Representations of Environmental Activism in Kim Stanley Robinson’s Science in the Capital Trilogy and Michael Crichton’s State of Fear

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How successful has the environmental movement been over the course of its existence? If we identify – as many commentators do – the publication of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring (1962) as ‘day one’ of modern environmentalism then the movement is now over fifty years old and ripe for appraisal. The academic discourse on environmentalism readily acknowledges the complexity of the issues which environmentalism has traditionally confronted. One key feature within this discourse is the visibility of environmental damage and the implications of this for environmentalist mobilization. In his recent work on the representational challenges of environmental crises, Rob Nixon pointed out that we need

to engage the different representational, narrative and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence. Climate change, the thawing cryosphere, toxic drift, [etc. ...] present formidable representational obstacles that can hinder our efforts to mobilize and act decisively. [These] long dyings [...] are under-represented in strategic planning as well as in human memory (Nixon 2, emphasis added).

Nixon’s stress here on the importance of “representation” in the effort to mitigate and avert environmental degradation can be placed alongside a number of similar exhortations (Dana Philips, Ursula Heise, and David Manuel-Navarrete and

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1 “Silent Spring was a sensation: a bestseller, a Book-of-the-Month club selection, a catalyst for high level policy review, the subject of a widely watched CBS Reports television program, and a text often seen as having launched the modern environmental movement.” (Hecht 150).

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Christine Buzinde). What Nixon’s account points to – but does not name, as such – is an account of how the activists behind these struggles are represented; that is, the protagonists of environmental movements seeking to realize their respective aims. The environmental impact of climate change has only recently begun to be measured, and as Nixon suggests, remains accretive and hard to visualize. The movement to combat the effects of climate change has been a correspondingly difficult one to understand, support, and participate in. Environmental activism is not unique in this, for the history of social movements more generally tells a similar story of long and painful struggles.

This article will examine dominant notions of what constitutes environmental activism by looking at how activists are represented in both sociological and creative literatures. It is, I feel, under-appreciated how difficult successfully mobilizing for social change is, not least when the problems confronted by environmentalists are as complex as they are demanding of representational simplicity and directness. Nixon points out that the main thrust of his research has been driven by the question, “How do we balance that restless drive for immediate novelty with activism that needs to remain focused on the long term?” (265). This question frames activism appropriately as a role prone to an inner-tension, one which sits between the violences envisaged by the activist (however slowly they might unfold) and the population at large. “The writer-activist,” Nixon tells us, “will continue to play a critical role by drawing to the surface – and infusing with emotional force – submerged stories of injustice and resource rebellions” (279). One way of doing this, following Nixon’s lead, is to look at how the struggle itself is represented, the attempts to uncover by means of narrative the “submerged stories of injustice” experienced by activists and those they wish to protect.

One need only glance at the historical and socio-scientific literature on the proceedings of environmental activist movements to gather that their successes have been incremental, hard-fought, and difficult to define. A study by Marco Giugni using a time-series analysis of the policy outcomes of ecology movements in the United States between 1977 and 1995, concluded “that [grass-roots or non-mainstream] movements have little leverage on policy”. Giugni found “at best a marginal to moderate effect and only when protest activities are supported by crucial external resources that are available precisely when the movements’ mobilization occurs”. These are results, furthermore, which have been reproduced numerous times (e.g. Amenta, “Political Contexts”, Movements; Amenta et al. “Political Mediation”, “Townsend Movement”, “Stolen Thunder”; Cress and Snow; Kane;

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2 “Over the last 140 years global surface temperatures have risen by about 0.8°C.” The Met Office News Blog. 14 Oct. 2012.
Schumaker; Soule and Olzak). These findings may be surprising to some. Indeed, they are in stark contrast to the popular opinion that protests from the fringe – led and organized by individual activists – have played (and will continue to play) a major role in the history of political change. The well-known caveat – often attributed to the cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead – to “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has” is emblematic of this view. Yet behind these two opposing perspectives (i.e. Mead’s and the findings of social movement theorists), I will argue, is not the fatal divide which might appear, but rather a more complex set of tensions and contradictions which beset the activist and the possibility of action in contemporary politics.

Defining activism is more problematic than it might seem at first. The study of social movements, which promises perhaps the most systemic analysis of activism, has been extensive. As yet, however, agreement on how social movements work or how activists function within them has been slow to emerge. According to Doug McAdam, a leading thinker in this area, ‘social movements’ are extremely complex and elusive phenomena, made up of activists promoting and/or supporting their actions [who] do so not as atomized individuals, possibly with similar values or social traits, but as actors linked to each other through complex webs of exchanges, either direct or mediated (McAdam and Diani 1).

Despite this complexity, a number of attempts in the sociological literature to define activism have nonetheless been made. Examples of qualifying criteria include prior contact with other movement participants (McAdam, “High-Risk”; Snow, et al.), membership in organizations (McAdam, “High-Risk”; Orum), history of prior activism (Gamson, et al.; McAdam, “High-Risk”, Freedom), biographical availability (McAdam, “High-Risk”; Pichardo and Herring), and “everyday” actions outside social movement groups (Pichardo, et al.). Even more problematic again are considerations of how particular motivations qualify an act as “activist” or not. In an assessment of the political potency of personal actions, Nelson Pichardo observed, “culture can be seen as providing a range or menu of acceptable reasons for engaging in an action” (Pichardo, et al. 203), further opening up an already loose set of qualifications. So too Mooney and Hunt, who demonstrated the need to consider the complex interaction of different ideological “frames” across time when thinking about how social

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3 Mooney and Hunt define three different types of ‘framing’ in the following terms: “Diagnostic framing identifies problems and imputes blame or causality; prognostic framing encourages certain strategies and tactics; motivational framing develops compelling reasons for action” (178).
movements function (178). Elsewhere ideas as varied as “ontological security” (Shepherd), “cognitive practice” and “ecological habitus” (Haluza-DeLay), “symmetric identities” and “self-identification” (Diani and Pilati) – to mention just a few – have contributed to a vast array of potential conceptions of what environmental activism is and what motivates it. McAdam’s recent work has stressed this complexity, concluding that “social movements are, in other words, complex and highly heterogeneous network structures” (McAdam and Diani 1).

If defining activism in the context of sociological study is complicated by the sheer variety of qualifying criteria – not to mention the vast “range or menu of acceptable reasons for engaging in an action” – this is no less true in the literary depictions. In recent decades sociologists have themselves begun to corroborate this, demonstrating an increasing readiness to engage in the discourses and disciplines of cultural studies as a means of expanding their own research capacities (Bearman and Stovel; White). In an article on network theory and social movements, John Mohr suggests that “the network scholars who are making the move toward culture are by and large doing so out of a frustration with the limitations of an over-simplified model of social structure” (Mohr). Much like the members of the Frankfurt School fifty years before them, cultural artifacts are valued by these sociologists as complex, privileged sites of social production and representation which can help to elucidate phenomena left unexplained by economic and sociological models. My decision to turn to literature to address these issues is based on a similar understanding of literary works as offering effective means to explore complex social phenomena; as, in short, ‘good things to think with’.

In the case of this paper, as with many others that look to literature in this way, the object under examination – or rather the ‘problem’ being explored – happens to be of vital importance; i.e. the effort to avert the likely cataclysmic effects of climate change. My belief is that literature can help to accurately delineate (to use Imre Szeman’s phrase) “the social life” of activism, to uncover dominant notions of what activism is, how it is perceived, and how it operates. I have chosen to look at two texts, similar in generic style, but remarkable for their focus on contemporary environmental activism in a sensationalized but essentially ‘real-world’ setting; namely, Kim Stanley Robinson’s Science in the Capital trilogy (2004-2007) and Michael Crichton’s State of Fear (2004). Successfully uncovering the ‘social life’ of activism in these texts – what George Lukacs calls “social-historical collision”: the moment of our specific engagement with environmental problems across personal, national, and global scales – will give strong indications regarding the health of, possible ways forward for, and grounds for improvement within, the environmental movement.
In his work on the cultural meaning of oil, Imre Szeman asks, with regards to periodizing texts in chronological and geo-political terms (‘the long eighteenth century’, British Empire, etc.), how we might organize texts “in terms of the forms of energy available to [them] at any given historical moment?” (“System” 806). Though my project diverges from Szeman’s – I am not interested in energy provisions – I am proposing a similar shift in approach: that texts be looked at through the lens of their historically-specific representations of activism. As Szeman describes elsewhere, this alternative periodization allows one to understand not only the specific politics enacted through the formal and aesthetic choices made in each [text], but to map out what these [texts] tell us about the social life of oil [in this case, activism] today, and the capacity for [texts] such as these to meaningfully intervene in the looming consequences of our dependence on oil (“Crude” 423).

Bracketing the fact that I do not address oil in this paper, it important to note that oil is well-known to be a substance which plays a large role in the issues targeted by environmentalists. As such, for “looming consequences of our dependence on oil”, a variety of environmental crises could be invoked. Furthermore, it is primarily Szeman’s methodology rather than the specific content of his study that interests me here. “The site of politics I will focus on,” Szeman tells us is not the success or failure of any given [text] to constrain or mobilize a political response, but rather what the discursive, narrative and aesthetic strategies employed suggest about the dominant ways in which the problem of oil [in this case, “climate change”] is named and solutions to it proposed (“Crude” 424).

My texts have been selected on the basis of a similar motive; their particular political “success” or status is not at issue here. I am looking, instead, and in the ways already outlined above, to identify the “dominant ways” in which the problems facing activism are “named and solutions to [them] proposed”. Indeed, it is no accident that the texts I have chosen to focus on are widely read and contemporary in their content and style. By targeting a popular literary form I am assuming that the ‘social life’ of activism depicted there represents a more generalizable and recognizable experience of activism than might be outlined in more obscure media. Before I turn to the literature to test this assumption, however, I will examine how environmental activism is analyzed and defined in sociological – or, at least, non-literary – discourses.
A working definition of activism

As the review of the above studies suggests, environmental actions can be defined in many ways. For the remainder of this article, however, I will be reading activism (following Shepherd and Weber) as a “vocation”; that is, “an occupation that is distinguished by extraordinary commitment,” namely, in which subjects claim that their activism is the “primary feature” of their identity and the “occupation” which they spend most of their time doing (Shepherd 151). The protagonists of my chosen literary texts are, accordingly, vocational in their devotion to the environmental movement in, as we shall see, both voluntary and professional capacities. In this sense it is possible to surmount the problems encountered by Pichardo, et al. in asking whether or not the activist identity should be extended to include “everyday actions” and to people who have never belonged to a social movement or group, or even participated in mass actions. If we think of activism as a “vocation”, the question of whether or not an individual officially belongs to a social movement group is irrelevant. Of greater importance is their “extraordinary commitment”.

This is effectively the same conclusion reached by McAdam in his landmark consideration of the issue (“High-Risk”) in which he argues for the need to distinguish between “low-cost” and “high-cost” activism, where “cost” refers to the “expenditures of time, money, and energy that are required of a person engaged in any particular form of activism” (67). Using this approach, the narrowness of the definitions of activism pointed out by Pichardo, et al. – as limited to “membership in social movement organizations and participation in movement events such as rallies or marches” (185) – is circumvented, whilst simultaneously avoiding the

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4 In the study, Pichardo, et al. nominate “five behaviors” as examples of everyday actions: “conserving water, gasoline, energy, and purchasing products made from recycled materials, and purchasing such products when they are more expensive” (185). Though this list could conceivably be extended to include many other practices – namely, voting, filling in petitions, turning off light switches, etc. – in this paper I identify everyday actions as part of what constitutes someone as an activist; which is to say, every actions are not sufficient on their own to qualify activism qua vocation.

5 “Measures of participation have traditionally focused on membership in social movement organizations and participation in movement events such as rallies or marches. For example, a study of anti-nuclear protestors in West Germany focused on “petitioning, participation in legal demonstrations, working in citizen initiatives, seizing construction sites, and resisting police if they attack demonstrators”. Another study examining participation in social movements focused on a sole event: a mass demonstration. Other studies used organizational membership as a measure of social movement participation. Many other studies, however, failed to precisely define social movement participation. Instead they referred simply to “activism” or “participation” leaving the meaning implicit. Thus, the...
cumbersome breadth of the definition implied by this conclusion, in which “everyday behaviors” alone become legitimate signifiers of an activist identity.

**What is at stake in the representation of environmental activism?**

Ultimately what is at stake in an examination of activist representations is a means for understanding why we have historically struggled to shift towards a system (or mode) of production that makes more sense ecologically, economically, and (if the activists and the scientists who support them are to be believed) in terms of the general well-being of *all life* on this planet. One argument as to why this difficulty persists is simply that environmentally-sound lifestyles are often undermined by, or in tension with, what many see as the structural pressures of social patterns and norms. Such a view actively foregrounds the restrictive (or at least co-constitutive) operation of the structures of society on individuals’ agential capacities. Environmental sociologists, specifically, observe that the “structure-agency dilemma” is central to the study of environmental problems and their solutions (Haluza-DeLay). One question this paper hopes to address, therefore, is where literature fits into this debate. As part of a utopian project to narrate solutions to the problems experienced by the environmental activist, or as part of a mimetic attempt to narrate ‘the social life’ of activism *as problematic* in order to force a resolution elsewhere (i.e. outside literature)?

Treatment of the ‘structure-agency dilemma’ which faces all activists is common in the sociological literature. “Environmentally sound lifestyles,” Randolph Haluza-DeLay points out, “will be difficult in [late-capitalist] society” (206); that is, the principal obstacles to urgent ecological imperatives stem from problems of “social organization”. A simple example: people continue to drive cars (in their billions) rather than use more sustainable transportation options. Why? Because the urban infrastructures are set up in such a way that make utilizing alternatives very difficult. To take a stand – to assert an alternative lifestyle in opposition to, or outside, current models – is by definition to *take on* a burden, to put oneself (or the community in which you live) in a position of *symbolic* or gestural discomfort or inconvenience. It is the challenge of living against the grain, of challenging the inertial effects of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*, in order to prefigure a new and less destructive social organization.

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conventional treatment of social movement participation has not conceptualized everyday behaviors as forms of movement participation” (Pichardo, et al. 185).

6 Indeed, it is also well known that suburban design was predicated upon the assumption of an essentially limitless and toxically manageable supply of oil (see *The End of Suburbia* (2006). Dir. Greene, Gregory).
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This structure-agency focus reflects both a lasting concern within the human sciences (Marx, Weber, Bourdieu, Giddens, etc.) as well as attempts in recent decades to escape some of the apparent impasses that the structure-agency discourse has produced (Emirbayer, et al; Emirbayer; McAdam and Diani). Because of its emphasis on the role of the individual in activating or stunting broad ecological and social change, discussion of the 'structure-agency dilemma' has long been at the heart of thinking about the possibilities and limitations for environmental activism, as well as for activism in general. As one theorist puts it, we must strive to “provide a new understanding of what it means to be human in the global change era” (Manuel-Navarrete 136). It is for this reason that I pause now to give a brief overview of critical thinking on the ‘structure-agency dilemma’ and its relevance to conceptualizing possibilities for political agency.

*Prima facie*, the ‘structure-agency dilemma’ is normally described as a “dilemma” because an understanding of how society works demands it; i.e. in the ‘last analysis’ we are either totally free agents able to exert our will over our environment, or bound entirely by the historical contingencies which have structured that environment. Generally speaking, the more sophisticated considerations of the dynamic do not, in fact, privilege one term over the other in this way, but find ways of allowing both to have some degree of influence (either simultaneously or at different times, depending on the theorist in question). Such an approach, explains Bourdieu, is
difficult to understand only so long as one remains locked in the usual antinomies - which the concept of the *habitus* aims to transcend - of determinism and freedom, conditioning and creativity, consciousness and the unconscious, or the individual and society (Bourdieu 55).

In his attempts to work outside of the “usual antinomies” which the ‘structure-agency dilemma’ frames, Bourdieu finds a way around the impasse by offering what I am simply going to call a ‘middle way’. Indeed, a majority of the most highly-esteemed structure-agency theorists (e.g. Anthony Giddens, William G. Sewell, Mustafa Emirbayer, Alex Callinicos, M. R. Redclift and Graham Woodgate) contribute theories in these terms. Marx too – arguably one of the first sociologists to systematically consider the dynamic – immortalised this ‘middle way’ approach in one of his most famous observations: “Men make history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Brumaire 103). This passage has become famous in the Marxist tradition due largely to the insight it gives to the analytical methodologies which have become associated with the movement; that is, insights that mediate historical contingency against the rational-agency of the individual. In *The German Ideology*, this notion provided the
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bedrock for Marx’s and Engels’ understanding of the possibility for political intervention and action. For though, as they admit, “consciousness is determined by life” and humans appear to “develop under definite conditions”, it does not necessarily follow that we are to an absolute degree determined. Instead, “consciousness”, in Marx’s and Engels’ view, is crucial: it can “emancipate itself from the world” and uncover the “contradictions” that emerge between social relations and the “existing forces of production” (Marx and Engels 52). The ability to see these contradictions, for Marxists, is precisely the moment when opportunities to intervene in the world present themselves and the basis on which all deliberate political change is predicated.

The methodologies of historical materialism and the dialectic, then, as exemplified in the work of Marx and his followers, permit an understanding of “structure-agency” in relational terms. In the Marxist tradition, historical circumstances are thus read as constituting, or giving rise to, the structures within which the politically possible occurs; or, in Alex Callinicos’ terms, “power-conferring relations” (Callinicos 26, emphasis added). This relational aspect is described too by Bourdieu when he claims that “the relation to what is possible is a relation to power” (64). The precise degree of access to these “power-conferring relations” is, it should be pointed out, the ultimate, and as yet unanswered, question of political history, theory and practice. Indeed, historically, “power conferring relationships” have been culturally, economically, and geographically closed-off from the majority; they have been, in short, appropriated, re-appropriated and energetically retained by ruling elites. Marxism’s central contribution to political philosophy, however, was to contest the inevitability – the ontological nature – of this power imbalance. Though the historical record is demonstrably bleak, it is also full of clues as to the causational link between economic inequality and structural instability. Capitalism in particular, within the Marxist tradition, has since become synonymous with cyclical (or spiralling) boom-bust economic paradigms, hence the phrase common in the contemporary anti-capitalist movement, “capitalism is crisis”. In his chapter on the working day in volume one of Capital, Marx describes class struggle as an inevitability; that is, as the internalised contradiction of exploitation taken to its breaking point. “Between two rights”, Marx claimed, “force decides” (Capital 344). Marx felt certain that the time would come when the force of the proletariat – the slumbering majority – would decide and determine the nature of social, political, and economic structures in a way more reflective of their interests. The pay-off for this conception is the ability to identify (as Marx and others have) both the “constraining” elements of structure, but also the ways in which this constraint enables and gives rise to social agency. It remains to be seen, however, if this mechanism can be scaled up to ecological levels; that is, if the limits imposed on us
by an unstable climate and dwindling resources will confer on us an opportunity to reorganise along egalitarian lines or simply plunge us deeper into catastrophe.

**Group Dynamics and “Socio-Ecological Agency”**

A number of theorists have developed an understanding of the influence of structure and the possibility for agency in terms of group dynamics. Such a notion, for example, is at the heart of what Anthony Giddens (whose work on the topic has been hugely influential) described as “structuration”, wherein

> structure is better understood as a process with the capacity not only to constrain but also to enable action. As a result, “knowledgeable” and “enabled” agents have the power to transform structures *if they act together* (quoted in Manuel-Navarrete 140, emphasis added).

Framed this way, and despite Bourdieu’s presentation of *habitus* as a conservative (or even regressive) force, social structures can be viewed as “power-conferring relations”, whilst not losing sight of their dependence on deep-rooted and historically accumulated social practices. As Bourdieu further comments, social conditions can be “objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor” (Bourdieu 53). From Bourdieu’s perspective, the danger that lies in settling on one term or the other in the ‘structure-agency dilemma’ is its ultimate inadequacy in accounting for social and historical dynamics. A combination of a ‘middle way’ approach and an understanding of how individuals work within groups, specifically, indicates to Bourdieu that

> the tendency of groups to persist in their ways, due *inter alia* to the fact that, they are composed of individuals with durable dispositions that can outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced, can be the source of misadaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation (62).

Bourdieu thus explains social structures as those things that can account for how conditions change in society. Such an understanding is relevant to how groups form and social patterns emerge on both sides of the proverbial aisle, whether the group in question reflects normative interests or counter-cultural ones. That is, the action of groups can result in “misadaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation”. This insight exists in stark contrast to other accounts of structure-agency dynamics, which – in doggedly pursuing the question, “structure or agency?” – struggle to provide an explanation that accounts for the co-existence of both terms. As William G. Sewell suggests,
what tends to get lost in the language of structure is the efficacy of human action – or “agency”. … A social science trapped in an unexamined metaphor of structure tends to reduce actors to cleverly programmed automatons … The metaphor of structure implies stability. For this reason, structural language lends itself readily to explanations of how social life is shaped into consistent patterns, but not to explanations of how these patterns change over time (quoted in Manuel-Navarrete, 139).

Subsequent research in this area has, as a result, tended to emphasize the shifting and unstable relationship between individuals and society.7 Being aware of one’s capacity to modulate or optimize agency is of great importance in studies about the power of group dynamics to create social change. Sewell, building ostensibly on the work of Marx, was well aware of this, pointing out that though “a capacity for agency is as much a given for humans as the capacity for respiration”, the “specific forms that agency will take consequently vary enormously and are culturally and historically determined” (quoted in Manuel-Navarrete 141). If social change is the ultimate aim, an understanding of these “specific forms of agency” and how they modulate is indispensable, as well as acknowledging how contributions from theorists like Mustafa Emirbayer (see note 7) have impacted social movement theory. As Callinicos suggests, the problem of agency gains “pressing political importance as activists in the vast array of overlapping networks involved in resisting global capitalism and imperial war seek to develop effective strategies” (Callinicos xliii). Indeed, as these scholars suggest, the time has come to shift the emphasis from individual and rational-agent based accounts of social change to considerations of group agency, and to do so without losing sight of the individual and a robust understanding of what agency is. That is, to put to bed questions about why the “global environmental crisis cannot be properly addressed through the conventional analytic construct of ‘human agency’”, in favor of a model of socio-ecological agency (Manuel-Navarrete 142).

7 Mustafa Emirbayer, for example, has sought to explain this instability in chronological terms, contending “that reconceptualizing agency as an internally complex temporal dynamic makes possible a new perspective upon the age-old problem of free will and determinism” (Emirbayer and Mische 964). Emirbayer’s basic mechanism for describing this has been to suggest that whilst some temporal orientations are very conducive to structural influence (most notably the “iterational”, or “past” orientations), we are able to “switch between (or ‘recompose’) [our] temporal orientations—as constructed within and by means of those contexts—and thus are capable of changing [our] relationship to structure” (964). The movement within society of individuals between settings – especially social groups – of differing dimensions, historical importance, and aesthetic qualities is the key way in which this temporal relation is modulated.
‘Natural limits’

Within the environmental discourse the salient question has become – in acknowledgment of the power of group dynamics – can we act immediately and in cooperation to save the planet? David Manuel-Navarrete and Christine Buzinde have argued that a special capacity to effect change always already exists in group or “social” agency – that is, as something “enacted within individual persons” but which “rarely takes place as an isolated process” (136). Environmental threats, particularly those predicated on doomsday scenarios like climate change, have a correspondingly more acute capacity when felt at the level of the group. Interestingly, environmental threats have also been described and conceived of as forces outside of human control, sometimes referred to as “natural limits”. Such a description creates the paradoxical situation wherein “socio-ecological agents”, as Manuel-Navarrete and Buzinde describe them, “have the task ahead of dealing with self-imposed material constraints, which surface from a clear awareness about self-inflicted threats (e.g. climate change) and with no place else to go to avoid these threats” (142). Natural limits, then, become the experiential moment when the limits of our environment push back against us in ways that emphasize our surprising capacity to drastically alter the environment in unintended ways. This moment of constraint, in other words, becomes the moment through which we encounter both our structural contingency and our capacity for “socio-ecological agency”. The task ahead, in the view of the majority of environmental scientists, sociologists, and activists, is to transform our blundering destructiveness and profligacy into actions with a beneficial social and ecological output.

Making such a transition is, unfortunately (and as many environmental groups have found), merely the starting point for planning environmental interventions and actions. As I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, the environmental movement is fraught with complications: poor organization, a limited record of success, and the huge task of representing crises and struggles (ones that are more often than not characterized by what Nixon calls a “slow violence”) to a public specifically responsive to immediate and explosive sensation. It is not surprising, then, that part of Manuel-Navarrete’s and Buzinde’s answer to this problem is, like Nixon, to call for new narratives which speak in engaging ways of exactly these types of problems. These “existential narratives”, as they call them, “should be capable of informing and enticing new forms of living and socializing. They should bring the connections between consciousness and materiality back into culture” (137).

As I have already stated, my method for searching for these new narratives is to delineate “the social life” of these struggles, specifically within contemporary novelistic fiction about environmental activism and the continued fascination within
these texts of the frictions, contradictions, and uncertainties characteristic of the “structure-agency dilemma”. An understanding of agency informed by the above debate will remain central to my readings due to its prominence within the discourse on the possibility for successful social and political intervention.

**Literature and environmental activism**

How does this thesis of the structure-agency dilemma and dynamic correspond to contemporary depictions in literary texts? Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975), perhaps one of the earliest and most famous of all literary depictions of environmental activism hinged on a portrayal of the structure-agency dilemma. The novel concerns a small but devoted group of activists prepared to stop at nothing to effect the kind of political change they wished to see in the world. The effectiveness and appropriateness of their actions are, as a result, one of the main focuses of the text. Whatever the apparent sense that informs the protagonists’ respective oppositional stances, their accompanying actions are invariably fraught with problems (e.g. unintended consequences, poor planning, mortal danger, the social ostracism of their perpetrators, etc.). Abbey was himself a *soi-disant* activist and repeatedly voiced his concern about the effectiveness of his own representations of his environmentalist protagonists, famously warning, “What may be written as a literature of protest may be consumed as a literature of escape” (Clark 30).

More recently, novelistic treatments of the activist have arguably carried forward and enlarged upon Abbey’s representation of his activists as beset with anxieties flowing from the ‘structure-agency dilemma’. Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010), for example, shows not only the attritional and slow-moving pace of bottom-up (or activist-led) socio-ecological change but also the degree to which personal, localized narratives often obstruct, supersede, or eclipse more globally-situated ones like those told by environmental campaigners. Much like the sociological literature already mentioned, the strength of commitment to slow-acting, far-off, and hard-to-visualize problems is often fragile, and activists are easily alienated from others (especially those to whom they are closest) in the process of mobilizing their political agendas. Ian McEwan’s *Solar* (2010), which, though in part motivated by McEwan’s own concern for the environment,\(^8\) chose to make an ironic point, foregrounding the personal foibles of its protagonist (a climate change expert) over the urgency of the environmental threats themselves. Ruth Ozeki’s *All Over Creation* (2003), John Nichols’ *The Voice of the Butterfly* (2001), and Gayle Brandeis’ *Book of Dead Birds* (2003) are similarly concerned with exploring the kind of tensions that exist between ‘the

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individual’ (as understood in the context of late-capitalism) and the structures of their broader ecological sensibilities and politics.

The function of narrative, quite simply, is not necessarily to “resolve” these tensions. This is not what literature does. Indeed, if literature were to seek to resolve real political problems it would face difficulty achieving these aims without spinning a more problematic and unconvincing fiction. The structure-agency dynamic is, furthermore, not unique to depictions of the contemporary environmental activist. It is unquestionably one of the oldest tropes in creative literature. One can go back as far as one of the earliest extant plays of Greek tragedy, Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia*, to find not only the first, but perhaps the most well-realized, explorations of the ‘structure-agency dilemma’. If there is a common message discernible within Greek tragedy it is hard to find a better one than the simple line, “the doer suffers,” an argument that encapsulates the double bind of the tragic hero. For whatever the urgency driving the actions of the tragic protagonists in these texts, these heroes are invariably annihilated in the process of their pursuit; their incommensurability with the “will of Zeus” (or the cosmos) demands it. The tendency toward failure which dominates contemporary literary depictions of the activist is, therefore, not only a trope with a long history, but also one which relies on a deep-running structural dynamic: in short, that of the “doer” – or activist – in opposition to the dominant trends of society in general.

The narrative theorist Northrop Frye suggests such a dynamic is indeed definitive of the tragic mode (or rather the broader category of “high mimesis” which includes both tragedy and epic). In these depictions, the protagonist (or “hero”) is “superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment.” The activist would, in this sense, be analogous to a “leader”, having “authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours”, but engaging in actions which are “subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature” (Frye 32-3). These observations are more than just to position activist representations within the field of narrative criticism. As Fredric Jameson, whose own interest in Frye is prominent in *The Political Unconscious*, suggests

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9 *Libation Bearers*, II. 309-314 (*The Oresteia*).

10 It is important to note here that I am not reading ‘natural environment’ in any specifically ecological sense, but instead in the broadest sense possible; that is, as the external political, social, historical and ecological conditions in which individuals find themselves. With regards to the structural/structuring relationship between these environments and their individual agents, I am particularly interested in a reading of ‘natural environment’ that emphasizes human environments (i.e. the political, social, and historical). This is because they are the structures within which environmental activists are most likely to make interventions.
[The] ethical opposition is, for instance, wholly absent from tragedy, whose fundamental staging of the triumph of an inhuman destiny or fate generates a perspective which radically transcends the purely individual categories of good and evil (103).

Jameson’s suggestion at first glance appears incompatible with the strong ethical underpinnings of environmental activist politics and lifestyles. For Jameson, however (and indeed for many others on the political left), the value of the tragic mode lies precisely in its ability to forgo the “ethical binary” in which “the ideological closure in question would end up drawing the entire analysis back into itself” (105). Tragedy, as something that avoids “ideological closure,” becomes the means by which ethics understands itself, providing a means to uncover and explore the assumptions prevalent within any given ethical discourse, without simply being “consumed as a literature of escape.” Such an attitude is discernible as well in recent works by T. P. Clark, most notably in his article, “For a Left with No Future”, wherein he argues,

[Tragedy] is the…form of this mystery [that best allows us to think politically], because the greatness of soul which it exhibits oppressed, conflicting and destroyed, is the highest existence in our view. It forces the mystery upon us (60).

For Clark, it is precisely our failure to acknowledge the value of the tragic mode that has held leftist politics back in recent years. This looking “the world in the face”, as Clark puts it, must also include the tragic experience of the activist, the iteratively cruel combination of expectation, ambition, and failure, which has been historically characteristic of popular resistance movements. For reasons that go beyond integrity, representing this experience as tragic is essential if we expect to look at the world and be edified by it.

As we have seen with Jameson, such exhortations are not new within left wing (and even more specifically Marxist literary) politics. Georg Lukacs’ *The Historical Novel* gives a useful account, especially for my purposes here, of the particular dynamic at work in the medium of the novel as a form significantly “more historical than drama” in its capacity to capture “the essence of a [social-historical] collision with the concrete historicism of all the details” (151 [126]). Indeed, Lukacs’ analysis of the Hegelian concept of the “world-historical individual,” echoes pointedly Frye’s own discussion of the tragic hero described above. In the dramatic medium, the “world-historical individual”, writes Lukacs, “is superior to his surroundings” (126) and is “destined to be a hero, to be the central figure in drama” (103). In the novel form, however, the “world-historical individual” “must be a minor figure,” leaving room instead for the “maintaining individual” to take the lead, a figure more suited
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to represent the “smallest oscillations [of history] as immediate disturbances of their individual lives” (43-4). This dynamic, Lukács claims, effectively “contrasts between the petty, everyday character of life and this purely inward significance of the person and action, between inner and outer” (127-8), hence permitting a more authentic portrayal of history. Lukács believed, furthermore, that the “golden age of the historical novel” began with Sir Walter Scott and ended with Balzac, after which novelists such as Flaubert became overly interested in the “lonely psychologism” (313) in which “the historical events become external and exotic … a mere decorative backdrop” (206).

Lukács’ understanding of the structural relationship of the individual to history is perfect for my purposes here in describing representations of the contemporary environmental activist. From this perspective, activists are those who function as the everyday or “maintaining” individual – “superior to [their] surroundings” – but are nonetheless destined to be obliterated (or at least ignored) by the larger systems of political, social, historical and ecological process which go on above their heads. As we shall see, this idea has important implications for the texts I will now go on to examine. The point here is to ask what a conception of the activist in this quotidian tragedy tells us about the ability of literature such as this to both highlight problems with, and affect for the better, the shortcomings of environmental movements and their proponents. That is, to return to a question already asked: where does literature fit into this debate? As part of a utopian project to narrate solutions to the problems experienced by the environmental activist, or as part of a mimetic attempt to narrate ‘the social life’ of activism as problematic in order to force a resolution elsewhere (i.e. outside literature)?

Tropes of activist representation

This survey will examine literary representations of activism in the following three ways, which emphasize the relationship between activists and the world they wish to change:

1. The tragic mode
2. Structure-agency dilemma
3. (By way of conclusion—) Where and how do these texts accommodate models of social movements offered by sociologists?

Before we look at some examples it must be said that environmental anxieties have enlarged considerably within the collective political consciousness in recent years. It is unsurprising therefore that the number of examples of contemporary fiction giving direct treatment to environmental issues have proliferated, and so too the number of
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characters in those texts which might conceivably be identified as activists. This survey, therefore, does not pretend to be exhaustive, and in order to be of any use at all must resign itself to look in detail at a relatively limited amount of evidentiary material.

1. The tragic mode

Science in the Capital tells the story of a group of scientists, politicians and activists who endeavor to mitigate and avert the emerging effects of climate change. The trilogy was, according to its author, conceived as a means of pre-figuring what a solution to the problems posed by global warming might look like. As Robinson stated in an interview in 2007,

you need a positive vision of what could happen and you need it written out as a narrative or a scenario so that you can kind of envision it and begin to believe in its possibility (“Robinson Saves Earth”).

In other words, Science in the Capital is a result of responding to the need – as outlined by one of its characters, Phil Chase (who begins the story as a Senator and is eventually elected to the office of the President) – to “imagine ourselves out of this one” (Sixty 473). The story is fuelled, arguably, by a strategic optimism, by an effort to increase the imaginative possibilities available to governments and climate change activists in the hope that a ‘real world’ political process might follow. Despite Science in the Capital’s optimism, vestiges of the tragic remain in Robinson’s story; i.e. experiences of failure, despair, misdirected efforts, and unintended consequences.

In structural terms, the trilogy is set up in such a way as to highlight the immensity of the task(s) ahead of its activist protagonists. We get a relatively limited number of perspectives on what is, in reality, a global struggle. The story’s main protagonist, Frank Vanderwal (as well as his numerous colleagues and friends working at institutions like the National Science Foundation (NSF)) are positioned at the vanguard of political and scientific action on global warming, entertaining and devising extreme and large-scale interventions to prevent and/or mitigate abrupt climate change. Early on in the trilogy’s final part, while discussing the logistics behind some of the ‘geo-engineering’ solutions available to them, one of Frank’s colleagues at the NSF, Edguardo, comments, “Well this is grim! There is not much we can do!” (Sixty 20). Another of Frank’s colleagues, Diane, challenges Edguardo’s despondency by pointing to the historical precedent of the Manhattan Project. Brushing aside the nefarious connotations of the project, Diane explains the reference by focusing on the capacity the project had to realize an aim of immense scale and national importance, “to entrain something like twenty percent of America’s industrial capacity to make the fissionable material”, concluding “that’s the
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kind of commitment we need now” (20-1). Dubious though it might be, Diane’s reference exemplifies the political dynamic of the series as a whole, one in which the impediments to desirable social and ecological change are the vast, historically entrenched edifices of social and political institutions, only movable via the levers of huge capital investment.

Unsurprisingly, this creates many points at which success seems remote, and reveals the tragic nature of the struggle itself. Tragic figures include, for example, the Khembalis (the sub-continen
tal Asian climate change refugees, in America campaigning for action on sea level rises which threaten their home); the group of homeless men and women whom Frank befriends during the second book; and of course Frank himself, who intimates on various occasions his acceptance (via his readings of Waldo Emerson) of the shortcomings of “the world they all lived in” while still believing that it is a world worth saving (Sixty 321). As such, the question remains how to save that world, a question invariably contingent on issues concerning the imagination. After being successfully elected President, Phil Chase (aided by Frank’s friend, Charlie Quibler) occupies large sections of the book, meditating on how to go about changing the structures of national and global governments to achieve ecological aims. Though Phil is essentially characterized as a can-do politician, the immensity of the task is not lost on him. Like Frank, he admits “it [is] hard to imagine how this would work” (181). The predominant attitude, Chase tells us, is one which asserts, “Nothing can change so buy things,” spawning a generation of idealists who “neither learned to do machine politics or dismantle the machine” (331). This “machine” is one dominated by the economic logic of capital, such that “no one was inclined to push for anything more radical” than “making money” (370). The option of imagining beyond capital is ultimately rejected. In both camps – searching for the scientific and political solutions – the capital investment “problem” is a recurrent concern (181, 229, 327) ending, ultimately, in resignation: “maybe we can’t afford to fight capital any more … right now we have capitalism so we have to use it” (347-8). This mixture of optimism and confusion, in Robinson’s own words, is the occupational hazard of “inventing [a sustainable permaculture] while we are in the midst of the emergency” (“In Conversation”). The capitalist “machine” is thus conceived, as it is in many other discourses, as the structural edifice, the confounding force of habitus, which repeatedly derails the efforts of the activist agent.

A second impact of such a beleaguering environment is its effect on planning. By the third book Frank is afflicted with a bout of disorganization and indecision following a head injury (Sixty 7, 79), forcing him eventually into the absurd position of devising an algorithm to decide moral issues (175). These problems extend beyond the personal, however; they also characterise the geo-engineering activities
that comprise much of Frank’s work at the NSF. After considering a number of options, Frank’s team begins to consider the dangers of the work they are doing. Contemplating the unintended consequences of acting without sufficient data, they realize they could be “exacerbating the very problem they were trying to solve” (19). Indeed, this is eventually the fate of the Russian-led project using lichens to accelerate (and increase capacity for) carbon sequestration in trees (221), a project that threatens to get out of control and kill off the tree-hosts, creating “feedback on feedback” as trees die, permafrost melts, and tonnes of greenhouse gases are released into the atmosphere (76-7). And this is all without mentioning the very serious considerations of inaction: actions bring with them disastrous worst-case scenarios and forbidding risks “until one compared [them] to the cost of not acting” (119). All combine to paint a portrait of mainstream scientific climate change activism as fumbling in the dark for solutions in the midst of an emerging global crisis on which there is very limited information.

Even Frank’s basic organizational strategies seem woefully inadequate. Frank repeatedly contemplates his “To Do list” (Fifty 23, 302, 322; Sixty 7, 16) which at first glance appears to be motivated by the anxiety that to study climate change is not enough:

[Frank] felt a surge of impatience […] he didn’t want to spend his extra year starting studies. He wanted to find where small applications of money and effort could trigger larger actions. He wanted to do things. If the weather was going to heat up, he wanted to cool it. If vice versa, then vice versa […] He wanted impossible things! Quickly he scribbled a list for their mutual inspection (Fifty 23).

Later on in the text, however, Frank’s list has spiraled out of control, manifesting the “impossible” ambition it first promised. In this sense, the list begins to approach a reflection of the absurdity inherent in one man writing up a “to do list” to save the world: “the list of things to do”, we are told, “looked like a document in another language” (Fifty 322). The text does not do this unconsciously, however, and a lot is made of Frank’s wariness of the orthodox peer review process prevalent in academic research as something that inhibits (or is explicitly not) direct action (181). This anxiety consistently informs Frank’s search for viable actions (176, 186, etc.). Conversely, talk of “adaptation” (269) is treated with contempt, as something that, alongside extended cogitation and research, really means to “do nothing” (209). From an early stage Franks looks to alternative sources other than mainstream political environmental action (which is, it should be stressed, vigorously championed (273ff)) to supplement his philosophy of action and repertoire of interventions. The writers Emerson and Henry David Thoreau play a large part, with frequent quotations from each, the former being attributed the idea that, “What
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happens beyond our senses we cannot know. All we can see indicates that everything is transitory” (Sixty 309).

Via such literary material Frank fosters not only his nascent anxieties about the limitations of scientific inquiry, but also draws energy and influence from political strategies and philosophies outside of the American political establishment, developing a contrasting and disruptive sub-plot to the dominant narrative of mainstream political action on climate change. These alternatives all possess a characteristic of ‘outsider’, or what is commonly referred to as “liminal”, positionalility. In his article on “The Uses and Meanings of Liminality,” Barfield Thomassen noted that, for Victor Turner, liminality

served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to understand the human reactions to liminal experiences: the way liminality shaped personality, the sudden foregrounding of agency, and the sometimes dramatic tying together of thought and experience (14).

This observation highlights a salient feature of the activist identity: a positionality (such as the one outlined in liminal theory) which foregrounds “agency” in relation to the wider and immovable structures of society as a whole. Turner himself noted, moreover, that “the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous” (81). This formulation is interesting, not only in its designation of liminal personae as “threshold people” (as a notion entirely befitting those who are actively trying to both dismantle the world as it is and to make it anew (Weber)) but also in its emphasis on liminality as a position that has the capacity to lever structural change.

Frank is simultaneously a fully-fledged and paid-up member of the political establishment and a “threshold” person. To name a few examples of the ways in which he exists as an outsider to normative frameworks, in the second book, Frank is essentially homeless (Fifty 34, 389), is “out there” (343), hangs around with homeless people, makes repeated attempts to avoid the surveillance attention he has inadvertently attracted (Fifty 335; Sixty 127), tries to get “off grid” (Fifty 501; Sixty 268), and experiments with frugal lifestylism (Fifty 30, 127, 238; Sixty 238). Conversely, within the boundaries of institutional scientific research there are moments when Frank’s work belies the characteristic of operating outside socially sanctioned parameters. There is much discussion, for example, of the extent to which the National Science Foundation will run into “political resistance” (Fifty 109, 232) from various other government departments (the FDA, EPA, etc.). The trilogy, however, makes no direct connection between the radical periphery and the moderate centre, barely ever mentioning grassroots activism (Fifty 113-4, esp. 252). Instead, it positions large-scale, well-funded, and government-sanctioned
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interventions as the only instrumental force in action on climate change.

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Michael Crichton’s *State of Fear* is itself an ‘activist’ novel, expressly concerned with countering (and correcting) what it sees as popular misconceptions about climate change and the risks behind allowing these misconceptions to justify geo-engineering projects. The novel was published along with an appendix, in which Crichton steps out of a literary register altogether to talk about “why politicized science is dangerous” (681). The activist and scientific morality in the novel is, broadly speaking, deontological. *State of Fear* displays less anxiety about theory as the ineffectual flip-side to action than the political problems associated with using environmental emergencies to circumvent democratic processes. Though *State of Fear* offers a very different world-view to that which informs Robinson’s trilogy, the texts share several similarities, most notably a representation of the “social life” of activism. This boils down to the idea that the result of acting in the “midst of an emergency” (to use Robinson’s phrase) causes personal problems for the activist. The “near hysterical preoccupation”, as Crichton characterizes climate change activism, is “at best a waste of resources and a crimp on the human spirit, and at worst an invitation to totalitarianism”. Though Crichton’s solution to this problem is to expunge politics from the realm of science (a solution that by his own broad-based definition of politics, as something chiefly concerned with “resolving incompatible goals”, is problematic to say the least) the tragic theme is as present here as it is for Robinson.

Crichton is eager to admit that all parties (notably, the interested parties from partisan politics and big business as well as the environmental movement) are “well intentioned”. Problems arise, however, when factors of pride take over; that is, as opposed to an impartial and disinterested analysis of the evidence at hand. Environmentalists, claims Crichton, are as (if not more) afflicted by an inability to admit their mistakes – or rather, to change policies and alter commitments based on new data – than any other agent. Decades of scientific advances affecting “the way we think about evolution and ecology”, Crichton suggests, “have hardly penetrated the thinking of environmental activists, which seems oddly fixed on the concepts and rhetoric of the 1970s”. Environmental activists are, in short, “ideologues” pursuing ends (in some cases unwittingly) simply due to the “corrosive influence of bias” and “systematic distortions of thought” (685).

What is dangerous about this, in Crichton’s view, is that, irrespective of intention, acting without up-to-date scientific knowledge and a sufficient degree of impartiality inevitably results in “unintended consequences”. Crichton paints a
picture of the scientific community as worryingly influenced by the shrieking and sometimes disingenuous rhetoric of activists, who use “claims of moral superiority […] to justify extreme actions” (686). It is a picture in the end of the tragic actor, noble in intention but fatally flawed in logic and application. “There is no difference”, Crichton concludes, “in outcomes between greed and incompetence”, combining tragedy’s two chief forms of hubris and demonstrating to great effect the law that that “the doer suffers”.

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The tragic theme plays a substantial part in the characterization of activists in both texts, though with considerably less favourable treatments being reserved for grassroots activists (as opposed to those from the world of business and the political and scientific mainstream). I will return to issues of mainstreaming in the following section; for now I wish only to focus on how, via the treatment in Science in the Capital of Frank’s disorganization and periodic estrangement from the political and scientific establishment, a tragic understanding of the activist emerges. Like Lukács’ “maintaining individual”, Frank is not a key player in the “social-historical collision” of climate change and human society. And whilst possessing some of the characteristics of a “hero”, Frank’s contributions are never commensurate with the global scale of the problem. He is, like Aeschylus’ tragic heroes, the “doer” that must “suffer”. The historical contemporaneity and accompanying urgency of climate change make his story one written in the “midst of an emergency”. Frank’s numerous problems testify to this: he is a well-intentioned individual caught in a crisis that threatens to crush him. Though he ultimately avoids personal annihilation, his story does not unambiguously depict (as Robinson intended) a “positive vision of what could happen”; instead, Frank’s story emphasizes the tragic dimension of the “social life” of activism. The ‘social life’ of activism (or rather, of climate change discourse) is one of beleaguered, confused, and exhausted individuals.

2. The “structure-agency dilemma”

State of Fear’s central protagonist, Peter Evans, is used repeatedly as a foil for teasing out a case against the dangers of hasty interventions. Evans’ adversary in this regard is invariably John Kenner (the perfect “scientist”, pragmatic and faultlessly consistent in his lifestyle). There are a number of conversations (usually taking place on planes (222, 499, etc.)) when Evans’s received and unscrutinized climate change “ideology” is revealed as such. Evans is the classic environmental straw man, systematically (though often selectively) taken apart by the robust cynicism and rationalism of Kenner and other similarly ‘well-informed’ colleagues. Despite Evans’ centrality in this regard, the most revealing episode concerning the ‘structure-agency dilemma’
comes towards the end of the book (567 ff) when Evans’s re-education is effectively complete. At this juncture it is the stereotypically bleeding heart liberal duo of Ted Bradley and Ann Garner who fulfill the straw man role. Half way through this conversation, which has consisted of Ann blundering her way through the various traps set up by Kenner to reveal her fundamental ignorance regarding ecological morals and interventions, Sarah Jones (the beautiful assistant of the presumed-dead millionaire philanthropist, George Morton) suggests by way of explanation to Kenner, “‘Her intentions are good’ but ‘her information is bad.’” Kenner responds with, “‘A prescription for disaster’” (574).

For Kenner the notion that “caring” is informing Ann’s environmental views is further cause for indignation: “‘Caring is irrelevant. Desire to do good is irrelevant. All that counts is knowledge and results. She doesn’t have the knowledge – and, worse, she doesn’t know it.’” Kenner’s indignation is rooted in the following conviction: to think that “managing the environment” (575) is possible without disastrous consequences is absurd. Whilst there may be some truth in this claim, its application is suspect, proving the basis for the delegitimization of the entire environmental movement. The conversation between Kenner and Ann functions as a highly selective but no less extensive catalogue of interventions that, though motivated by “good intentions”, have resulted in catastrophe. In one case we are given a potted history of Yellowstone National Park, which was set aside in 1872 as a conservation area due largely to the mobilization efforts of environmental activists. The story is one of wildly fluctuating animal populations, crude culling methods, and poor forest management that has led to wildfires. Yellowstone, according to Kenner, was a

“disaster […] caused by environmentalists charged with protecting the wilderness, who made one dreadful mistake after another – and, along the way, proved how little they understood the environment they intended to protect” (578).

Kenner’s stance is one of an aggressively asserted precaution. As he says towards the end of the section, “‘The real question with any environmental action is do the benefits outweigh the harm? Because there is always harm’” (581). Interventions of the kind demanded by an unstable and threatening climate are framed as actions ruled by the law of unintended consequences. No assurance can be given that they will not simply cause more damage. Those who engage in them are simply dishonest, or at best either irresponsible or deluded:

“Environmentalists screamed bloody murder about cost-benefit requirements and they’re still screaming. They don’t want people to know how much their forays into regulation actually cost society and the world” (581).
Action and intervention (especially of the large-scale geo-engineering variety), from this point of view, is always problematic. In adopting this stance, Kenner evinces a very particular moral code, that of the “doer suffers”. The environmental (and social) structures which one must understand in order to effectively change things (whilst being sure that “benefits outweigh the harm”), are simply too large for the activist agent. The activist is structurally, as well as ideologically, doomed from the outset.

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*Science in the Capital*, on the other hand, is exemplary of a belief in the popular understanding of climate change as both anthropogenic and severe enough to demand immediate and drastic multilateral intervention. Frank Vanderwal, like his colleagues and friends who work at the NSF, is in a very straightforward sense an ‘activist’ (his role is both definitively a ‘vocation’ and ‘high-risk’), though for the most part in mainstream and government funded-capacities only. In latter two parts of *Science in the Capital*, there is much emphasis on the NSF’s (and other institutions’) attempts to execute direct interventions to avert or mitigate the undesirable effects of climate change. As I have mentioned, however, Frank often feels a deep frustration with his work, a frustration that neatly recapitulates the classic dynamic of the ‘structure-agency dilemma’. When offered a job in the new administration by his NSF boss, Diane, Frank declines, saying, “I prefer doing things to advising people” (*Sixty* 129-30). It is an attitude that pervades much of the trilogy. Research at the NSF is guided by a search for the “kind of policies [to avert and/or mitigate climate change] and activities [which] might achieve it” (15) but plagued by the notion that this work is ultimately valueless because of an “absence of concrete results” (191).

The creative focus of the trilogy, however, strays frequently outside the scientific and political mainstream. Frank repeatedly refers to the work of Emerson and Thoreau, the former, we are told, having thought that “Thoreau had disappeared off into the woods and failed to live up to his promise” (403-4). The Dalai Lama too makes an appearance, emphasising “doing” over simply thinking and feeling: “Compassion is not just a feeling, you have to act” (311). It is interesting to note that Frank is presented as most empowered when working outside of the mainstream; whether helping his girlfriend evade detection, living in a tree house, meditating on the extraordinary lives of Emerson and Thoreau, this is where most of the imaginative energy is invested in the trilogy. What is strange about this emphasis on the subversive, solitary, and liminal operation of Frank as an individual is how out of key this message is with not only the current thinking within social movement theory, but also the resolution provided by the trilogy itself. In interviews Robinson has
repeatedly framed the need for, and the inevitability of, a broad-based response to the effects of climate change. In writing *Science in the Capital*, for example, Robinson claimed he “was deliberately saying, OK, let’s make this a utopian novel in the end, and say that climate change is basically forcing utopia because it’s either utopia or catastrophe” (“Robinson Saves Earth”). From the outset the action of the trilogy was one conceived in the broadest structural terms: not only as one which must take place within the political establishment, but as one forced by a very real prospect of global catastrophe.

The plot of *Science in the Capital* reflects this confining, but opportunity “conferring”, nature of natural limits and ‘structures’ brought into focus by ecological crises such as climate change. The trilogy’s final part is dominated by the language of necessity: “at this point there was no other option” but to act (4); “no choice but to proceed” (18); and to “do the necessary” (26), because “there was never going to be a too late” (330). Indeed, Phil Chase’s presidency is made possible by several extreme weather events which sufficiently mobilize the American people to vote in a president committed to implementing far-reaching – or “really robust” – ecological interventions (31). This is, furthermore, the moment when *Science in the Capital* most resembles the science fiction Robinson is famously known for writing, not in the sense of its sensational depiction of abrupt climate change, but in the otherworldly nature of the politics underpinning Phil Chase and his administration. A direct line is drawn, for instance, between the mechanisms of global capitalism and the effects of climate change. “The climate change and environmental collapse”, claims Phil, “are the start of us hitting the limits…and yet capitalism continues to vampire around the globe” (350-1, emphasis added). Whether during real-time dialogue or in excerpts from his blog, “Cut to the Chase”, Phil’s character is afforded a significant amount of time to reflect on (and lecture the various other characters concerning) the social and ecological perniciousness of capitalism. His concerns may be to a certain extent ‘tongue in cheek’, or at least deliberate fantasy, but they are also given some degree of credibility because of the “social-historical collision” that is climate change.

As previously mentioned, however, the actual mechanisms and bases of these changes remain sketchy, even to the point of appearing implausible and miraculous. For example, we are told that the US government was able to implement a large-scale geo-engineering project on Chinese soil, though the terms in which this project is described lack any real texture:

Big news had arrived from China: there had been some kind of crisis declared, normal laws and all the normal activities had been suspended. The American nuclear submarine fleet had turned up en masse in Chinese harbors, along with several aircraft carriers; but this was by Chinese invitation, apparently, and the
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fleets had immediately plugged into the grid and taken over generating electricity for essential services in certain; the rest of the country’s grid had been shut down (462).

This event – which was ostensibly the raison d’etre of the trilogy – is presented as an afterthought, a distant event in which the main characters play almost no part. It feels jarring, an archetypal deus ex machina. This is not least because, as already suggested, the imaginative energies in the trilogy are focused squarely on individuals like Frank and Charlie. The large historical events that go on in the background are given comparatively little or no development. Here we are only told that “some kind of crisis” had been declared, and that what amounts to American martial control of China (a long-time political and economic adversary of the U.S.) is implemented “by Chinese invitation”. Far from science fiction, in fact, this is political fantasy of the highest choir.

Conclusion: Literary depictions and their sociological influences

Where do these texts fit in the models of social movements offered by sociologists? Science in the Capital does, ultimately, offer an activist vision that is consistent with the kind of “socio-ecological agency” and collaboration described by David Manuel-Navarrete and Christine Buzinde. Robinson’s vision is also consistent with a wholehearted endorsement of studies (such as Marco Giugni, Amenta, Soule and Olzak, et al.) that stress the need for the ultimate dependence of grass-roots activism on mainstream politics and broad-based popular support. Group dynamics are championed repeatedly (Sixty 335), and an understanding of the Government as “the COMMONS”, or as, essentially, “the power to do things” (352) is prominent. Yet, the trilogy’s key political passages are narrated with the minimum of detail: we are told about these processes rather than shown how they were achieved. The result is not edifying, but is rather merely a recapitulation of what we already well know: that what we need is an extraordinary and unprecedented international collaborative effort to curb the disastrous effects of climate change. Statements like “everyone had to agree on the need to act or it wouldn’t work for any of them” (369), which masquerade as a resolution, merely return us to square one of the climate change conundrum. In Robinson’s own words, this was a chance to write out a solution “as a narrative or a scenario so that you can kind of envision it and begin to believe in its possibility”. The result of his efforts was unfortunately to emphasize that such a solution still remains well beyond (and definitively so) the horizons of political imagination.

The reception of Robinson’s work has tended to foreground the author’s science fiction pedigree, championing the utopian function of the narrative, or, in other words, the “immense ideological effort that is needed to create that world within the
text” (Johns-Putra 19). This view challenges the mimetic value of literature that I am arguing for here. According to Adeline Johns-Putra, a work of literature’s “environmental referentiality” is not always the most relevant test of a text’s success, nor is it necessarily the business of literary criticism to pass judgment on whether such success has been achieved” (21). The alternative, in Johns-Putra’s view, is to foreground the capacity of ‘SF’ to bring about change through imaginative investment. For Johns-Putra, Robinson provides a “sophisticated revision of generic habit and habitat, a reimagining of the world-building impulse that characterizes science fiction” (16). Daniel Cho is similarly upbeat, noting not only Science in the Capital’s utopian impulse, but naming it: “The role of Utopia in these novels is played by something Robinson calls permaculture, ‘a culture that can be sustained permanently’ (Sixty 367)” (Cho 24). For Cho, climate change becomes an ironically positive force, a natural limit which, in the actions that it elicits from us, “estranges the postapocalypse itself, inviting us to see, not what is ended, but what is made possible in it” (26).

Whilst I sympathize with the broad thrust of this utopian impulse, I object on two points: first, on the level that Robinson actually provides a “sophisticated revision of generic habit and habitat” at all (as Cho himself states, the figure around which this new politics or “permaculture” is orientated “never becomes clear as Robinson never fully fleshes it out” (24)); and second, on the level of dismissing mimesis as a vital contributor to a “world-building” project. To ignore the particularities of the struggle toward a Utopia is to leave that vision in limbo, in danger of an unfulfilled latency. A consideration of this very contradiction can be found in Fredric Jameson’s Archaeologies of the Future: whilst Utopian writing usefully reminds us that there are other options available to us, suggests Jameson, it offers “nothing like an account of agency, nor…a coherent historical and practical-political picture of transition” (232), precisely what Robinson promised he would give us.

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State of Fear, far from framing an alternative political future, is concerned entirely with discrediting and problematizing the ground on which existing interventions exist or might exist. The conventional environmental stance on measures like Kyoto are dismissed out-of-hand (563-4), and popular concern about the consequences of global warming (which studies show is indispensable to effect any real change) are discredited if and when they are offered by individuals with no “legal” or “scientific training” (563). Above all, it is a politics fundamentally motivated by a suspicion of any type of moral intervention, rejected from the outset not only because all interventions are definitively risky, but because there is a problem, Kenner tells us,
“with other people deciding what is in my best interest when they don’t live where I do, when they don’t know the local conditions or the local problems I face, when they don’t even live in the same country as I do, but they still feel – in some far off Western city, at a desk in some glass skyscraper in Brussels or Berlin or New York – they still feel they know the solution to all my problems and how I should live my life” (595).

In the novel’s final chapter (titled, in a bitterly ironic fashion, “Resolution”), the environmental activists’ plan is successfully derailed by Kenner and his entourage. Many of the activists in this scene are met with gruesome ends in a way that develops pointedly from Crichton’s personal resentment for anyone who identifies with the environmental grassroots movement (633-4). The ‘resolution’ (if any) in the end is that the scientific process currently in existence needs to be radically re-centered. The emergencies claimed by the activist community simply are not happening (they are, in actual fact, being faked to foster popular opinion), thus any action (if at all) must be grounded rigorously in the scientific discourse presented by Crichton largely through footnotes within the novel itself: Kenner, Bradley comments at one point “is real big on references” (569). This process, however, is nothing if not problematic, and will likely not proceed anyway. Humans, we are told, are “nasty little apes” that can do “nothing except run and hide … they can’t control the climate” (709, emphasis added). State of Fear is, in short, a flat out denial of the possibilities for socio-ecological agency and a distinctly reactionary narrative that tells us change is impossible.

It is surprising, perhaps, that on this basis I would argue for renewed consideration of the value of State of Fear. The novel has been largely ignored in academic circles, referred to only in asides as an example of a political outlier, or a specimen of an incomprehensible right-wing environmental skepticism. That it is in fact both of these things does not detract from the fact that State of Fear also provides an interesting and useful critical perspective. David Hecht’s mention of it in an article about anti-Carson rhetoric (154) is instructive in this regard. To not know and confront the dangers of the environmental movement would be a squandered opportunity to address the dysfunctional elements of environmental activism’s ‘social life’; that is, to uncover the reasons for the limited progress the movement has made in recent decades.

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Science in the Capital and State of Fear both depict environmental activism in some state of disarray. Neither text underplays, however, the complexity of the situation. Despite their respective populist limitations, both texts offer a useful counterpart to the sociological literature considered at the beginning of this paper and, moreover, the cultural-turn in social movement theory and sociology observed elsewhere in the
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field (Mohr). They show, as well, a sustained interest in “high-cost” activism as a “vocation” (Weber and McAdam), reflect the very real problems within the discourse, the scale of the crisis, and a vindication of the long-known lessons from social movement theory that movements must be well organized, target systemic weaknesses, and work closely with public opinion and the political mainstream if they are to have any hope of success.

To do this both texts draw on the tragic mode and issues surrounding the ‘structure-agency dilemma’ (Marx, Bourdieu, Giddens, etc.), strategies which they use to great effect to flesh out the individual experience of the environmental activist and the difficulties in achieving a successful model of “socio-ecological agency” (Manuel-Navarrete and Buzinde). The differences between the two texts are, ultimately, reducible to their politics – whereas *Science in the Capital* sets out to represent the activist in a positive light (albeit faced with a huge and complicated task), *State of Fear* actively seeks to highlight these problems in an effort to discredit their practical and political grounding.

Though these texts do not offer much beyond a reminder of the problems faced by the environmental activist in contemporary struggles, I wish to emphasize that this is not a wholly negative observation. In drawing out an account of the need for more-informed accounts of environmental struggles – ones which answer directly to Nixon’s plea for a sea-change in the way we conceive of these struggles as “incremental and accretive” in their representation of the environmental and social violences which they seek to mitigate – we move ever closer to a better-functioning and historically-situated activism.
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Works Cited


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