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The Climate of History by Dipesh Chakrabarty

EN267

Chakrabarty is a 69-year-old Indian Historian and it is as an historian that he presents four ways in which we might consider history in the age of man-made climate change. He draws attention to the cross-disciplinary collaborative process required, as he declares that he trusts the overwhelmingly corroborative data produced by scientists; his job is to consider how historical scholarship might contribute to the debate.

Thesis One

Anthropogenic Explanations of Climate Change Spell the Collapse of the Age-Old Humanist Distinction between Natural History and Human History.

This is the first opposition that Chakrabarty sets up – between natural history and human history.

Traditionally historians have separated the history of humans from the history of nature. Man could only know man-made objects because he created them; nature was mysterious because made by God. Chakrabarty sees this separation as originating in the work of Vico (an Italian Enlightenment philosopher), and it became the founding thought of 19th and 20th century historicism.

This separation can be illustrated by the ideas of Robin George Collingwood in the late 19th early 20th century, who saw the historian's job to be a delving into the thought processes that produced social institutions, not a consideration of the animal nature of man; his bodily needs or instincts.

Continuing this theme, in 1938 Stalin wrote of the slow pace of geographical change compared to the development of human societies; environmental changes taking millions of years, societal changes maybe a few hundred.

BUT

then came Fernand Braudel, a French historian who wrote *La Mediterranee* in 1949.

HE

saw that the changing seasons and nature “played an active role in molding human actions” (Chakrabarty 205). This was a step in the right direction from the “nature-as-a-backdrop” (205) attitude of the past, but he still saw the relationship of humans to nature as timeless.

In the late 20th century environmental historians took another step in bridging the divide between natural history and human history, producing what Chakrabarty calls

“natural histories of man” (205). However, these were concerned more with the biology of man - as an organism, rather than him as a social being.

SO

There was still a gap separating man from his behaviours, which were leading to climate change.

NOW

It is climate change scholars who have unwittingly breached the old distinctions.

THEY

have recognized that humans impact upon the environment.

Naomi Oreskes, an historian of science, says that to deny “global warming” is “to deny that humans have become geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes on earth” (qtd. in Chakrabarty 206).

We have moved from man as a “prisoner of climate” according to Braudel (Chakrabarty 206); to humans who change the weather.

We are accruing to ourselves the same degree of impact potentiality previously the preserve of meteors and volcanic eruptions.

This is all very recent, only becoming clear in the 21st century, so it is only now that the old distinction between natural history and human history has crumbled, and it has been recognised that they are interpenetrative.

Thesis Two

The Idea of the Anthropocene, the New Geologic Epoch when Humans Exist as a Geologic Force, Severely Qualifies Humanist Histories of Modernity/Globalisation

The opposition here would appear to be between freedom, and damage to the planet.

Chakrabarty starts by drawing our attention to the difficulties of reconciling the quest for human freedom with cultural and historical difference, which has been a major concern for historiography. Freedom is a plastic term stretching from 19th century class struggles, to the slavery abolitionist movement, to the anti-imperialist conflicts as Empire crumbled. We could include freedom from racism and the fight for gender equality; such as Saudi Arabian women winning the right to drive. Chakrabarty doesn't mention gender equality but I think that it should be in there.

HOWEVER

at no point in the discourses on freedom was it mentioned that freedom comes at a cost to the planet.

Modern freedoms are based on the consumption of fossil fuels – and Chakrabarty talks quite a lot about the significance of these in the video which I have put on the forum.

(Also, here I might mention the freedom of the female Saudi drivers and how it will impact upon climate change; more fossil fuel will be burnt, more of the planet's resources will be used in the production of cars and air quality will worsen).

Although the current era is called the Holocene – that is a warm period starting 11,700 years ago, after the last Ice Age, it has been suggested by climate change scientists, that we call this new era of human intervention in changing the world so fundamentally, the Anthropocene. This term was coined by Paul J Crutzen and Eugene F. D Stoermer in the year 2000. Their view is that the Anthropocene started in the late 18th century which is backed by evidence of carbon dioxide and methane trapped in polar ice (Chakrabarty 209).

SO

Where does this leave us?

Should we see approximately 1750 to the present as a struggle for freedom or the establishment of the Anthropocene? Is it that freedom has come at the cost of the planet?

The straightforward answer would appear to be 'yes', but Chakrabarty says that it is more complicated.

To get us out of this bind mankind needs to deploy classic Enlightenment values such as reason, knowledge, and the collaborative scientific application of evidence based research, in a global context. Ironically, we need to use those very freedoms bought at a cost to the planet to help us to see a way out.

The one freedom that could de-rail this effort is politics, which is not based on reason!

How will politicians deal with a population explosion which will exacerbate already extant inequalities? What sort of policies will be needed to feed, house and provide energy for an extra 3 billion over the next 40 years? And at the same time reverse the cost to the planet. Mark Maslin, a geography professor at UCL, says that global politics is unlikely to solve climate change because countries will need a fifty-year plan to work together, which is optimistic given the short-termism of politics. You only have to think of the party political in-fighting by both the Tories and Labour to get the point.

Reconciling the freedom of the 3 billion and the Anthropocene seems a hopeless task.

Thesis Three

The Geological Hypothesis Regarding the Anthropocene Requires us to put Global Histories of Capital in Conservation with the Species History of Humans

The opposition here would appear to be between capital narratives and a history that sees humans as a species.

Critiques of globalisation treat climate change only so far as it impacts upon capitalism. Although important this does not go far enough; they must engage with *human* history as it is inextricably linked to capitalism via the Anthropocene.

Scholars such as Crutzen refer to humans as a species. This connects to the idea of 'deep history' which is pre 4000 years ago. 'Recorded' history is the time since then, largely since the written word was available to document events.

By reaching back to deep history humans can be seen as part of the history of life on the planet. Globalisation can only refer to recorded history and seems superficial by comparison.

In addition, some historians see humanity as multiple discreet organisms, not a species as a whole. This is in direct opposition to the Anthropogenic view of humans as a united geologic force.

Species thinking also suggests that humanity has always been somehow ineluctably drawn to its present predicament.

NO

says Chakrabarty, this is misleading. In reality we have stumbled into the Anthropocene. (This echoes Bill McKibben's view in *The End of Nature* 86).

SO

if this is the case why aren't capitalist critiques enough to question climate change, its consequences and challenges?

Well, because we are part of what Jason Moore would call the "web of life". (*Wall Street is a Way of Organising Nature* 40). We are connected to other lifeforms and the environment, which are only made possible by the Holocene, which is a "fluke of nature" (Chakrabarty 218). We have taken this lucky break and interjected the Anthropocene to our cost.

Tensions exist then in the thinking about climate change between "the planetary and the global; deep and recorded histories; species thinking and critiques of capital" (213).

Climate change is so important that scholars must put their differences to one side and work together. Both capitalist narratives and ideas about species history must co-exist in climate change thinking.

Thesis Four

The Cross Hatching of Species History and the History of Capital is a Process of Probing the Limits of Historical Understanding.

SO

What is historical understanding?

Well Chakrabarty suggests that it can be a self-knowledge in the first instance, which then expands to include the historical moment. That is humanist histories ask us to “reconstruct” but also to “re-enact in our own minds the experience of the past” (220).

BUT

This model doesn't work if we see ourselves as a species. We can't experience being a species; here the individual has disappeared. A species is just a concept, but as Chakrabarty says “one never experiences being a concept” (220).

Nevertheless, he believes that mankind is universally responsible for climate change of which the capitalist narrative is constituent, and it requires a universal response. The problem is that we are working on the very edge of historical understanding and cannot help but take a collective step into the unknown. Chakrabarty calls this “negative universal history” (222).

TO CONCLUDE

I would suggest that Chakrabarty is probing a set of oppositions to see how we might view ourselves as historical subjects, in an era which is a total break from the past, and all the old assumptions are not fit for purpose. How can we understand the future when we have fractured our compact with the past and randomised the pieces through climate change?