

The Review of Politics 84 (2022), 592–612.

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A Symposium on Dipesh Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*

*Andrew Ollett, Brooke Ackerly, Adom Getachew, and Jennifer Pitts,
with a response by Dipesh Chakrabarty*

Dipesh Chakrabarty: *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 296.)

Introduction

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doi:10.1017/S0034670522000717

My book contemplates a conundrum that the phenomenon of anthropogenic climate change produces for modern historical and political thought. The benefits, such as increase in life expectancy, that humans have derived from a global economy based on access to cheap and plentiful energy from fossil fuels are undeniable; but now we must face up to the planetary environmental crisis that has been precipitated by the same developments. A palpable tension between our attachment to the hopes and aspirations generated by fossil-fuel-dependent developments and our growing knowledge and experience of this crisis often produces a disorienting sense of the present.

To think this through in these disorienting times, I engage with Earth System Science. According to this science, humans—thanks to the growth in their numbers, consumption, and technology—have become a geological force capable of changing the climate of the whole planet, thereby causing global warming, sea-level rise, extreme weather events, species extinction and the consequent loss of biodiversity, and other similar events. Earth system scientists propose that the period of Great Acceleration of human numbers and consumption since the 1950s be seen as the beginning of a new geological epoch in the history of the planet, the Anthropocene. They claim that human activities have pushed the planet over the threshold of the geological epoch of the Holocene, usually dated from the end of the last Ice Age nearly 11,700 years ago.

This collapse of the distinction, defended over the last two centuries by philosophers ranging from Hegel and Marx to Croce and Collingwood, between humanist histories of humans and their natural histories provides the starting point for my book. The convergence of human and natural histories on a planetary scale, I argue, has rendered insufficient (but not unnecessary) the 500-year-old history of European imperial expansion, colonization, enslavement, dispossession, racial oppression, and global capitalism and technology that historians have so far used as a framework for explaining or understanding the modern world. Their periodizing labels such as “modern” or “global” now have to be *thought together* with the much larger-scale units of geological time that are deployed in periodizing the geobiological history of this planet.

This poses the question of the categories of social and political thought we can now use to contemplate the geological agency of humans. I argue that humanity’s emergence as a planetary force is related to an intensification of the economic and political-institutional processes of globalization based on various forms of extractive capitalist operations. I develop a distinction between the globe and the planet (i.e., the “earth system”) as connected but analytically separable categories and suggest that we look at contemporary human history from both global and planetary perspectives. The global is anthropocentric while the planet de-centers and provincializes the human. Structured around this distinction, my book argues for a new philosophical anthropology.

This Globe Where Man Is Nothing

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doi:10.1017/S0034670522000687

Chakrabarty wants to introduce “the planet” as a “humanist category.” I suppose “humanist categories” are those that organize our thoughts and discussions when we reflect upon our past, present, and future as human beings. He gives “the state” and “capital” as examples of categories like this (70), for good reason: to say that the planet is a “humanist category” is more than to say that it can be the object of human values and actions; it is to recognize in it a “dynamic ensemble of relationships” (70) in which the human is cast. Two of his claims on this point are, in my view, indisputable. The first is that “the planet” has already emerged as a humanist category in some important sense. As the planetary consequences of human activity increasingly force their way into our awareness, the category will become almost as familiar as “the state.”