



Anthropocene: A critical engagement

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Abstract

The world is facing an unprecedented change in the climatic conditions. Many scholars, scientists, and historians have agreed to name this period the 'Anthropocene'¹. Social-Science Academia has started engaging with the concepts in the past few decades to understand the impact of such weather changes and provide normative understanding along with a practical policy framework. 'Anthropocene' has become a dominant framework in understanding and theorising climate-induced change in order to sensitise everyone towards such change. However, its critics have pointed out the inability of the concept to bring any practical changes on the one hand and the production of jargonised language on the other hand. This paper is an effort to understand the theorisation of the term by focusing on Dipesh Chakrabarty's book "The Climate of History in a Planetary Age" and other texts. We argue that rather than an overarching theoretical spectacle, one must situate the debate in the local context and provide alternatives based on contextual understanding, not grand theorisation.

Keywords: Anthropocene, climate-change, academics

Introduction

In the wake of the last century's cataclysmic climatic events throughout the planet, many academic studies have tried to make sense of the political attitudes underlying the crisis. However, many of these studies occur in isolated 'containers' of academic disciplines and methodological approaches, with little interaction between them. Dipesh Chakrabarty's book, "The Climate of History in the Planetary Age", is an impressive attempt to pool these pieces of literature together while adopting a multidisciplinary approach. It will help to deal with the complex problem of the climate crisis to aid a more comprehensive understanding.

In "The Climate of History," Chakrabarty asks humanists to expand their methodologies and timelines in response to the realisation that anthropogenic climate change has ended the historical Distinction between human history and natural history. Chakrabarty has made an effort to underline the previous literature and its inefficiency to come out of the garb of Enlightenment thinking of giving centrality to the Human Species. For him, the present climate crisis is also the crisis of ideology/ theories that are incapable of comprehending, predicting, and dealing with climatic catastrophes caused by anthropogenic activities. This can be seen in our failure to deal with the challenges posed by global warming. He brings forth various scientific convictions and informs the need to prioritise the vocabulary of 'Anthropocene' to understand the present crisis. Chakrabarty further proposes to focus on 'Deep histories' to unfurl how species coexist.

An engagement with Dipesh Chakrabarty

Chakrabarty stumbled upon the realisation that the concept of the globe in the word globalisation was not the same as the concept of the globe in the expression global warming and eventually came to develop it as globe/planet distinction. There is a departure from various approaches such as Post-colonial, Marxist, liberal etc., which for Chakrabarty, are proved to be insufficient in understanding

the question of planetary crisis. Like Tomas Kuhn, Chakrabarty is hinting toward a need for a 'Paradigm Shift'. A shift that accounts for the failure of present theories in order to create a new set of theories that can reasonably explain the phenomenon. Chakrabarty put forth the idea of Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, Dona Harraway, and Jane Bennett to the extent of 'political' beyond human. Chakrabarty often refers to it as a mere normative idea for now, which requires rigorous theoretical and practical understanding. For Chakrabarty,

"this means telling stories of human wrt empire of colonial, racial, and gendered oppressions in tandem with the larger story of how a particular biological species, Homo sapien, its technosphere came to dominate".

Making fundamental assumptions about the Science of Climate Change, Chakrabarty relied on IPCC reports, the Stern Review on Economics of Climate Change, Peer-Reviewed Scientific Journals, and various authoritative institutes of climatology. In 2009, Chakrabarty presented an article, namely "The Climate of History: Four Theses," and extended all those theses in this work that came in the form of a book in 2021. The first thesis is "Anthropogenic Explanations of Climate Change Spell the Collapse of the Humanist Distinction between Natural History and Human History". To reach there, Chakrabarty focuses on, Historical making of the discipline of history. Wherein famous historians put forth the idea of human history as a history that is something radically different from nature. To make the occurrence of a historical phenomenon intelligible, a historian will frequently offer a "genetic explanation" aimed at exhibiting the principal stages in a sequence of events that led up to the given phenomenon (Hempel,1962). Chakrabarty, ask us to focus on 'deep history' as a genetic explanation to illustrate the interconnected whole of the Ecological system.

The history of "man's relationship to the environment" was seen as "almost timeless", hence not noteworthy. He broadly focuses on the Distinction made between biological and geological agents, which has been erased for Chakrabarty

and many climatologists due to massive anthropological interventions in the biosphere. He deals with the question of scale (quantifiable data). He claims that - the human footprint has become much more prominent since the industrial revolution and has gained significant resilience in the second half of the twentieth century. In line with this argument, he presents his second thesis, i.e., "The Idea of Anthropocene, the New Geological Epoch When Humans Exist as a Geological Force, Severely Qualifies Humanist Histories of Modernity/Globalisation". He put forth various scientific and geological data that are evident in proving the new planetary Age with a new name - Anthropocene and asked multiple disciples to accept and ¹ popularise this term to unfold the gravity of Anthropogenic changes that are threatening life on the planet.

Chakraborty shows scepticism about techno-fixes which are fundamentally intertwined with modern capitalism and technology, and their inability to solve the problem of the climate crisis. Chakraborty reiterates the belief of Peter Haff that the human population is now dependent on the existence of the "technosphere" in that technology has become an indispensable condition for biological living. For Chakraborty, Technosphere also has its agency, irrespective of human will. This agency has made human civilisation cross the threshold of the "Holocene" and enter into the "Anthropocene", an age marked by a significant climate catastrophe. Chakraborty explains how most freedom is energy-centric and based on fossil fuels. 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 Chakraborty, replacing these anthropocentric notions will be essential if new practices are to emerge. In thesis three, Chakraborty claims, *"The geological hypothesis regarding the Anthropocene requires us to put Global histories of capital in conversation with species history of humans"*.

To explain that, he focuses on -the human history of domination over other species. He calls for relating it to "deep histories" rather than only focusing on the register of "recorded histories" and to look forward to unpacking retrospective guilts in order to understand the stakes in prospective guilt. In the final and fourth thesis, he says, "The crosshatching of ² species history and the history of capital is a process of probing the limits of historical understanding". Chakraborty rightly argues that dismantling capitalism is necessary but insufficient for living well in a planetary age'. Borrowing Karl Jasper's 'epochal consciousness', he calls to rethink the interest in our collective future. He critically examines Bruno Latour's idea of 'the parliament of things' as a far cry. Drawing on Adorno's work, Chakraborty provides his concept of "negative universal history" that calls for a Global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, unlike Hegelian universality, which can't subsume particularity. His selection and rejection of various theories develop a normative framework to create a more profound understanding rather than finding practical solutions for now.

In "Conjoined Histories," he put out some initial thoughts about why the few centuries-old stories of capitalism did not give us enough of an intellectual grip on the problems of human history that anthropogenic climate change revealed. He builds up the case to understand the globe/planet

distinction by referring to the ideas of Heidegger (an effort to philosophise Earth), Gadamer (taking forth Heideggerian understanding), Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis', Gayatri Spivak (invocation of planetary), Hannah Ardent (Earth annihilation), Hans Joachim Schellnhuber (Physicist research on climate impact), Felix Guattari (Three Ecologies-focus on the health of the planet) etc. He opined that the three categories of divided histories ^[1] must be understood together. Chakraborty argues that whereas the "globe" is an anthropocentric construction, the "planet" is an Earth-centric realisation as it decentres humans. He analysed the theory of 'Ecological Rift' and critically examined the work of John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, and concluded that "- The lurch into the Anthropocene has also been globally the story of some long-anticipated social justice, at least in the sphere of consumption".

The difficulty of being modern,' Chakraborty explores the question of why modern ideas ^[2] of freedom, whether projected for individuals, the nation, or for humanity in general, retain their attraction even after various critics of modernity and modernisation have justifiably challenged many of the assumptions underlying them. The focus on works of Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Deborah Danowski, Jane Bennett, etc., unfold the posthumanism rubric and bring forth the need for 'thick descriptions' within the framework of 'deep histories'. In "Planetary Aspirations: Reading a Suicide in India," Chakraborty reworked various ideas of Carl Sagan (species gesture), Martha Nussbaum (Stigmatisation and emotions of disgust), Sundar Sarukkai (Phenomenology of the Dalit body), Dumont (Caste analysis), Gopal Guru (experience of being daily), Gyan Prakash (Untouchable bonded labourers), Frantz Fanon (Blackness-Psychoanalysis) etc. He read the history of stigma and upper-caste disgust surrounding "the Dalit body" as pointing to certain limits to how the human body is imagined in the reigning conceptions of the political.

Kant's 1786 essay "Speculative Beginning of Human History" is, in an anthropogenic critique, i.e. trying to show how the Distinction fundamental to modernity, made by the great philosopher, between the moral and animal lives of humans, has come undone in the present crisis of the biosphere (Chakraborty, 2021). In the final section of the book "Facing the Planetary," he pays homage to the political theorist William Connolly's book by the same name. This section proposes new concepts and arguments for a different kind of politics. 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 (Castree, 2021). In the postscript to the book, which is a conversation between Bruno Latour and Chakraborty, he says that the journey of the global Age began from the 15th century onward.

In contrast, the planetary era began at the dawn of the 20th century. Drawing upon Heidegger and Earth-system scientists, Chakraborty argues that whereas the "globe" is an anthropocentric construction, the "planet" is an Earth-centric realisation as it decentres humans. Hence, the 'deep histories' of the planet are crucial to unfolding the collapse between time's geological and human scales.

A critical outlook

Chakraborty uses a normative philosophical approach to make his argument and presents himself as a humanist thinker. Theoretical Abstractions are backed with factual data based on multidisciplinary understanding is central to Chakraborty's work. His arguments are primarily deduced from secondary literature of various disciplines and schools of thought, emphasising the need to theorise Anthropocene. However, the book does not reflect on the contextual problems and gives a meta-theorisation.

While beautifully written, this book does little to advance any practical solutions relating to the most profound climate change issues facing humans present and future. While the author is adept at posing big questions, he seems reticent to venture into a coherent alternative worldview. Chakraborty himself asserts that his task is to theorise and historicism the present crisis rather than giving any ready-made solution to solve it. This is odd, given how often Chakraborty uses the word 'crisis' to describe our planetary condition. Indeed the urgency of our situation calls for a new metaphysics that's actionable. The central argument is to see oneself from the prospect of 'Planetary' and 'Global' at once and unfold the Anthropocene crisis. He engages with the work of luminaries ranging from Paul Crutzen to Immanuel Kant, Hannah Arendt to Jason Moore, Rabindranath Tagore to James Hansen, Carl Schmitt to Timothy Lenton, and so forth. Still, He doesn't produce anything new to create a new philosophy required to understand and act in Anthropocene. The book strongly critiques any partisan view on the problems of climate change and calls for a "new acceptance of universals" to face what political philosopher Hannah Arendt would have called the human condition today.

References

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6. Three histories-the histories of the earth system, the history of life including that of human evolution on the planet, the recent history of industrial civilisation.
7. Chakraborty in "Provincializing Europe" proposes that every case of transition to capitalism is a case of translation of existing worlds and their thought categories into categories and self-understanding of capitalist modernity Chakraborty, 2000.