled by society. The prosperity of the Great Acceleration has been captured, isolated, and restricted in distribution. Perhaps forty years ago the prosperity of the Great Acceleration made auto workers, farmers, and coal miners feel like they were important, this is no longer the case. The truth of their exploitation at the hands of people who claimed to be fighting for them is now laid bare. The truth of their false

reality has been tumbling down around them for years, and now seems to be accelerating.

The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset sees the meaninglessness and hopelessness of the world and cannot conceive of a way forward. The world they see before them, the one they contributed to building, is so complex and opaque that there seems no other option than to go back in time to a world that was simpler, less humiliating, and supported the perceived needs of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. There is a slight problem with this perspective: technology cannot go backwards, barring a mass collapse of society on a global scale. Only an event such as a meteor strike, or a pandemic could accomplish that kind of backtracking.

The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset is not entirely negative. The concept of valuing tradition and maintaining a connection to heritage is not inherently a bad thing. There is value in knowing where we come from and honoring aspects of tradition that have been with us for hundreds of years. However, the problem with the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset is that all of those ideas have been channeled into attempting to restore traditions and values to the exact design of things from the past. Restorative thought is at the heart of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset, and the drive to restore has been taken over by the fear and the humiliation Proto-Anthropocenic individuals experience. The restorative thought patterns of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset limit the individual's ability to convince of a different future and traps them in trying to recreate the past; with little success.

On the other hand, the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset is driven by transformative thought patterns that lead Demi-Anthropocenic individuals to see the world as what it

could become, not what it is, or what it was. Demi-Anthropocenic Individuals tend to be younger, more educated, and predominantly urban. Progressive politics is represented in this mindset, and a desire to form a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable world are core goals of this mindset. Technology has opened the eyes and emotions of Demi-Anthropocenic Individuals to a kind of collective experience via the Internet. Due to this component, the Demi-Anthropocenic idea of individualism has become a sort of dependent individualism.

The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset is fueled by fear of the unknown, while the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset is generally intrigued by the unknown. It has been clear to these individuals for some time that the system that exists does not work and will in fact never work. So, to them the unknown is full of possibility; the realm of the subjunctive. Whatever comes next might be better, even if just slightly, than what we have now.

Rugged individualism is no longer the goal. The Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset seeks a more fulfilling form of individualism. Furthermore, as is the nature of the Demi-Anthropocene, we are aware of our place within the Earth System, particularly our role as the primary driver of planetary evolution. Demi-Anthropocenic individuals are undeniably more aware than their counterparts, however, this awareness is only useful to an extent. While we are aware of countless issues within our world, we also perceive that world as endlessly complex and opaque, thus convincing ourselves that we do not have the agency to change that world.

While the dissonance for the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset involves their direct relationship with the world and their inability to meaningfully interact with it, the Demi-

Anthropocenic Mindset typically does not experience that alienation from reality. The Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset tends to be able to navigate our world relatively well. Then they are confronted by the crushing weight of the opposition to transformative thoughts. The problem for the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset is that at least for now, they hold less power and fewer resources than the ones perpetuating the Proto-Anthropocenic way of thought; people who are orchestrating, knowingly or not, the perpetuation of a status quo.

The core of the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset is the acceptance of humanity's place in the Earth System and the acceptance of the reality caused by human actions on that very system. As the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset relates to the Early Anthropocene model, the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset relates to the Recent Anthropocene model. This is a fundamental difference between these two paths of thought. The Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset is capable of seeing our place in nature as more than an opportunity for exploitation and sees the writing on the wall when it comes to changes in the Earth System that are the direct result of human activity.

There is a great deal of tension between these two mindsets as they struggle to co-exist. Restorative ideals and transformative ideals are diametrically opposed forces. Currently, the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset holds the majority of the power and resources in the world. As we continue into the Anthropocene these two mindsets will come into more and more conflict as forces of the Anthropocene continue to disrupt society on an increasingly wider scale.

### Chapter 3: The Cycle of Disruption and The Happy Consciousness

In *Individualism Old and New* Dewey discusses his observations on the crisis in American individualism due to the effects of the industrial revolution. He poses the question of “whether the American type...has as yet taken on definitive form.”<sup>27</sup> Dewey does not give a direct answer to this query, instead, he offers suggestions as to how we might guide the construction of a “definitive form” in a socially conscious and beneficial manner through the integration of scientific thought in more parts of our society.<sup>28</sup> It was not until 34 years later that we got an idea of what that American form might be. Herbert Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* paints the picture of an individualism that fell down all the wrong paths Dewey could have imagined.

I interpret Dewey’s account of transitioning individualism as describing the failure of the established social consciousness due to new technological forces disrupting the social construct and introducing countless instruments of change. The forces of the industrial revolution rendered the pervious social consciousness obsolete and incompatible with the evolving world. Dewey believes that this was an opportunity to rework our idea of individualism in order to create a more “equitable and stable society”<sup>29</sup>; we failed to do so.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse presents an image of American individualism under a new kind of false consciousness.<sup>30</sup> The corporate forces that began in the early 20th century empowered by the incredible technological

---

<sup>27</sup> Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 12

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 8

<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that when Marcuse refers to false consciousness, he means something more pragmatic than the traditional sense. His conception of false consciousness is based in false needs more than false goals.

advancements of the Great Acceleration constructed a new iteration of the false consciousness. Marcuse describes a sort of naked false consciousness. The rapid technological advanced allowed the false consciousness to exist in the open; Marcuse calls this new phenomenon the Happy Consciousness.

Using the work of Dewey and Marcuse I have constructed a theoretical model for the American crisis of individualism that historically reveals itself in the years following a mass social disruption. It is called the Cycle of Disruption and takes place in four steps:

1. Disruption
2. Emergence
3. Adaptation
4. Iteration

The typical conclusion of this cycle is the establishment of a new status quo and the associated layers of false consciousness that accompany it. The individual is enveloped by the false consciousness and placed in a state of blissful exploitation, aware and unaware of their unfreedom simultaneously.

In this description of the Cycle of Disruption, I am using the United States in the aftermath of industrialization as the focus. John Dewey recounts the first step of the cycle. He writes that “rapid industrialization of our civilization took us unawares... [and] being mentally and morally unprepared, our older creeds have become ingrowing; the more we depart from them in fact, the more loudly we proclaim them.”<sup>31</sup> This is his description of the social disruption caused by the rapid industrialization of the United

---

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 8

States moving into the mid-20th century. Industrialization and mechanization rapidly expanded into all aspects of American society. This kind of disruption changes the fabric of society so quickly that the individual lags behind, and as the world they knew is replaced by things not previously possible, the more concerned the individual feels, and the more social pressure to transform is exerted upon them. Dewey notes the reluctance to set aside tradition in favor of new possibilities.

I posit that this is an important part of the Cycle of Disruption; it signals the social consciousness, false or otherwise, maintaining the status quo is beginning to falter. The individual is confronted with a world that no longer supports their social programming and does not present the opportunity for interaction that the individual is accustomed to. Dewey describes this process as individuals

groping... through situations which do not direct and which do not give them direction. The beliefs and ideals that are uppermost in their consciousness are not relevant to the society in which they outwardly act and which constantly reacts upon them. Their conscious ideas and standards are inherited from an age that has passed away; their minds, as far as consciously entertained principles and methods of interpretation that are concerned, are at odds with actual conditions. This profound slip is the cause of distraction and bewilderment.<sup>32</sup>

This is the experience the individual goes through when old values and ideas cease to effectively connect the individual to the world they interact with. It became evident to the individual that the world no longer works for them. The disruption, in this case rapid industrial development, altered society to the extent that individualism no longer functioned properly.

Dewey writes that “individuals vibrate between a past that is intellectually too empty to give stability and a present that is too diversely crowded and chaotic to afford

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 35

balance or direction to ideas and emotion.”<sup>33</sup> This is a deeply confusing place for the individual to exist within. Seeking refuge in the past you understand but that can no longer provide for your needs, and then being surrounded by a diverse chaotic world that does not function for the individual or their ideas. This left individuals, as Dewey describes “bewildered, uneasy, restless, always seeking something new and different, only to find, as a rule, the same old thing in a new dress.”<sup>34</sup> The individuals are then left in an unsatisfying world where they “are [not] sustained and sustaining members of a social whole.”<sup>35</sup> This is the end of the first step. Society was disrupted, in this case by technology, and the exploitative nature of the labor system was revealed. The world changed so quickly that many individuals were left clinging loudly to tradition or confused and wandering from one disappointment to another as they continue to not feel fulfilled. This is the point where we see the emergence of new social forces from technological instruments, and the beginning of the second step: Emergence.

In the case of early 20th century America, the social force that emerged out of rapid industrialization was what Dewey calls dominant corporateness. He writes that “the United States has steadily moved from an earlier pioneer individualism to a condition of dominant corporateness.”<sup>36</sup> To be very clear, dominant corporateness does not mean domination via business corporation. This was the expansion and subsequent conquest of society by the corporate structure. Dewey posits that “the development of a civilization that is outwardly corporate-- or rapidly becoming so-- has been accompanied by a submergence of the individual.”<sup>37</sup> The pioneer individualism of pre-

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 27

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 7

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 18

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 26

industrial America was submerged within the corporate structure as it expanded to all parts of American society. This individualism was not suited to the corporate environment and met its new reality reluctantly.

Dominant corporateness was enabled by the rapid industrialization of America and since the individual was confused and bewildered in the new world, the emergent forces were powerfully influential. The emergent forces then began to directly influence the lost and seeking individuals. Dewey identifies this as “the development of these corporations upon the change of social life from an individual to a corporate affair. Reactions to the change are psychological, professional, political; they affect the working ideas, beliefs, and conduct of all of us.”<sup>38</sup> This new change in social organization via technological instruments developed as a consequence of the industrial and scientific revolutions.

From a contemporary perspective, we see that the corporate structure and adherence to the corporate system became part of what it means to be an American individual. This is the end of the second step in the Cycle of Disruption. At this point in the cycle, many years have passed since the original disruption and the continual advancements of technology prompt an adaptation of the emergent force and a subsequent adaptation in individualism to match.

I believe Herbert Marcuse's description of society in *One-Dimensional Man* can show us the results of this adaptation and how the individual coped with the new world. During the time Marcuse writes, American society was in the midst of the Great Acceleration, a period of unparalleled growth in all aspects of the human condition. The

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 20

further development and exponential progression of technology eventually resulted in a shift from dominant corporateness towards corporate domination. This corporate domination of society was justified by what Marcuse calls technological rationality.

Technological rationality was used as justification to organize a social system that appeared incredibly rational to average participants. It was heavily based in positive thinking, that is it is grounded in material relations and "real" things. Marcuse describes it as such: "the technological controls appear to be the very embodiment of Reason for the benefit of all social groups and interests-- to such an extent that all contradiction seems irrational and all counteraction impossible."<sup>39</sup> This is the essence of technological rationality, its ability to inherently deflect negative thought—critical thinking based in the space between reality and potential-- and to reproduce itself.

The adapted force is more influential on the individual than the original emergent force. It is also much more stable than the emergent force. The adapted force is what is capable of constructing and sustaining a new iteration of the false consciousness and re-establishing a status quo. The iteration of this new false consciousness is the final step in the Cycle of Disruption.

The process of iterating a new false consciousness is an expansive and complex endeavor. Due to the advancement of technology, the traditional concept of the false consciousness was transformed by the forces of technological rationality. It resulted in what Marcuse calls the Happy Consciousness. He describes it as "the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods-- [which] reflects the new conformism which is a facet of technological rationality translated into social behavior."<sup>40</sup> The very

---

<sup>39</sup> Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991., 9

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 84

fabric of social reality was rewritten from the perspective of technological rationality, and along with that new structure came an iteration of the false consciousness.

This false consciousness was much more sinister than the traditional concept. The Happy Consciousness created “a comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom”<sup>41</sup> in American society. The quality of life, to the general participant, seemed high, and there appeared to be nothing but prosperity in the wake of the Great Acceleration. So much that “satisfactory liberties granted by an unfree society [made] for a *happy consciousness* which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society. It is the token of declining autonomy and comprehension.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, the goods that the system produced rendered any concept of resistance or negation obsolete, and for the sake of creature comforts individuals disregarded systematic and direct injustices and in turn reduced their own level of autonomy voluntarily. Only from a transcendent perspective would it become evident to the individual that their perceived needs are false, and both dictated and provided by the Happy Consciousness.

I believe all aspects of the adapted forces are stronger, and the influence of such forces on individuals runs deep. The new social consciousness, in the case of 20<sup>th</sup> century America the Happy Consciousness, establishes social control over individuals and continues to influence core aspects of American individualism. While it does this, it is perpetually inoculating itself against dissidence. Marcuse points out that

if the individuals are satisfied to the point of happiness with the goods and services handed down to them by the administration, why should they insist on different institutions for a different production of different goods and services? And if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 76

the satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, why should they wish to think, feel, and imagine for themselves?<sup>43</sup>

The world was becoming so endlessly complex, and that complexity grew every day. It became more and more difficult to navigate the increasingly opaque world, so the individual was likely to take the easy way out, to accept goods the system allows them, and to cede their intellectual and emotional faculties to the powers that be. This was the active loss of negative thought space in American individualism. The individual surrendered their own conception of possibility in order to receive the false needs administered by the system they exist in.

That is the core of the Happy Consciousness: the elimination of any power of negative thought the individual might have had. Negative thinking involves the exploration of the space between possibility and reality. The subjunctive nature of the future is captured in negative thought. But, since the powers of technological rationality are so deeply rooted in positivism, the realm of the real, the negative spaces are completely lost. Marcuse describes this process as the individual becoming one-dimensional, the loss of inner subjective space, and the loss of any kind of real subjectivity.<sup>44</sup>

The Happy Consciousness made opposition seem so deeply irrational by providing for the needs of the individual so conveniently that any other option seemed impossible. But of course, not all is as it seems. Those needs that the Happy Consciousness so readily provides are dictated by consciousness itself. The needs that pacify masses into an unfree state of blissful exploitation are false; created as a way to perpetuate the status quo. Marcuse expanded this to many more aspects of society:

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.,

The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood.<sup>45</sup>

Mass production of cheap but effective commodities disarmed the oppositional power of the population. Negation became near impossible based on desired convenience and new things. This is the strongest way the Happy Consciousness reproduced and stabilized itself. As Marcuse writes: “under the conditions of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole.”<sup>46</sup> This seems to have become our reality.

The individual has become administered in nearly all aspects. The Happy Consciousness was able to envelop most Americans in its lies and as Marcuse notes that “the result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.”<sup>47</sup> Individuals were convinced that the system they live in will provide every aspect of who they are, and who they want to be from what kind of car you want to buy, to what brand of refrigerator you use.

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 56

Alienation changed. Individuals were no longer disconnected from the result of their labor; the nature of the system allowed just enough choices between predetermined options to produce the illusion of genuine experience. The workers were so integrated into the production cycle and the corporate structure that the only way for individuals to feel unique was to take pride in their material possessions. Particularly the ones they own, and others do not. Marcuse remarks that “the people recognize themselves in their commodities: they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored to the new needs which it has produced.”<sup>48</sup> All of these processes the Happy Consciousness undertook are predicated on the promotion of false needs, and the deprivation or eradication of negative thought spaces. Social control shifted, and by the nature of the Happy Consciousness no longer needed to hide. The false needs it provided were strong enough to pacify the vast majority of people. The Happy Consciousness did not need to alienate or distort the individual's experience with reality because “the achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification: before their tribunal, the “false consciousness” of their rationality becomes the true consciousness.”<sup>49</sup> The result is a sort of non-illusion illusion. An interaction with reality that felt, and appeared to be reality, because it was. But, the nature of that reality was engineered to perpetuate inequality, oppression, and exploitation.

The deeply irrational became the only demonstrable reality, and the forces of technological rationality enforced the idea that the real is rational, and thus a society built upon irrationality convinced itself that it is a paragon of rationality. This is the

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 9

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 11

terrifying power of a false consciousness that is inundated with refutations of its own falseness. Marcuse describes the domination of the Happy Consciousness in this way:

The tangible source of exploitation disappears behind the facade of objective rationality. Hatred and frustration are deprived of their specific target, and the technological veil conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement. With technical progress as its instrument, unfreedom-- in the sense of a man's subjection to his productive apparatus-- is perpetuated and intensified in the form of many liberties and comforts. The novel feature is the overwhelming rationality of this irrational enterprise.<sup>50</sup>

This was the completion of the Cycle of Disruption. The industrial revolution disrupted society and upended what it meant to be an individual; the power of dominant corporateness emerged from that chaos. Dominant corporateness began changing the fabric of individualism, and eventually through continued technological advancement adapted into technological rationality. This adaptation then iterated a new form of the false consciousness, re-established social control, and thus a new status quo began.

The Happy Consciousness seems to have functioned effectively for many years, continuing the trend of exploitation and consolidation of wealth within the upper strata of society. The status quo of class differentiation still exists, only now several classes are integrated with either each other, the process of production, or both.

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 32

## Chapter 4: The Disruption of The Happy Consciousness

The disruption that broke the Happy Consciousness is undoubtedly the Internet. No one could have predicted what the Internet would become or how ubiquitous its use would be. The Internet allows for a level of connectivity on a global scale like never before. Suddenly, it became possible to instantaneously communicate with people on the other side of the planet. The Internet changed everything. It unlocked the potential of a globalized world that is tightly interconnected. Much like the industrial revolution before it, a similar digital revolution centered around the Internet upended what it means to be a person. The Internet has started contemporary American society down the path of the Cycle of Disruption once again.<sup>51</sup>

It revealed the exploitative nature of our system through awareness. We suddenly became able to see the lives of billions of people and paired alongside this awareness were continued advancements in automation. Our exposure to billions of other humans and the constant advancement of automation dispelled the illusion of the Happy Consciousness. I believe this is as far into the Cycle of Disruption as we have progressed. Society has been thoroughly disrupted by the possibilities the Internet has created, and as of now, I cannot identify a distinct emergent social force from the Internet. However, that's not to say the confused, lost, seeking American individual is not under the influence of powerful social forces; the forces of the Anthropocene are acting on the American individual.

---

<sup>51</sup> I should note that in isolated instances individuals certainly could have felt an alienation from the physical world before the advent of the Internet. The reason I begin my discussion here is because the Internet was the technology that expanded that distorted experience onto a global scale.

There are two prominent forces in the Anthropocene I have identified: chaos and nihilism. I will be referring to these forces as Anthropocenic Chaos, Anthropocenic Nihilism, and in a synthesized form: Chaotic Nihilism. Both individualistic mindsets are affected by Chaotic Nihilism, but the reaction of the mindsets are starkly different. To identify and understand the interaction of Chaotic Nihilism and American individualism I look to the works of writer and director Sam Levinson. Before exploring those reactions, I want to elaborate on the Anthropocenic forces driving those individuals and give proper definition to Anthropocenic Chaos, Anthropocenic Nihilism, and thus Chaotic Nihilism.<sup>52</sup>

A great deal of Anthropocenic Chaos is the result of climate change. Chaos in the climate extends into all parts of the Earth System, and as humans are an integral part of that system we are enveloped in chaos. The climate has departed from all norms that humanity has lived through, so of course that feels like utter chaos to the individual. No one has experienced an Earth like this before. We are living in planet-wide *terra incognita* and the climate chaos, as a result, is all-consuming.

Another key element of Anthropocenic Chaos is the speed at which our society operates. The Great Acceleration has not stopped. Technology has developed at an increasing rate and will be integrated into more and more aspects of the world. The changes are so rapid they become overwhelming and difficult to keep track of. This acceleration is perceived as chaos. With everything changing, it is nearly impossible for the individual to not feel overwhelmed by that perceived chaos. Speed makes reality

---

<sup>52</sup> It is important to note that the Internet did not create these forces, they just connected them to us. The choices in the Proto-Anthropocene created these forces, the Internet exposed them to the population subsequently breaking the Happy Consciousness and ushering in a time of uncertainty and turmoil.

feel more chaotic, and we don't seem to be able to stop or really even slow the acceleration of technology. Through the Internet and globalization, the individual is plugged directly into the constant chaos of the evolving human condition.

Anthropocenic Nihilism is a result of the globalized aspects of our world. A result of global connectivity through the Internet is an acute increase in awareness of just how small the individual is. The Internet showed the individual that they were one in 7.8 billion, essentially nothing. That is a heavy weight. It translates into the development of hyper-individualism. If everything is so insignificant then why shouldn't the individual do anything and everything to make themselves feel something? The awareness of our own insignificance drives us to act like we are the only thing that matters, our personal desire is paramount. The Internet and the globalized world showed people that most things do not matter; that the individual does not matter. The world moved past caring about the individual person. Now we are lost, seeking any way to make ourselves feel like we matter in a meaningless world.

Anthropocenic Nihilism comes from the environment as well. It feels like we have already lost the war with climate change and that we are doomed to an increasingly uninhabitable Earth. That weighs heavily on many people. There is a crushing weight from all the necessary work to save humanity from impending environmental catastrophes, and moreover, it appears that the majority of powerful individuals have no desire to change societal conceptions around climate change. The size of our world and the size of the problems we face are orders of magnitude larger than any single individual. Thus, the individual is immersed in a sort of inherent nihilism around their own existence. Our relationship to the climate and the Earth

System itself is becoming increasingly intertwined as humanity continues to drive the evolution of the planet. A society that believes the world is already uninhabitable is doomed to produce the circumstances which they dread.

One individual is nothing while looming in the shadow of the Anthropocene. Feeling alone, meaningless, and worthless, the chaos and nihilism of our massive world infects the minds of all individuals. A globalized world inherently feels nihilistic by virtue of its sheer size. Everything is so large, and American society has aimed to grow rugged individuals, Proto-Anthropocenic individuals. Independent individuals who are generally powerless in the corporate structure of our society. A society which was built to isolate the individual and enforce a perceived lack of agency. These two Anthropocenic Forces result in what I call Chaotic Nihilism. A deterministic hyper-individualism that is rooted in short-sighted fixes and a general lack of care for the collective wellbeing or future of humanity.

The response of both individualistic mindsets to the Chaotic Nihilism of the Anthropocene can be broken down into three components: an epistemological component, a physical component, and an operative component. The epistemological component governs their general thought processes, the physical component is the individual's interaction with the world, and the operative component is the internalized force within the individual driving all actions and decisions.

The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset reacts by adopting a sort of Zealous Traditionalism. The response consists of a golden age epistemology, a physical forced substitution of reality, and operating with a constant feeling and fear of utter humiliation. The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset seeks to avoid the humiliation of the

new world by forcibly moving society backwards towards a fictional golden age where everything made sense, and everyone mattered. Unfortunately, that golden age never existed, and it would be impossible to go back to even if it had.

The Demi-Anthropocenic response functions quite differently. In the face of the Chaotic Nihilism of the Anthropocene, the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset has embraced a kind of Careless Hedonism. The Demi-Anthropocenic response is governed by an end-of-the-world epistemology. In terms of the physical component, the Demi-Anthropocenic individual resorts to excessive substance use to dull the pain of existing in this world. The Demi-Anthropocenic individual is operating with a constant sense of existential dread. In their response, the Demi-Anthropocenic individual checks out of this world with careless drug use or meaningless sex. The Chaotic Nihilism of the Anthropocene overwhelms the Demi-Anthropocenic individual and drives them towards numbing themselves to reality through hedonistic pleasures as opposed to living in a false reality like a Proto-Anthropocenic individual.

Both the Proto-Anthropocenic response and the Demi-Anthropocenic response can be seen in the work of Sam Levinson. There are some initial concepts about Levinson's work I wish to convey before elucidating their representation of the response to Chaotic Nihilism and their depiction of the breakdown of the Happy Consciousness. First of all, I am operating under the assumption Levinson's work takes place in the same world, albeit in different circumstances. The tone and style of the world are congruent between his work, and for simplicity, I am going to define them as part of the same reality. This is important as in both of his works there is strong generational tension and placing them within the same theoretical reality allows that tension to be

utilized as an important dramatic device. I am utilizing the generational divide in Levinson's films as a representation of tension and competition between the individualistic mindsets of contemporary American society.

In Levinson's films, for the most part, the older generations (Gen X and the Baby Boomers) represent the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset, while the younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) represent the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset. This generational divide is used by Levinson to build tension and create conflicts throughout his work. The ambiguity of generational placement and the powerful social programming associated with the generational groups well represents the diversity of members in the Proto-Anthropocenic and Demi-Anthropocenic Mindsets. The divide is not perfect, just like the individualistic mindsets, there are outliers in his works that do not abide by a strict division of young and old between the Demi-Anthropocenic and Proto-Anthropocenic Mindsets. Using a generational divide to represent the different individualisms could be problematic in some cases, but as a dramatic device, it offers a reductive but accessible path to normative claims about large groups of individuals.

In Levinson's *Assassination Nation* we can see more than just the individualistic response to Chaotic Nihilism, we are also able to see the disruption that exposes the individual to the chaos and nihilism of the Anthropocene and dispels the Happy Consciousness. *Assassination Nation* follows the story of Lily Colson and her three friends when their hometown, Salem, is struck by a massive data breach; upending thousands of lives. When Lily becomes the victim of a leak, her affair with a much older man is revealed and she is thrown out of her house by her parents and scapegoated by society. She is then blamed for the leak by a fellow high school student and the town

of Salem forms an armed mob to exact their justice on Lily and her friends. The film ends with a standoff between Lily, her friends, and the mob that Salem became. It is revealed in the end that Lily's brother Donny was behind the hacks and had absolutely no reason behind his actions besides that it was something he was capable of and that he thought it might be funny.

I believe this film depicts the first step of the Cycle of Disruption. The town of Salem was living in a haze of lies, collectively ignoring the secrets they all held; much like how the Happy Consciousness functions. The triggering event for the entire film is the hacking of the Mayor of Salem which reveals him to be gay after running for office on a borderline homophobic platform. The Mayor kills himself on public television, and the hacker then begins releasing thousands of other people's information, pictures, and secrets. The illusion of purity the citizens of Salem held onto was shattered by Donny Colson, revealing to everyone the reality they were collectively ignoring. Donny used the Internet to destroy the sort of false consciousness that maintained Salem's status quo, and then the Chaotic Nihilism of the Anthropocene wreaked unmitigated havoc on the town of Salem. In this film we can see aspects of both the Proto-Anthropocenic response and the Demi-Anthropocenic response, the former being more prevalent and the focus of my discussion.

In my framework for *Assassination Nation*, the older citizens of Salem that eventually resort to mob justice are a representation of the Proto-Anthropocene Mindset, and the younger citizens- Lily Colson and her peers- represent the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset. While hyperbolic and overly violent, *Assassination Nation* does accurately represent the component parts of Zealous Traditionalism. We can see

aspects of Careless Hedonism in *Assassination Nation*, but Zealous Traditionalism is much more prominent and pervasive.

The main characters in *Assassination Nation* are generally all Demi-Anthropocenic individuals, so to characterize the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset I view The Town of Salem as a personification of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset: holding onto a false past, humiliated by the present, and desperate to return to a pre-data breach world. The Town of Salem is desperate to be the "good and wholesome people" they used to be once again. They hope to re-conceal all the dirty secrets of their lives and ameliorate the deep humiliation that they experience as a result of the data breach. This is their golden age thinking, the epistemological component of Zealous Traditionalism. They try to return to the world before the breach as they perceived it to be even if that world is fake.

We see the forced substitution of reality, the physical aspect of Zealous Traditionalism, throughout the film. For instance: after the principal of Salem's High School is hacked and pictures of his daughter in a bathtub at age six are released, he is accused of being a child molester. Lily confronts her family about those events during a dinner scene. She makes an impassioned argument that her parents and the Town of Salem are the ones sexualizing photos of Principle Turrell's daughter. Her parents go on and on about how they won't stand for Lily defending a child molester and that she "doesn't know the first thing about this world"<sup>53</sup> completely invalidating any and all experiences Lily might have had.

---

<sup>53</sup> Levinson, Sam, Odessa Young, Joel McHale et al. *Assassination Nation*. Streaming on Hulu. Directed by Sam Levinson. New York City: Neon AGBO Refinery29, 2018.

The argument ends when Lawrence Colson, Lily's father, yells at her that he's been alive for 45 years and if he knows anything it is that "men will be men and girls will be girls"<sup>54</sup> and that until Lily can protect herself, in his eyes, he will do it for her. This is the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset denying reality and substituting it with a convenient and or more digestible alternative. Lily points out their hypocrisy and denial of reality in the midst of the argument by showing her parents that they are guilty of the perceived crime, referring to a naked photo of two-year-old Lily on their mantle just to be swatted away and dismissed. The drive to substitute an understandable reality into their world is strong and does not appear to be vulnerable to reason or facts. Lily's entire life experience is dismissed by her parents in lieu of the ease of scapegoating Principal Turrell. This brings about the final component of Zealous Traditionalism. the operative force of humiliation.<sup>55</sup>

*Assassination Nation* is steeped in humiliation, and the desire to eliminate or conceal that humiliation. The extreme circumstances in Salem drive its citizens to fight that humiliation with violence, and the town devolves into mob rule. The Town of Salem, caught in their rose-tinted vision of the past, attempted to assuage their humiliation by forcing the existence of their own personal reality through violence. When Salem fully devolves into mob rule there is a scene of the leader of the mob giving an impassioned speech about the humiliation they experience. He says that "the rest of the world is laughing at us (Salem). Taking pleasure in our humiliation. That ends right now. We will no longer be helpless... if the government cannot establish law

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.,

and order, then believe me, we will.”<sup>56</sup> When the leader concludes, the mob beings chanting “Take Salem Back! Take Salem Back!”<sup>57</sup>

In this scene we see the humiliation of Salem be directed towards violently restoring their idea of Salem. The systems they once trusted are not even attempting to restore the type of society they desire, so they take it upon themselves to recreate a world that sustains their idea of the individual. Since there is no actual explanation for the disruption of their lives, the Town of Salem convinces itself that they only way to restore order, *id est* substituting their own reality, is to destroy what they perceive as the source of their humiliation and fear; in this case Lily and her friends.

Zealous Traditionalism is displayed quite aptly through the actions of the Town of Salem. This film is, in my opinion, a dramatization of the first step of the Cycle of Disruption. We are shown the status quo, its disruption, and the ensuing madness the individual experiences. While reductive, and hyperbolic, this film depicts through dramatization the more complex social situation that Americans face in the wake of the Internet age.

The final time Lily Colson appears in the film is to deliver a monologue directly to the camera; aimed directly at members of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. It is a scathing condemnation of the righteousness and hypocrisy of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset and their Zealous Traditionalism. She calls out the problem directly: Proto-Anthropocenic individuals don't like the world they built; it doesn't satisfy their needs. She invites Proto-Anthropocenic individuals to change the world they built by tearing it

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.,

down while warning them not to blame here, *id est* the Demi-Anthropocenic individual.<sup>58</sup>

Lily expresses what it feels like to be born into a broken world and to be the one blamed for doing the breaking. Moreover, she addresses how the older generations feel entitled to order her around and force her, and by proxy the entire Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset into social paradigms that no longer function. Lily's monologue ends in a with a mixture of a threat and a challenge. She espouses that the actions of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset may kill her as an individual, but with time will not be able to stifle or suppress the realities of all Demi-Anthropocenic individuals. This is the most important Demi-Anthropocenic aspect we see in *Assassination Nation*. It is, however, very difficult to examine the Demi-Anthropocenic response to Chaotic Nihilism in this film because it is dominated by the extreme aspects of Zealous Traditionalism. We must look to another of Levinson's works to understand the Careless Hedonism of the Demi-Anthropocenic Mindset: *Euphoria*.<sup>59</sup>

Much like *Assassination Nation*, *Euphoria* follows the stories of American high school students struggling to cope with a chaotic, meaningless world. Levinson evokes many of the same themes from *Assassination Nation* but with greater depth. *Euphoria* is an 8-part series giving it a lot more time to give depth to characters and provide deeper insight into motivation and justification of Carelessly Hedonistic acts.

---

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>59</sup> A key difference to note between *Euphoria* and *Assassination Nation* is the style of narration. Lily Colson is a reliable narrator. She is telling her truthful perspective on the events of the data breach. Rue, the main character in *Euphoria*, is an unreliable narrator. But she is telling a more complex and nuanced story about existence. She often tells stories that she is not directly involved in which means she is telling the story from a perspective biased by her own existence, and thus her drug addiction—a direct aspect of Careless Hedonism.

The main character in *Euphoria* is a 17-year-old girl named Rue. Rue is a drug addict. The story begins after Rue spends most of her summer in rehab following her younger sister finding Rue passed out from an overdose. She feels immense guilt for causing her sister trauma but nevertheless, less than a week out of rehab Rue is back at her dealer with zero intention of staying clean. This is the physical component of Careless Hedonism: constant or near-constant substance use, often to excess. The components of Careless Hedonism are a bit more closely bound together than those of Zealous Traditionalism. The epistemological component of Careless Hedonism is an end-of-the-world way of thinking. Rue's dealer is hesitant to sell to her again after her overdose and she responds by saying to her dealer: "you think because I went to rehab, I stay clean? Yeah, well the world is coming to an end and I haven't even graduated high school yet."<sup>60</sup> Rue is very aware of the condition the world in terms of climate and politics, and the only way she knows how to cope with that weight is through drugs. In her interaction with her drug dealer, Rue exhibited all the components of Careless Hedonism that are driving her to act the way that she does. This mindset and the actions it produces leads directly into the operative component carelessness Hedonism: existential dread.

The Demi-Anthropocenic individual is immersed in end-of-the-world thinking and sliding through life in a haze of substance use and or abuse. The vastness of the world, the size of the problems facing humanity injects a palpable sense of existential dread into everything a Demi-Anthropocenic individual does. The dread and the emptiness and the anxiety of climate catastrophe are heavy weights. For the Demi-

---

<sup>60</sup> Levinson, Sam, Zendaya et al. *Euphoria*. Streaming on HBO. Directed by Augustine Frizzell. New York City: Home Box Office, 2019

Anthropocenic individual, the best way to deal with all of their internalized dread is through achieving a level of numbness with drugs. Rue describes the moment of release that the drugs offer her as "everything you feel and wish and want to forget, it all just sinks, and suddenly you give it air again, give it life."<sup>61</sup> This sort of release, and acceptance of the weight of life is a powerfully addictive experience. Rue tells the audience that it became "all I wanted: those two seconds of nothingness."<sup>62</sup> A brief reprieve from the crushing weight of the existential dread of existence, and then a reacceptance of a weighty yet ultimately meaningless existence.

In an uncaring world that is perceived as already lost to climate change, it makes total sense that the individual might as well do as anything and everything to make them feel as good as possible. To them, the world is ending, nothing matters, so drugs and sex are the ways the Demi-Anthropocenic individual faces the breakdown of the Happy Consciousness. The Demi-Anthropocenic individual likely was not alive to have experienced the blissful exploitation of the Happy Consciousness, and the satisfactory goods it provided.

In *Assassination Nation* we witness the disruption of the Happy Consciousness; *Euphoria* takes place in the world after that disruption and in the midst of the following chaos where we see a more in-depth view of how an individual might function. Levinson's films, while at points reductive, use dramatization to address the real experiences of both Proto-Anthropocenic and Demi-Anthropocenic individuals as they grapple with the collapse of the Happy Consciousness and the Chaotic Nihilism that follows. The first step of the Cycle of Disruption is in full display in Levinson's films.

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.,

We can see in these films the chaos of climate change as well as the increasing nihilism from the expanding globalized world, and how those forces work simultaneously on both Proto-Anthropocenic and Demi-Anthropocenic individuals. The perspectives that Levinson's films offer is a valuable resource when contemplating a future for humanity in Grinspoon's Mature-Anthropocene.

## Chapter 5: Towards a Mature-Anthropocene?

There are two potential results to the Cycle of Disruption that we can interpret from Marcuse and Dewey. They are the Great Refusal and the Great Abdication. There is incredible power in the remarkable technology produced every day within advanced industrial society. Marcuse and Dewey believe that there is a chance for those instruments to be used to develop a more fulfilling, richer, and meaningful form of American individualism. Dewey says that “machinery means an undreamed-of reservoir of power...” and that “we are in possession of a revolutionary transforming instrument.”<sup>63</sup> Marcuse notes that “the technological processes of mechanization and standardization might release individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond necessity. The very structure of human existence would be altered; the individual would be free to exert autonomy over a life that would be his own.”<sup>64</sup> They both knew that American society had a chance to use the technological instruments created by the Great Acceleration to facilitate a meaningful new idea of individualism and pacify the struggle for existence; we failed to do so. Instead, we wandered down a path Dewey predicts: The Great Abdication.

Dewey’s description of the Great Abdication is haunting when considering the conditions of contemporary American individualism. Dewey says that “with an enormous command of instruments, with possession of a secure technology, we glorify the past, and legalize and idealize the *status quo*, instead of seriously asking how we are to employ the means at our disposal so as to form an equitable and stable society. This

---

<sup>63</sup> Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 47

<sup>64</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 4

is our great abdication.”<sup>65</sup> The Great Abdication is the failure to effectively act upon the potential for progressive change created by technology.

As history shows us, American society chose to let technology be used to develop a sinister new form of social control and to create a social structure rife with corruption and structural injustices. In other words, we chose to give ourselves over to the Happy Consciousness and unbridled deterministic capitalism. The Great Abdication leads to the establishment of a new status quo, and an eventual repetition of the Cycle of Disruption. We are experiencing the results of the last Great Abdication that Dewey describes near the industrial revolution.

The second path out of the Cycle of Disruption is Marcuse's Great Refusal. The concept is deceptively simple. The Great Refusal would be the widespread rejection of the goods and services provided by our social system. In this circumstance, the individual would refuse to tolerate unfreedom and injustice. Instead of accepting the false needs provided by for instance the Happy Consciousness the individual would reject them and construct a new social structure altogether.<sup>66</sup>

In all likelihood, The Great Refusal that Marcuse describes is nigh impossible; Marcuse knows this. He believes that if we were to actually be liberated from the unfreedom and repression of capitalism we would be met with catastrophe. As we have discussed, Marcuse believes that the Happy Consciousness went all the way to the base of our experience with reality. If we abandon the structure entirely, we will be just as bewildered, humiliated, and lost as if the Happy Consciousness had collapsed as part of the Cycle of Disruption.<sup>67</sup> It seems that going down either path- Refusal or Abdication-

---

<sup>65</sup> Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*, 8

<sup>66</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.

<sup>67</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*,

leads us to the exact place we are now. A world falling into disarray as individualistic mindsets compete for dominance. No matter the path we choose, the future seems bleak for the development of a healthy individualism much less a Mature-Anthropocene.

Grinspoon says that we will enter the Mature-Anthropocene “when we acquire the ability to live sustainably and become a lasting presence on this world.”<sup>68</sup> This criterion essentially requires moving away from the core components and beliefs of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset. That is not to say that we need to discard all of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset’s characteristics and values. Grinspoon says that the key to entering the Mature-Anthropocene is “mass awareness of our role in changing the planet.”<sup>69</sup> He believes that once the masses are aware of and can comprehend our relationship to the Earth System, we will be able to “transition from blundering through inadvertent global changes to thoughtfully and deliberately controlling our effects on the planet.”<sup>70</sup> Grinspoon believes that this level of awareness is within us, and that “it starts with the end of our innocence.”<sup>71</sup> What he means by this is ending the idea that there is a disconnect between humanity and the Earth System. If that disconnect exists, like it currently does for many Proto-Anthropocenic individuals, then we maintain a conceptual innocence for the climate chaos we witness on a daily basis. The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset seeks to maintain their illusory innocence, refusing to take responsibility for actions during the Great Acceleration that have wreaked havoc and chaos upon the entire Earth System. Grinspoon claims we achieve this loss of innocence through the development of a “situational awareness... of how we behave on a planetary

---

<sup>68</sup> Grinspoon, *Enter the Sapiezoic: A New Aeon of Self-Aware Global Change*.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.,

scale... and integrating that knowledge into our actions."<sup>72</sup> This integration is not about altruism, or self-sacrifice, or idealism, instead Grinspoon posits it only requires the development of "accurate self-perception and enlightened self-interest."<sup>73</sup> If we take these criteria as true, then it is no wonder we have been unable to enter the Mature-Anthropocene. The Happy Consciousness rendered "accurate self-perception and enlightened self-interest"<sup>74</sup> impossible under its parameters.

Since the Happy Consciousness has been disrupted by the Internet, we are no longer barred from the development necessary to transition into the Mature-Anthropocene and develop a new kind of individualism worthy of the human-centered epoch. Just as there was a middle-ground between Grinspoon's Mature-Anthropocene and Proto-Anthropocene I believe there is ground between the Great Refusal and the Great Abdication: A Great Realization. A Great Realization where we use the technological instruments of the 21st century, namely the Internet, to develop the kind of "situational awareness...accurate self-perception and enlightened self-interest"<sup>75</sup> that we need in order to enter the Mature-Anthropocene.

However, the Chaotic Nihilism of the Anthropocene will lead us down a different path if we let it. The interactions between Proto-Anthropocenic and Demi-Anthropocenic individuals as they respond to Chaotic Nihilism reveal the barrier to the Mature-Anthropocene: tension between individualistic mindsets is holding us back. We can see this tension in how Levinson depicts sexuality and sexual behavior in both *Euphoria* and *Assassination Nation*.

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.,

In *Euphoria*, Rue discusses this tension through the story of Cassie, another student that is known to be a sexually promiscuous girl. The audience is shown that there is an archive of all the naked photos she'd sent boyfriends and videos that were taken of her having sex on the Internet for essentially anyone to see. Rue sums up the generational tension around this issue aptly when she tells the audience:

I know your generation relied on flowers and father's permission but it's 2019 and unless you are Amish, nudes are the currency of love so stop shaming us. Start shaming the middle-aged men who make passwords protected folders of underaged girls' nudes on the Internet.<sup>76</sup>

This sort of shaming is rooted in projected humiliation by the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset as a result of an antiquated concept they cling to for dear life. This type of interaction between two competing kinds of individualisms mirrors what Dewey describes in *Individualism Old and New*. He says that being "mentally and morally unprepared, our old creeds have become ingrowing the more we depart from them in fact, the more loudly we proclaim them."<sup>77</sup> Just as before, American society has been disrupted by technological advancement beyond imagination and the dominant Proto-Anthropocenic individualism is, just as before, proclaiming with increasing volume their devotion to traditional values as the reality of our world departs further from those values each day.

The Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset appears to be falling right into the same trap set for what Dewey calls the "pioneer individualism"<sup>78</sup> of pre-industrial America; loudly clinging to antiquated values and tradition in the face of titanic social change for fear of humiliation and confusion. In contemporary America, the perceived threat of

---

<sup>76</sup> Levinson, Zendaya, *Euphoria*,

<sup>77</sup> Dewey, *Individualism Old and New.*, 8

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

humiliation only exists because of the fiery righteousness the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset wields when trying to substitute in their own false reality. We see this clearly in *Assassination Nation* when the data breach revealed the darkest secrets and desires of half of Salem, members of the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset were so terrified of perceived humiliation they create a self-fulfilling prophecy that resulted in their own humiliation.<sup>79</sup> The tension regarding sexual freedom or promiscuity is just one area where the films dramatize the contention between Proto-Anthropocenic and Demi-Anthropocenic individuals, but this dissonance between individualistic mindsets expands to broader social ideals such as humanity's relationship with the Earth System, our chosen economic system, and essentially all parts of how we conceptualize the individual.

These areas of contention between competing individualism is what is blocking our advancement into the Mature-Anthropocene. In order to proceed, we must find a way to ease the tension between individualism and facilitate a co-operative outlook for the future. Or, we must find a way for our society to leave behind the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset, to overcome their fear and perceived or real humiliation. That would be the essence of the Great Realization: realizing the fear is a product of internalized hate and humiliation. As we can see with the dramatized example of sex in Levinson's films: virtually all individuals participate in promiscuous behavior in private, the only reason they believe it heinous is due to antiquated ideals about purity that are no longer relevant in the world of the Internet. The only reason the Proto-Anthropocenic individuals feel humiliation about their sexualities is their drive to restore a "traditional"

---

<sup>79</sup> Levinson, *Assassination Nation*,

world and when they themselves are no longer compatible with that world the ideal becomes malignant.

In normal circumstances, the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset would be unlikely to set aside their malignant Zealous Traditionalism. Typically, enough scraps of their golden age exist so that they can justify forcing the existence of the key missing parts. However, that is not the circumstance in which American society exists today. We are gripped in the midst of a global pandemic on a scale not seen in 100 years. "Never waste a crisis" is a popular saying in corporate America, and since the corporate structure has invaded every aspect of American society that saying should also apply to the development of a new individualism. COVID-19 serves as a second mass disruption since the Internet. The Happy Consciousness was revealed by the Internet's disruption and due to technology certain parts of the individual were invalidated. The encroaching chaotic Nihilism of the Anthropocene resulted in the mayhem we experienced in the late 2010s but before any new social forces could emerge the world was disrupted again by COVID-19. The pandemic has resulted in the entire world changing in a matter of weeks. The remaining scraps of the Proto-Anthropocenic golden age were decimated by the virus. Over the past months, we have been forced to use the Internet to develop new ways of connecting with each other and conceiving what it means to be an individual.

The pandemic has forced billions of people to confront the brutal reality of the system we live in, and already we have developed a level of awareness like never before. Inequality and injustice are in the spotlight for everyone to see and it is clear that the world does not function at all like it did in the early Proto-Anthropocene. You might ask: how do we set aside the malignant aspects of the Proto-Anthropocene? The

pandemic has shown us a stratification of how our actions actually affect each other, and just how little a lot of our social tension over behavior actually matters. It has shown us a way to reframe Anthropocenic Nihilism. We can see that the moral battles we wage are meaningless. The behavior perceived by the Proto-Anthropocenic Mindset as dangerous or "untraditional" does nothing to the offended individual. In the end, it doesn't matter, because we can see from the sheer size and number of things happening every second of every day that being angry about promiscuous women or an LGBTQ individual's actions factually changes nothing in the existence of the Proto-Anthropocenic individual.

That is the result of a Great Realization that COVID-19 could offer to American individualism. We could realize and achieve a level of situational awareness that paves the way for the "self-perception and enlightened self-interest"<sup>80</sup> that Grinspoon identifies as the key to entering the Mature-Anthropocene. We must guide the Great Realization into the Mature-Anthropocene through changing how we connect with each other, and the establishment of an acceptable level of dependent individualism. The pandemic has shown us that humans are not meant to be isolated creatures and that the best tool we have for overcoming any challenge is cooperation. Instead of using the technology of the Anthropocene to focus on hyper-individualism and isolate ourselves to focus on pecuniary goals we must come together, Proto-Anthropocenic and Demi-Anthropocenic individual alike in order to develop a new individualistic mindset: A Mature-Anthropocenic Mindset. Only then can we achieve a sustainable place within the Earth System.

---

<sup>80</sup> Grinspoon, *Enter the Sapiezoic: A New Aeon of Self-Aware Global Change*

## Bibliography

- Angus, Ian. *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System*. Monthly Review Press, 2016.
- Dewey, John. *Individualism Old and New*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1999.
- Grinspoon, David. "Enter the Sapiezoic: A New Aeon of Self-Aware Global Change – David Grinspoon: Aeon Essays." Aeon, Aeon, 15 Feb. 2020, [aeon.co/essays/enter-the-sapiezoic-a-new-aeon-of-self-aware-global-change](https://aeon.co/essays/enter-the-sapiezoic-a-new-aeon-of-self-aware-global-change).
- Levinson, Sam, Odessa Young, Joel McHale et al. *Assassination Nation*. Streaming on Hulu. Directed by Sam Levinson. New York City: Neon AGBO Refinery29, 2018.
- Levinson, Sam, Zendaya et al. *Euphoria: Episode 01 "Pilot"*. Streaming on HBO. Directed by Augustine Frizzell. New York City: Home Box Office, 2019
- Lukács, György. *History and Class Consciousness. An Anthology of Western Marxism*. Oxford University Press. 1989.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.
- Zalasiewicz, J., Waters, C. N., do Sul, J. A. I., Corcoran, P. L., Barnosky, A. D., Cearreta, A., ... & McNeill, J. R. (2016). *The geological cycle of plastics and their use as a stratigraphic indicator of the Anthropocene*. *Anthropocene*, 13, 4-17.