

BOOK REVIEWS

The climate of history in a planetary age, by D. Chakrabarty, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2021, 296 pp., \$25.00 (Paper), ISBN 9780226732862 and \$95.00 (Sri Lanka Cloth) ISBN 9780226100500

Dipesh Chakrabarty is a highly distinguished historian based at the University of Chicago. Perhaps best known to human geographers for his writings about post-colonialism (such as the book *Provincialising Europe* (2000)), in the last ten years or so he's been drawn to the insights of geoscientists about the Anthropocene. In *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, Chakrabarty brings together a set of already published articles and chapters. Some have been widely read within the academy, notably his 2009 *Critical Inquiry* essay entitled 'The Climate of History: Four Theses'. Somewhat reworked as a set by Chakrabarty, the result is an erudite, lucid, cohesive, multi-disciplinary and highly stimulating contribution to our understanding of what our 'planetary age' means for our most elemental categories of thought. By 'our', I refer to us in 'the West' who've sought to spread our taken-for-granted norms and institutions worldwide since the European powers colonised Africa, the Americas and SE Asia. Chakrabarty shows readers that the jaw dropping impacts of modern humans on the Earth System are now rebounding on the worldview that, in the West, has underpinned environmental practices that are no longer tenable (and which affect pretty much all humans now and in the future). The cumulative effect of these practices, particularly during 'The Great Acceleration' that's occurred since 1945, calls into question our accepted notions of progress, human freedom, responsibility, rights and much more besides. For Chakrabarty, replacing these notions will be essential if new practices are to emerge. These new practices will need to be far less anthropocentric.

The book comprises eight chapters, bookended by an introduction and post-script and followed by a transcribed discussion between the author and Bruno Latour. Chakrabarty effortlessly combines insights from across the disciplines. He engages the work of luminaries ranging from Paul Crutzen to Immanuel Kant, Hannah Arendt to Jason Moore, Rabindranath Tagore to James Hansen, and Carl Schmitt to Timothy Lenton. Though a historian, Chakrabarty's principal concern is ontology and how the epochal insights issuing from geoscience (specifically, stratigraphy and Earth System Science) can change the self-understanding of self-styled 'moderns' in the US and beyond. In particular, what counts as 'politics', as well as its *raison d'être*, is his concern: '... the planetary environmental crisis', he says, 'calls on us to extend ideas of politics and justice to the nonhuman, including both the living and the nonliving. The more this realisation sinks in, the more we realise how irrevocably humanocentric all our political institutions and concepts are'. In short, while authored by a historian only secondarily is this a book about a new way of doing history in 'the planetary age'.

Part one (comprising the first two chapters) shows how the emergent Anthropocene undoes a whole set of hitherto seemingly solid distinctions e.g. between human history and planetary history. Chapter three, though, introduces a distinction that the author argues is a pivotal one: that between globe and planet. The first has been the focus of economic historians, economists and others for decades and encompasses human affairs near and far. The latter is the focus of geoscientists of various stripes and encompasses humans within a large and immensely long story of Earth System change. Chakrabarty criticises the tendency to elide the two:

Faced with the radical otherness of the planet, however, a deeply phenomenological urge on the part of many scientists is to recoil back into the human-historical time of the present and address the planet as a matter of profound human concern—as a critical question of human futures and as an entity to be governed by humans (p. 86).

He goes on:

Any theory of politics adequate to the planetary crisis humans face today would have to begin from the same old premise of securing human life but now ground itself in a new philosophical anthropology, that is, in a new understanding of the changing place of humans in the web of life and in the connected but different histories of the globe and the planet (p. 101).

The rest of part II shows how the West's notions of politics, progress, time and so on were paradoxically vouchsafed by a planetary environment whose importance for human affairs was also routinely denied.

Part III is called 'Facing the planetary', a title that suggests Chakrabarty will propose new concepts, and arguments for, a different kind of politics. However, chapter seven is a protracted caution against the globe-planet elision discussed earlier:

... so long as we think of the name and the concept of the Anthropocene as a measure—and a critique—of the impact humans have had on the geobiology of the planet, we cannot escape the moral pull of world history, for questions of empires, colonies, institutions, classes, nations, special-interest lobbies—in a word, the world system created by European empires and capitalism—are then never far from our concerns (p.167).

Chapter eight then asks

What would be our ethical-spiritual relationship to the planet—neither an 'in itself nor "for us"'—that refuses to grant us the usual assurance of an imagined relationship of mutuality with the Earth that, while itself older than modernity, has also accompanied our sense of being modern? (p. 191).

For Chakrabarty an awareness of 'habitability' and a rediscovery of wonderment and reverence are all important. The closing conversation with Latour – who is amply referenced in the book – then replays and elaborates certain of the book's themes. Thirty pages of endnotes and a bibliography then close out the book.

Chakrabarty is immensely learned, yet he wears it lightly: his writer's voice is appealingly modest. I found *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* to be highly engaging and very readable. And yet, having digested all two hundred and seventy four of this book's scholarly pages, I'm left wondering what I have learnt relative to existing works that broadly cover the same ground— works by the likes of Latour, Isabel Stengers, William Connolly, Jane Bennett, Philippe Descola, Tim Morton and Clive Hamilton, thinkers that Chakrabarty quotes approvingly. While the author is adept at posing big questions, he seems reticent to venture a coherent alternative worldview in the way that Latour, for instance, has done in *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence* (2018). This is odd given how often the word 'crisis' is used by Chakrabarty to describe our planetary condition. Surely the urgency of our situation calls for a new metaphysics that's actionable? At present – and to follow Chakrabarty's logic – fast-emerging plans to geoengineer the planet through a diverse suite of 'negative emissions technologies' treat the Earth like a globe, doubling down on what Latour called 'the modern constitution' in his classic book *We Have Never Been Modern* (1995). How can this be avoided?

Here Chakrabarty's historical sensibilities would have come in handy. As all card-carrying Marxists know, to be effective critique needs to be immanent not external to its object. While

Chakrabarty rightly argues that dismantling capitalism is necessary but insufficient for living well in ‘a planetary age’, the highly abstract nature of his book’s argument leaves the reader clueless as to how a ‘new philosophical anthropology’ could be instituted. Even speculative works like Mann and Wainwright’s (2018) *Climate Leviathan* offer a more granular sense of how a climate-changed planet will affect human affairs. And, given his focus on political metaphysics, political philosophers would derive far more from a book like Kelly’s (2019) *Politics and the Anthropocene* than *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. What does it tell us that Chakrabarty, Morton, Connolly and others have largely favoured a highly philosophical register when discussing insistently practical, empirical problems of planetary transformation?

Let me turn finally to geography, since I’ve said almost nothing about the subject so far. In large part, this book is about the collapse of spatial (and temporal) scale, and what it betokens for people and planet. And yet the geography is anaemic in a number of ways. First, Chakrabarty’s notion of ‘the globe’ is oddly ahistorical. One would never know that there have been several ways, even in ‘the West’, that the world beyond our doorstep has been imagined to exist (I’m thinking of some of the late Denis Cosgrove’s works in saying this). And one might want to know how certain dominant imaginative conceptions of the globe have come to exist (cf. Selcer’s (2018) fine analysis of ‘global environmental thinking’ after WW2). Second, and relatedly, Chakrabarty’s notion of ‘the planetary’ is similarly devoid of content (it seems to mean ‘the non-human’ at the largest imaginable scales). Compare this with Latour and Lenton’s (2019) careful analysis of Lovelock and Margulis’s often misunderstood notion of Gaia (which Chakrabarty himself cites). This analysis alerts to the fact that there’s more than one way to think about the planetary, with significant implications for how we organise our human affairs moving forward.

Taking these two problems together, Chakrabarty might usefully have asked what sort of space-time is emerging in the Anthropocene. If Doreen Massey were still alive, I wonder how she might conceive the relationship between the political and the new temporalities and spatialities that compete and converge in ‘the planetary age’. Chakrabarty would have benefitted from a close engagement with her work, and also that of many geographers writing about scale and relationality this last quarter century. Any new metaphysics has to reckon with time, space and being equally, but Chakrabarty gives his readers precious little food for thought in all three domains.

In sum, this is a book that feels ten years too late. While beautifully written, it does little to advance thought or practice relating to the most profound issues facing humans present and future. Chakrabarty is a humanities scholar, and humanists value slow scholarship that takes stock of knowledge and does not rush to judgement. However, perhaps humanists need to recognise that the Anthropocene is turning fields like professional history and philosophy into ‘crisis disciplines’ (cf. Soule, 1985). These fields may need to now dirty their hands in the worlds of government and public discourse more than heretofore, and seek to alter the terms of debate about ‘the human planet’. Some practitioners are moving decisively in this direction, notably those involved in the new UNESCO-sponsored BRIDGES research consortium (see *Introducing the BRIDGES UNESCO MOST Sustainability Science Coalition* (15 min) - YouTube).

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14702541.2021.1945194>