

REVIEW ESSAY

Planetary Politics and the Climates of History

Geoff Mann

Department of Geography, Simon Fraser University
Email: geoffm@sfu.ca

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

Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2023)

(Received 12 April 2024; accepted 28 April 2024)

In Ray Cummings's loony 1922 novel *The Girl in the Golden Atom*, a man known only as the Chemist discovers a beautiful woman in a subatomic world in the gold of his mother's wedding ring. Smitten, he figures out how to shrink himself to join her. Upon his return to our world, he finds that although seven days passed for him while "in the ring," he has arrived back only forty hours after leaving. Over drinks, the Banker asks him to explain how the difference is possible. The Chemist replies, "To get a conception of this change you must analyze definitely what time is. We measure and mark it by years, months, and so forth, down to minutes and seconds, all based upon the movements of our earth around its sun. But that is the measurement of time, not time itself." He then turns to the Big Business Man and asks, "How would you describe time?" "The Big Business Man smiled. 'Time,' he said, 'is what keeps everything from happening at once.'"¹

This witticism has been widely misattributed (to Henri Bergson or Albert Einstein, among others), but is commonly associated with Einstein's collaborator, John Archibald Wheeler, who borrowed the phrase several times.² Wheeler's point when unwittingly quoting the Big Business Man was neither to endorse the "homogeneous, empty time" of progress that Walter Benjamin attacked, nor mere cleverness.³ It was, rather more importantly, that what we call time is a human construction: it is not a "primordial category supplied free of charge from outside."⁴

¹Ray Cummings, *The Girl in the Golden Atom* (New York, 1922), 34.

²Wheeler claimed he first saw it "among graffiti in the men's room of the Pecan Street Cafe, Austin, Texas." J. A. Wheeler, "Information, Physics, Quantum: The Search for Links," in Wojciech Zurek, ed., *Complexity, Entropy, and the Physics of Information* (Boulder, CO, 1990), 3–28, at 10 n. 6.

³Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Thesis XIII, in Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), 253–64, at 261.

⁴Wheeler, "Information," 15 n. 14.

"If there are problems with the concept of time, they are of our own creation! ... We will not feed time into any deep-reaching account of existence." On the contrary, we must derive time out of that account.⁵ That effort must be constrained by what Wheeler calls the "super-Copernican principle," which "rejects now-centeredness in any account of existence as firmly as Copernicus repudiated here-centeredness."⁶

For Wheeler (the physicist) this is a challenge facing quantum theory. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty (the historian) shows in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* and *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax*, his two recent books on the ways planetary climate change is unsettling how we think about history and modernity, the problem can hardly be contained to physics. If anything, the challenge to history is even more unsettling, because unlike quantum physics (at least for most non-physicists), history is essential to how we make sense of our place in the world: how we conceive and narrate our relations not only with one another, but also with the rest of life on Earth, and with the "unhuman" planet that for so long we have taken for granted (*The Climate of History* (TCH), 49). "Now-centeredness" is upended by entanglement with processes unfolding at temporal and spatial scales which dwarf even the multiple human temporalities of what usually goes by the name "historical experience," which render the entirety of human history a mere all-at-once.

How might we reconsider historical experience when the "givenness of the world is now breaking down" (*One Planet* (OP), 46)? When we can no longer trust in the "structure of mutuality" between humanity and the Earth system, which has allowed us to forget that we are only a very recently arrived "minority form of life" (TCH, 191; *One Planet*, 38). How do we derive a concept of history out of an account of existence fundamentally altered by the Anthropocene, the era in which we have come to recognize humanity as a "geological force" (TCH, 31)?

These are, to put it mildly, daunting questions. Chakrabarty, who is probably most familiar for his foundational contributions to postcolonial history and theory, has been wrestling with them since at least 2009, when he published "The Climate of History: Four Theses" in the journal *Critical Inquiry*. As he puts it, the article marks the moment his "train of postcolonial thought crashed into the planetarity of the 2000s" (OP, 59). "Planetarity" or "the planetary" is the conceptual centre of gravity for Chakrabarty's climate project (it is indeed a single, if expansive, project: the second book is "both a prequel and a sequel" (OP, ix) to the first). He says the concept first coalesced for him when he realized that "the concept of *globe* in the word *globalization* was not the same as the concept of *globe* in the expression *global warming*" (TCH, 18, original emphasis). The globe of globalization is a "humanocentric" frame through which we narrate the histories of the world as "we" have made it (TCH, 178). It is a "pluriversal" world of difference, in which human communities and institutions are the subjects (and objects) of history. In contrast, the globe of global warming is the planetary; it "is about how some very long-term planetary processes involving both the living and the nonliving

⁵Ibid., 10.

⁶Ibid., 13.

have provided, and keep providing, the enabling conditions for both human existence and flourishing” (*TCH*, 85).

At its most fundamental, Chakrabarty’s argument is that with the onset of the Anthropocene, which for many is manifested mostly clearly in the form of anthropogenic climate change, the human (and humanist) conception of history can no longer be confined to the global: for the first time, “the planetary now bears down on our everyday consciousness” (*TCH*, 85). The claim is not that the planetary now trumps or subsumes the global—he insists that it is not a binary but an analytical distinction (*TCH*, 18)—but rather that we are now forced to think in both registers simultaneously. “We are all living, whether we acknowledge it or not, at the cusp of the global and the planetary” (*TCH*, 85).

This position demands a set of epistemic contortions that we are not, at least at present, well prepared to undertake, and maybe never will be—first, because it forces us to recognize the embeddedness of the “shallow time” of human histories in the “deep time” of our “species history” and planetary geobiological processes (*OP*, 2). Second, because it requires us to come to grips with the contrast between our global plurality and our planetary unity, which Chakrabarty calls “the problem of the One and the Many”: “humans are politically not-one, while Earth system scientists see the planet—the Earth system that is—as one” (*OP*, x).

This is the “jagged and mismatched interface between the ‘global’ and the ‘planetary’” (*OP*, 14). The mismatch is an organizing principle behind a collection of analytic interfaces, many just as jagged, that run through the books: human time and deep time, anthropocentrism and non-human-centrism, human history and natural history, anthropogenesis and geobiological causation, background or setting (the “phatic”) and foreground or realm of conscious agency, difference and sameness, biology and geology. Chakrabarty intends these pairings to serve as conceptual tools rather than empirical categories. They compound and concatenate—each is a variation on or derivation from the same globe/planet schema, so in many ways they are mutually reinforcing—but the point is not that the latter is overwhelming the former in each pair, as if the Anthropocene were defined as the moment at which the planet displaced the globe, sameness overwhelmed difference and geology trumped biology.

Instead, according to Chakrabarty, for the humanist the novelty of the Anthropocene—the era of anthropogenic climate change, pandemic and biodiversity collapse, in which humanity can now recognize itself as “a thing-like entity, a nonhuman planetary force that can change the geobiology of the planet” (*OP*, 46)—consists in the fact that the effort to grasp the human condition now requires an engagement with *both* elements in each set.⁷ We can no longer treat the second element, the one associated with planetarity, as static background. This requires us to develop an account in which we are neither the playwrights nor the protagonists, acknowledging that “humans come very late in the history of the planet, that

⁷In Chakrabarty’s account, as in many others, the Anthropocene retains an important place in the periodization of modernity, despite the March 2024 decision of the International Union of Geological Sciences and the International Commission on Stratigraphy to “reject the proposal for an Anthropocene Epoch as a formal unit of the Geologic Time Scale” (<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene>).

the planet was never engaged in readying itself for our arrival, and that we do not represent any point of culmination in the planet's story" (*TCH*, 152).

The implications of the emergence of the "new historical-philosophical entity called the planet" (*TCH*, 3) for the humanist account of the "human condition today" (*OP*, 10) are the books' most provocative, even controversial, contributions. Chakrabarty insists that it means we must supersede "modern political thought," which "has defined the human as a political subject by bracketing—putting in the container of the phatic—the work of deep history, of the geobiology of the planet including the work that microbes do" (*OP*, 39). This does not mean that we need to stop thinking about the "merely" political questions of a species whose import disappears in the vastness of planetary time and matter. But it does mean—and one would be correct to expect this claim alone to invite a storm of criticism—"that the human story can no longer be told from the perspective of the five hundred years (at most) of capitalism" (*TCH*, 137). Even more importantly, perhaps, planetarity exposes the "limitations of calculating on human timescales alone (which is what we do when we think politically)"; "deep pasts and futures are not amenable to human-centered political thought or action ... one has to learn to have recourse to forms of thought that go beyond—but do not discard—the human political" (*TCH*, 151). In short, any theory of politics adequate to the current conjuncture requires nothing less than "a new philosophical anthropology"; that is, "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" (*TCH*, 20, 91).

Unlike most books, we basically knew this would be Chakrabarty's argument long before *Climate of History* appeared in 2021, because both books are building on the project he began in 2009. Indeed, one of the challenges for a reviewer is that the books' arguments have effectively been under review since then. The original article already contained the main elements, at least in outline, and it has found an extraordinarily wide readership: as I write in early 2024, the paper has been cited almost five thousand times. Together, the books are an extended elaboration of the article's principal claims, and a response to several of the main lines of critique that have developed in the fifteen years since its publication. These extensions and clarifications do a great deal of mostly helpful and interesting work but, except on one essential question—the political, on which more below—the fundamentals remain basically the same.

Two of the more pointed criticisms of the original article seem particularly to bother Chakrabarty. Neither is surprising, and I must admit that, at first reading, they leapt immediately to my mind as well. The first is that there is no discernible politics to "deep time" and its constituent evolutionary and geological processes. Žižek was only one of many to remark that the turn to planetarity was radically depoliticizing.⁸ If the tragedy of our current condition is framed as just part of, or a brief interlude in, a much longer and ultimately more decisive set of processes that were at work before we were here and will be long after we're gone, it is hard to imagine that inspiring the kind of political action that many of us—including Chakrabarty, it would seem—believe is desperately necessary.

⁸Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London 2010), 332–4.

The second is that the planetary seems to perform the same discursive move for which the concept of the Anthropocene is often attacked: it imputes an illusory universalist homogeneity to the global community and distributes responsibility for the climate and biodiversity crises to an undifferentiated “humanity” (or abandons the effort to hold those responsible to account), when in fact we know that these terrible dynamics are the fault of a very narrow fraction of the Earth’s population, mostly in the wealthy global North.⁹ I think one can understand this reaction on the part of some, but it is ultimately a knee-jerk reading. Of course he knows that the colonial and postcolonial axis is perhaps the organizing principle of the globe: it has been the organizing principle of his career. But he has spent that career tracing complexities of the postcolonial condition that can go unremarked, accounting for the legacies of European colonialism while also showing, as Gayatri Spivak once put it, that “there is something Eurocentric about assuming that imperialism began with Europe.”¹⁰ The real question here is how to confront the planet knowing what we know about the globe. “How do we relate to a universal history of life—to universal thought, that is—while retaining what is of obvious value in our postcolonial suspicion of the universal?” (*TCH*, 42).

Despite this critical misfire, however, many readers feel compelled by its logical corollary: in deemphasizing the modern drivers of the crisis—indeed by explicitly insisting that capitalism cannot on its own explain the climate crisis (*TCH*, 35, 45; *OP*, 93)—some argue that Chakrabarty “let capitalism off the hook” (*TCH*, 18).¹¹ As a long-standing student of capital—much of his previous work, like *Rethinking Working Class History* and *Provincializing Europe*, develops incisive and creative critiques of the historical imagination of capitalism—he finds this accusation especially irksome, and goes out of his way to refute it (*TCH*, 18, 160–62).¹²

These criticisms are obviously related: to place the global/human in the eternal *durée* of the planetary which “exceeds” it (*TCH*, 10) is necessarily to deemphasize or decenter capital’s agency in the generation of the climate crisis. “While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital” (*TCH*, 35), Chakrabarty writes, “the tricky question of the assumed specialness of humans takes us into a past much longer than that of capital and into territories that we never had to cross in thinking about the inequalities and injustices of the rule of capital” (*TCH*, 63). Since, for much of the climate justice movement, capital is justifiably political enemy number one, claims of these kinds are readily assailed as undermining its politics with the “theoreticist” gesture characteristic of someone who doesn’t have to get their hands dirty.

At times, especially in some lengthy segments in *The Climate of History* caught up in the ephemeral political thought of Bruno Latour, this does not seem entirely unfair. For example, it can lead Chakrabarty to claims like when “we grant

⁹E.g. Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *Anthropocene Review* 1/1 (2014), 62–9.

¹⁰Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 37.

¹¹Malm and Hornborg, “Geology of Mankind?”, 66–7.

¹²Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (Princeton, 1989); Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

processes belonging to the deeper histories of Earth and life the role of cofactors in the current crisis,” we must acknowledge that current problems may be anthropogenic, but “only contingently so.” Warming has happened before, on Earth and on other planets. “It just so happens that the current warming of the earth is of human doing” (*TCH*, 67). That does sound a lot like letting capitalism “off the hook.”

But in the arc of the entire project, I think this reading is unfair both to Chakrabarty and to the kinds of question he hopes we will join him in asking. He is not saying that in the long ride of the planetary we were always going to crash anyway; nor is he saying that it is “everybody’s fault” rather than solely capitalism’s. Angry eyes might read that here and there, and it is not difficult to understand why. But this is not really the actual terrain of argument, and to suggest that this is what the books are saying is ultimately to elide what is in fact at stake: the relation of the political to processes and histories with which climate change has entangled humanity—processes that, at present, have been understood as beyond or outside politics by definition.

Chakrabarty’s proposition—a sound one, it seems to me—is that if we don’t take planetary-scale processes into account, “we do not quite see the depth of the predicament that confronts humans today” (*TCH*, 156).¹³ Indeed, at a more prosaic scale, this is the aspect of climatic change that is so disastrously underestimated by “green-growth” boosters and gradualist policy programs: who is responsible matters, certainly, but we must also acknowledge that humanity is now caught up in vast “geobiological” dynamics that have their own momentum, freight trains we have discovered we have the power to derail but not to slow down. Whether one believes this is a novel condition, or whether this has always been true and we just refused to acknowledge it, many of the most important decisions are no longer up to us.

If so, then he is right to suggest that “deep pasts and futures are not amenable to human-centered political thought or action” (*TCH*, 151). The challenge is thus one of developing “forms of thought that go beyond—but do not discard—the human political” (*TCH*, 151). Chakrabarty says “we don’t yet know how to do that” (*TCH*, 126), which is true. These two books are his attempt to figure out how to do that, an attempt he admits has flaws, missteps, even evasions, and is far from complete.

If we engage the books on this terrain, the important questions of who is responsible or what form political struggle might take are not primary, however much they are, of course, at the heart of our everyday concerns. Indeed, this dissonance is part of what Chakrabarty is interested in. This is perhaps the hardest thing for him to communicate because, as he sees it, it is precisely the dire urgencies afflicting the globe in the age of the Anthropocene that limit our capacity to investigate what happens when we try to think beyond it:

What does it mean to dwell, to be political, to pursue justice when we live out the everyday with the awareness that what seems “slow” in human and world-historical terms may indeed be “instantaneous” on the scale of earth history,

¹³Daniel Smail has made similar arguments; e.g. “Beyond the Longue Durée: Human History in Deep Time,” *Perspectives on History*, Dec. 2012, 59–60.

that living in the Anthropocene means inhabiting these two presents at the same time? I cannot fully or even satisfactorily answer the question yet, but surely we cannot even begin to answer it if “the political” keeps acting as an anxious prohibition on thinking of that which leaves us feeling “out-scaled.” (*TCH*, 179)

Chakrabarty’s goal is not to dismiss the political, but rather to clear a space where its urgent demands do not shout down an attempt to think at those scales—“deep time” and the planetary—that at present “we don’t yet know how to” talk about politically. If there is a critique that meets the books on their own terms, this is where it needs to do so. It is also the one key strand in the argument where Chakrabarty’s thinking shifts substantially between *The Climate of History* and *One Planet*.

Early in *The Climate of History*, Chakrabarty suggests that the climate crisis and the Anthropocene provide “an opportunity for working toward Karl Jasper’s idea of an ‘epochal consciousness,’ a form of argumentation that seeks to make a conceptual place for thinking the human condition *before* committing to any particular version of practical or activist politics” (*TCH*, 19, original emphasis). Following Jaspers, he calls this vantage point “prepolitical” (*TCH*, 196).¹⁴ To the extent that *The Climate of History* attempts to hold politics temporarily at bay for the purposes of thinking in realms in which it is “out-scaled,” the term “prepolitical” is accurate enough. Its relation to the political, though, whether temporal or conceptual, is not established. It is hard to tell whether the work of developing a prepolitical “epochal consciousness” can or should have any effect on the determination of the political or the practice of politics. They come across as distinct, even unrelated, projects. Perhaps this is because the work for which a new “epochal consciousness” is a precursor cannot be “political” in the conventional sense, for the same reasons Chakrabarty is trying to bracket politics in the first place. Instead, its purpose—which might remind us in particular of earlier feminist, and decidedly more earthly, work by people like Donna Haraway, Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva—is to lay the groundwork for what he calls the “new-political” (*TCH*, 194–5), a “new tradition of political thought that is not simply about human domination of the earth” (*TCH*, 201).¹⁵

One of the more appealing aspects of these books, especially if read consecutively, is the candour with which Chakrabarty chronicles the development of this thinking over time. At times it can be defensive or exasperated, but often he invites us to struggle through the ideas with him, even pointing out directions that pop into the reader’s mind, and admitting he too had that thought but it didn’t work out. The most significant breach in the development of Chakrabarty’s thinking between *The Climate of History* and *One Planet*, and he draws immediate attention to it (*OP*, 12), is the abandonment of the project of “the new-political.” Chakrabarty comes to the conclusion that the political cannot be sought in our “two presents”

¹⁴Karl Jaspers, *Man in the Modern Age* (New York, 1933).

¹⁵Donna Haraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race and Nature in Modern Science* (London, 1989); Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (London, 2005); Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London, 1993).

(the planetary and the global), but only in one: “the political question, What is to be done in a climate emergency, seems to be for humans alone”: “However abstract the conception of the Earth system is and however entangled the human may be with other forms of the living and the nonliving, it seems to me that there is, as of now, no alternative to beginning with the question of human experience of the world in conceptualizing the political” (*OP*, 12). In other words, on the question of the political, the super-Copernican principle cannot hold. The political is unsettled by the planetary, but in spite of this, it remains global. We must “accept the political as something that is provincially and parochially human. The political is founded on human phenomenology and thus on disagreement. It assumes humanity to be a pluriverse” (*OP*, 102), and cannot (yet?) encompass the oneness of the planetary. If the political functions as an “anxious prohibition” on thinking otherwise, it is not politics’ fault. It is just the way it is, at least for now.

If this turn makes it sound like the wrestling match with politics across the two books is ultimately fruitless, that is not my intention. At first glance, it might be tempting for his critics to enjoy a “told-you-so” moment, but, on the contrary, it provides an opportunity for a rewarding narrative reflexivity. However irked by some critical reactions, Chakrabarty did not pull up the intellectual drawbridge in an attempt to defend a proposition just because it was he who made it, as so often happens.

One of the more important instances of this mode of engagement appears at the end of the first chapter of *The Climate of History* (a revised version of the 2009 article), in an addendum that takes up a critique formulated by Ursula Heise.¹⁶ Heise is interested in Chakrabarty’s claim that “humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species” (*TCH*, 43), since this would require a “knowledge that defies historical understanding” (*TCH*, 45). She suggests that since his larger argument “is essentially what in other theoretical discourses would be referred to as a kind of cosmopolitanism,” this leaves it “with no positive content,” only a “negative universalism.”¹⁷ He concedes the point, and goes on to say,

In my argument, *species* may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of danger that is climate change ... [C]limate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe. (*TCH*, 45, original emphasis)

This “negative” collectivity, which would allow for “a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity,” cannot help but remind him of Adorno, since “unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities.” Inspired by the work of Antonio Vázquez-Arroyo, he suggests that we call it a “negative universal history”; in other words, “one that allows the particular to express its

¹⁶Ursula Heise, *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species* (Chicago, 2016).

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 224.

resistance to its imbrication in the totality without denying being so imbricated" (*TCH*, 47).¹⁸

The problem, however, is that in the Anthropocene a negative universal history "cannot simply be about humans alone" (*TCH*, 47).¹⁹ The nonhuman, including the nonliving, "should be able to make itself heard without having to be anthropomorphized or without having to speak the language of humans" (*TCH*, 48). But if Chakrabarty's universal arises from a shared sense of catastrophe, then the recruitment of the nonhuman is as yet impossible: "The 'negative universal history' of the Anthropocene—the history that gestures to a 'we' that may indeed be more than human—can only be an ethical advisory at this point. Its empirical content for now remains empty" (*TCH*, 48).

Is it as empty as the "positive," homogeneous universal history that Benjamin criticized? No: it is not empty in the "abstract" sense, but in the "yet-to-be-filled," unfolding sense we get from Hegel. Indeed, the potential "we" for which this "ethical advisory" might prepare us cannot help but take vaguely Hegelian form, and there is something Hegelian about these books. This is not to say that they are totalizing—though sometimes they aspire to that—but rather that they operate the "negative" in Hegel's sense, the aspect of Hegel's thought that Adorno mobilized against him so effectively, the sense that is so misunderstood. Negative universal history aspires ironically to a closure it knows it will never realize. It is Hegelian in its unrelenting negation (critique) of the given ("the positive"), and in its critical predilection to go on including that which seems uncludable.²⁰

Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that the problem of politics that has forever hounded Hegel is reanimated in Chakrabarty's account: what on earth does a universal politics look like? He notes the Hegelian dimensions of the planetary explicitly in *The Climate of History* (70), and, for those familiar with Hegel, the unrealized (I am tempted to call it quixotic) quest for the "new-political" often has a familiar feel to it, like those moments in *Philosophy of Spirit* when you are asking yourself whether he really believes that we are ever going to get there, because you sure don't anymore. But just as Adorno discovers what we might call a hopeful resignation in the non-resolution of negative dialectics, the Chakrabarty of *One Planet* ultimately appears to find some slight relief in the earthliness of negative universal history, a universal that undoes itself in the moment of "planetary" unity. "There is no one 'we' to respond to a planet or an Earth system that is, by the contingency of Earth's pasts, one" (*OP*, 13); the Anthropocene "fragments human futures in unprecedented ways" (*OP*, 21).

But negative dialectics are also always about the disappointment of possibility unrealized in actuality—"the possibility of which their reality has cheated the

¹⁸ Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Universal History Disavowed: On Critical Theory and Postcolonialism," *Postcolonial Studies* 11/4 (2018), 451–73.

¹⁹ Here he is leaning hard on Harriet Johnson, "The Anthropocene as a Negative Universal History," *Adorno Studies* 3/1 (2019), 47–63.

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge, 1975), 424: Hegel's "opposition to what was merely 'positive,' just given and not deduced from rational will, remains constant from his earliest writings to the end." Jürgen Habermas, "On Hegel's Political Writings," in Habermas, *Theory and Practice* (Boston, 1973), 170–94, at 180: "'Positive' he calls a society from whose petrified forms the spirit has fled, a society whose institutions, laws, and constitution no longer correspond to interests, opinions, and sentiments."

objects and which is nevertheless visible in each one.”²¹ There is indeed, it seems, much disappointment behind Chakrabarty’s acknowledgment of “the political as something that is provincially and parochially human.” It is the possibility of which we have been cheated, something we have to “accept,” presumably with regret.

This is a regret I do not feel in the least. I think it can only come from asking too much of the concept of time itself; as Wheeler said, “if there are problems with the concept of time, they are of our own creation!” If it is true that “we will not feed time into any deep-reaching account of existence,” but must instead derive time itself out of that account, then maybe “the collapsing of multiple chronologies—of species history and geological times” (*TCH*, 14) and the “jagged mismatch” of temporal scale between global human history and planetary “deep time” are the result of Chakrabarty putting the temporal cart before the existential horse. The account of time that grounds the political needs to acknowledge that these simultaneous “times” and histories in fact differ not in scale, but in kind.

In other words, “deep time” is not just a really, really long version of the time of human experience. If the “new-political” is rendered impossible and our only recourse is the parochial humanism of the old-school political, perhaps that is not because “we don’t yet know how to” to clear space to think the planetary and the global together in a way that makes room for politics. The problem is not that one “out-scales” the other. Instead, it might be because the time or history of the geobiological and that of human modernity, even of human life on Earth, are not the same kinds of things.

To say we are pinned, or “shuttling back and forth” (*TCH*, 68), between two scales of time seems to me to elide perhaps the one crucial difference between the global and the planetary that Chakrabarty does not discuss. This is not to deny the nonhuman a meaningful past. It is only to say that calling on “natural” and “human” history, when talking of “deep time” and the geological “fact” that is our planet in a universe of planets, even if only to “collapse the distinction” between them, is as sensible as arguing that quantum mechanics unfolds in the same “space” as human life, just a teeny-weeny version of it, or that the “space” of the universe is just a humungous instance of our own. Our parochial little term “history” isn’t quite up to it. Chakrabarty runs thoughtfully through some of the debate on what constitutes “history” proper, from Croce to Collingwood to Carr, but one question he does not consider is whether the problem is not mismatched temporalities, or the relation between human and natural history, but rather that we speak of “times” and “histories” as if they are mere macro and micro versions of some common temporal substance. That is only true in a trivial way.

Chakrabarty suggests, however, that in the time of the planetary, the task of the “new-political” is to “extend ideas of politics and justice to the nonhuman, including both the living and the nonliving” (*TCH*, 13). This, it turns out, is impossible to fulfill because a political subjectivity that “thinks like a species,” a species that is only one among many on a planet defined by its otherness (*TCH*, 67), is not forthcoming. The task, he says, then becomes a “one-sided diplomacy” with the nonhuman world,

²¹Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York, 1973), 52.

“imagining and then implementing a process of scaling back the realm of the human-modern” (OP, 42). I think many would join me in endorsing this call. One might even say that some involved in the degrowth movement have long been arguing for a similar politics.²²

But it bears emphasis that this “one-sided diplomacy” is required not because the scales of time and space involved are “too big” or require a perspective from which we could “experience ourselves as a species” (TCH, 43). Nor is it usefully conceived as a fallback plan we only require because, unfortunately, “there is, as of now, no alternative to beginning with the question of human experience of the world in conceptualizing the political” (OP, 12). It is, rather, that our concept of time or history does not precede the political, and this is as true of the geobiological “natural” history of the planet as it (more obviously) is of the provincially human globe. The political comes first. It is one of the principal means through which we develop our accounts (plural) of existence—from which we derive a concept of time. And it seems to me that that concept of time will always assume that human life and agency are meaningful, if by no means carefully operated or evenly distributed. What is the (political) point of a history in which we humans don’t matter? There isn’t one. Maybe this anthropocentrism is the next best thing to a “phenomenology of us as a species.”

As Chakrabarty (among others) has long taught, where there’s humans, there’s politics. In *One Planet*, he writes that he has come to understand that, despite it all, “on the ground ... there is only difference. The task of politics is to find solidarities across these differences, sublating, articulating, or even suspending them for a while.” And then he adds, “But how long is ‘a while,’ and how long does it take to get there?” (OP, 15). This is the question of the moment, the one we all want answered, forgetting, sometimes, that it is only us humans—or some portion of us—who will answer it. How long is a while? It depends. Historical, ethical, contingent, vague and uncertain, commonsense but ad hoc: the time of the political.

Acknowledgments. This essay benefited enormously from Joan Scott’s and Nicholas Robbins’s comments.

²²Jason Hickel, *Less Is More: How Degrowth Will Save the World* (London, 2020); Matthias Schmelzer, Andrea Vetter and Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World beyond Capitalism* (London, 2022).