A Difficult Thought for Us to Stay With

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Chakrabarty's exquisite and challenging book takes readers on what can feel like a paralyzingly difficult journey. And yet as a guide Chakrabarty models such humanity—a word I use with greater hesitation than I would have before reading his book—that he makes the journey almost bearable. As a humanist concerned about rights and justice, he feels as though he has "fallen" into deep history, in facing the "shock of recognition of the otherness of the planet" (15). This confession epitomizes his quality as a guide who is trustworthy precisely because he embodies the dispositions he describes at the end of the book and seeks to draw out in readers: reverence, courage, and, perhaps especially, fear. I raise two sets of questions that his book prompted: the first about moral and political judgment in light of the planet's indifference to humanity and the second about the dialogue with critiques of imperial capitalism woven throughout it.

Much of the book seems to resist the impulse to subject climate change to moral and political judgment. This may be a perverse way of putting the point, since it is evident, especially in the final pages, that it was written in service or in search of a new moral and political thought that is attuned as no existing moral and political thought is to the predicament of environmental catastrophe. Chakrabarty concludes that "the political eventually will have to be refounded on a new philosophical understanding of the human condition" (196). So clearly he is far from declining moral and political judgment.

And yet most public discussions of climate change are, not surprisingly, efforts to make the incomprehensible magnitude of human effects on the planet somehow intelligible, to help people grasp the crisis so that they are moved to act to address it. But while Chakrabarty recognizes that this is an understandable response to our situation, he urges us to resist this reflexive move to make the planet somehow tractable to human reason and moral judgment. That is how I read his repeated stress on the planet's profound indifference to human existence. This in itself is not an altogether unfamiliar claim, but the book shows how difficult a thought it is for us to stay with. Faced with the otherness of the planet, there is "a deeply phenomenological urge on the part of many scientists to recoil back into the human-historical time of the present and address the planet as a matter of profound human

concern" (87). I read the book as inviting us at least temporarily or provisionally to resist such an urge.

This is partly because this urge tends to be accompanied by a series of mental habits that blind us to the planetary, to deep history, and to the true dimensions of our predicament. These mental habits include the idea that we are stewards of the earth, responsible for all its other life forms and for maintaining the stability of the nonliving planet, and the presumptions of human superiority and our capacity for mastery that this idea of stewardship seems to entail.

Chapter 7 uses the word "displacement" to describe the ubiquitous tendency to address the planet as a matter of human concern. It might seem that we cannot help but think about the physical force human beings exert on the planet through the "human-existential category of power" (161), or displace planetary time with human time, when we are reasoning about what to do, individually and collectively. But Chakrabarty's language of *displacement* suggests that these translations entail a kind of error: that we need a *re*placement or recentering of the idea of humans as exerting physical force rather than exercising power. In speaking of "code-switching" between the categories of force and power, Chakrabarty does suggest tacking between them. Chakrabarty, the humanist who finds he has fallen into planetary history, seems to be recommending the geological perspective of Earth System Science in part as a technique for resisting the "moral pull of world history" (167). It seems our best hope of reasoning practically—morally and politically—about humanity's effects on the planet is to defer our first impulse to moralize and strive to see ourselves from the planet's perspective of indifference, even if such a perspective is in a strict sense necessarily unavailable to us.

Relatedly, the book mounts a critique of the idea of mutuality between the human and the planet. Chapter 8 offers a moving exploration of some examples of this idea, in Rabindranath Tagore and other twentieth-century authors' sense of landscape and their pleasure in returning to certain familiar natural settings. I wondered whether the critique is that such an assumption of mutuality is unacceptable *for our time*: unavailable to us now given the catastrophe we have unleashed, however compelling or appropriate it might have been at one time for human beings to imagine themselves into a relationship with the natural world, even if it was perhaps always misleading. The generosity of the book's readings of these moments suggests that possibility. But the book's larger argument intimates a thoroughgoing rejection of the idea of any mutuality between human beings and the rest of the natural world: whether because it involves a kind of presumptuousness about our ability to understand something that is deeply unknown to us, or projects onto the planet a concern for humanity that is not only false but self-indulgent and morally misguided.

Such engagement with imaginative literature prompts a question about Chakrabarty's view of the role of the creative arts, especially literature and

film, in this collective task of bringing "within the ambit of human moral life something that has always lain outside of its scope: the history of natural life on the planet" (134). The book primarily addresses the role of the humanities in this regard. Does literature—say, the work of authors like Richard Powers or Amitav Ghosh—offer distinct means of disrupting our mental habits or "bring[ing] together in our thought" (86) the incommensurate timescales, some of them at the limits of human comprehension, that we must face? While Chakrabarty has little to say about works of fiction or poetry, his characterization of a letter by Tagore and the 2016 suicide note of the student and Dalit activist Rohith Vemula as both "thinking at the limits of political thought while responding in their human souls to the invitations of the planetary" (132) suggest something of the role literature might play in reorienting our imagination as we collectively seek out new forms of political thought more adequate to our moment.

Second, I raise some questions about the book's complex dialogue with postcolonial thought. Chakrabarty strikingly distances himself from the postcolonial critique of the "spurious 'one world-ism'" of the West—the view of authors like Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain that the very idea of the Anthropocene is a kind of capitalist or imperial ruse, obfuscating the true causes of climate change (96). He acknowledges that responsibility for climate change is distributed exceedingly unevenly, with Western imperial and capitalist powers accountable for the overwhelming majority of carbon emissions. But he deemphasizes this point and holds at arm's length the related view of our age as the Capitalocene, not the Anthropocene. His reasons for doing so seem to stand in some—fascinating and productive—tension with one another. On the one hand, he resists the suggestion that capitalism, particularly in its tendencies to exploitation and profligate consumerism, is distinctively responsible for environmental crisis. He insists instead on the uncomfortable thought that emancipatory projects since the Enlightenment have been thoroughly implicated in planetary destruction. As he observes in the second of his celebrated four theses, the "mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding foundation of fossil-fuel use" (32). He refuses any distinction between capitalism and socialism in this respect, "for there was never any principled difference in their use of fossil fuel" (40). Even if industrial capitalism was the precipitating condition for our crises, Chakrabarty prioritizes the thought that the human species has, together, "slid into a state of things" (40) in which we collectively threaten the boundary conditions of our existence.

Alongside this line of response to the Capitalocene view is another, seemingly at odds with the homogenizing impulse of the first: that it is insufficiently appreciative of the distinctive and the ethical aspects of postcolonial modernity. The critique of capitalist modernity, Chakrabarty argues in his wonderful discussion of Nehru's passion for irrigation projects, can fail to respect the "spiritual, ethical, and idealist" (110) aspects of the desire for fossil-fuel driven modernization in the non-West, and to recognize that

anticolonial modernizers were not simply derivative mimics. Chakrabarty suggests that the key question driving the Capitalocene argument—How should we distribute responsibility?—moves too quickly to a human frame rather than grappling seriously with the planetary. What might an appreciation for the spiritual and emancipatory aspects, and the originality, of non-Western developmentalism do for our efforts today to grasp the depth of our predicament?

Author's Response

Dipesh Chakrabarty

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I am grateful to colleagues for both the appreciative and critical remarks they have offered. My response focuses on four broad areas of inquiry: questions relating to "the planet," capitalism, modernity, and the political.

Questions of the Planet. By using the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi's 1835 poem *La Ginestra*, Ollett expands the canvas to show that different kinds of cosmological thinking including Leopardi's from the early nineteenth century act as precursors of what I call planetary thinking. This is a generative suggestion. However, I am not persuaded that Ollett's claim that Leopardi uses "the planet" "in Chakrabarty's strict sense of the word" (594) is right. The category "planet" in my usage refers to the "earth system" of Earth System Science. For example, I write that "The intensification of globalization and the consequent crises of global warming . . . have ensured that the planet —*or more properly . . . the Earth system*" etc. (3–4, emphasis added). Later I describe the planet as "a dynamic ensemble of relationships . . . an ensemble that constitutes the Earth system" (70, cf. 76).

This concept of "earth system" comes from Earth System Science.[21] While the roots of this science go back to the nineteenth century, it would have been impossible to develop it without modern technology and superpower competition in space. As I show in chapter 3, it is a Cold War science that was formalized by NASA in the 1980s. The "earth system" is an abstraction of scientists. We encounter the "earth system" in thought, I said, as "something that is the condition of our existence" but is not in any "communicative relationship" to us (70). It does not address itself to humans, though humans—in the present crisis—seek to understand it. In that sense, there is no "mutuality" between the "planet" or the "earth system" and humans (70 and chap. 8).

[21]Tim Lenton, *Earth System Science: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.