
within these knowledge systems are deeply relational politics that provide not just “principles,” but historically resilient, surviving, evolving, dynamic modes of engaging with each other and with earth systems that maintain that integrated view even through change.

Political Theory in the Age of the Planetary

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The culmination of over a decade of thinking and writing about climate change, Chakrabarty’s book challenges humanists, including political theorists, to contend with the limits of our analytic categories and received intellectual traditions in the face of the contemporary climate crisis. Central to the book’s intervention is the arresting formulation of the planet as distinct from the globe. The distinction emerges from a simple observation. “The word *globe* as it appeared in the literature on globalization is not the same as the world globe in the expression global warming” (71, emphasis in original). Where the globe of globalization points to the ways humans produced and represented a connected world, the globe of global warming is concerned with earth systems far outside of human agency and that can only be fully comprehended in relation to the systems of other planets. It is the latter that Chakrabarty discusses under the rubric of the planetary.

Chakrabarty’s insistence on taking the planetary seriously is a significant departure from and challenge to the traditions of anticolonial and postcolonial theory with which he is so closely identified. As he acknowledges, from Frantz Fanon’s image of the Manichean world of colonialism to his own *Provincializing Europe*, anticolonial and postcolonial critique has been concerned to theorize the global as a space of unevenness, differentiation, and hierarchy. From this perspective, claims to the oneness of the world are viewed with skepticism and subjected to unmasking critiques (17–18). Within the debate over climate change, the Anthropocene has been the object of similar intervention. Those informed by Marxist and postcolonial perspectives have argued that the attribution of climate change to humans as such elides the fact that the greatest contributors to our carbon footprint have been states of the global North, with China and India playing a growing role only in the last decade. Alternative framings such as the

capitalocene¹⁷ or efforts to locate global warming in the post-1950s period of the great acceleration¹⁸ seek to name this differentiated contribution and by extension to demand that global North states shoulder the largest burdens in a just transition.

For Chakrabarty, this perspective folds the planetary too quickly into our existing analytic frameworks and normative commitments. The planetary asks us to contend with the fact that “because humans constitute a particular kind of species they can, in the process of dominating other species, acquire the status of a geologic force. Humans, in other words, have become a natural condition, at least today” (37). Whereas the critique of unequal burdens of and responsibilities for climate change assimilates the climate crisis into anthropocentric categories, this planetary approach decenters the human world. It asks us to view the climate crisis from the perspective of the earth, a perspective from which the internal constitution of human civilization and the attribution of responsibility to one segment of humanity is inconsequential. What would it mean to make this realm of the planetary an object of humanist concern? How would political theorists for whom questions of justice, equality, power, and freedom are central take on the planetary? I pursue these questions by both highlighting the answers that Chakrabarty offers and proposing new lines of inquiry.

Chakrabarty suggests that political theory and particularly the history of modern political thought is implicated in the disavowal of the planetary. “The mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding foundation of fossil-fuel use,” he provocatively declares. Yet “in no discussion of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as—and through processes closely linked to—their acquisition of freedom” (32). The inability to view humans as geological agents stems from a disaggregation of human and natural history central to modern political thought. Through a reading of Kant, Chakrabarty shows that this disaggregation emerged from an understanding of the human race as both a physical and a moral species. For Kant, as for many other figures of modern political thought, it would be the latter that grounded a distinctly human capacity for self-perfection and that made possible a transition from “a guardianship of nature to the state of freedom” (Kant quoted at 144).

Even as anticolonial thought denounced the ways the nature/freedom distinction relegated most of humanity to the realm of the non- or subhuman, the versions of anticolonialism that came to shape the project of decolonization

¹⁷Jason Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016).

¹⁸Rob Nixon, “The Great Acceleration and the Great Divergence: Vulnerability in the Anthropocene,” MLA Presidential Forum, *Profession*, March 19, 2014, <https://profession.mla.org/the-great-acceleration-and-the-great-divergence-vulnerability-in-the-anthropocene/>, accessed December 22, 2021.

largely extended this Kantian vision of the human as a moral species. Indeed, anticolonial nationalists of the mid-twentieth century were quintessential modernists with a profound faith in the sovereign capacities of humanity for self-transformation. This sense of possibility—what Chakrabarty calls a “secular religion of modernization” (110)—is captured, for instance, in Nehru’s 1948 prediction that “we shall solve our food problem in 5 to 7 years” (Nehru quoted at 107). As in Kant’s image of man’s earthly dominion, this was a vision in which the earth—its mountains, waterways, flora, and fauna—was “a vast potentiality” to be actualized in service of human flourishing (Nehru quoted at 109). Living after the failure of the postcolonial project Nehru announced and in the shadow of climate crisis, the secular faith that animated this sense of possibility is not one we can maintain. But we also seem trapped by the modernist visions of human freedom and well-being we have inherited—recognizing that their geological and earthly conditions of possibility are fast disappearing and still unable to invent alternative conceptions of human society.

If modern political thought in its European and non-European iterations has contributed to our entrapment, how should we approach our intellectual inheritance? What might be gained from the history of political thought in this context? Chakrabarty does not directly call for this, but perhaps our modern intellectual traditions might be read against the grain to expose and emphasize the entanglements of human and natural history. For instance, while Kant ultimately disaggregates animal and moral elements of the human to articulate a theory of human freedom, Chakrabarty’s reading of Kant illustrates how difficult and uncertain this disaggregation was. Although reason distinguishes humans from mere animals and endows them with the capacity for earthly dominion, it “did not straightforwardly guide humans toward recognition of their vocation” (144). Kant thus writes, “the history of *nature*, therefore, begins with good, for it is God’s work; the history of *freedom* begins with badness for it is *man’s* work” (Kant quoted at 145, emphasis in text). Attending to the equivocation and tragedy that marked the separation of the human and the natural might be one way to reorient our reading and teaching practices for the planetary age we now inhabit.

This is not to suggest that we already have all the resources to think the planetary within the canon of modern political thought. The planetary raises two central questions that require stretching our conceptual vocabulary. First, while the Anthropocene names the ways humans have become geological actors, Chakrabarty writes, “long-term Earth system processes [are] co-actors in the drama of global warming” (66). We thus need to not only come to grips with an unprecedented form of human agency, but we also need to recognize and account for nonhuman systemic actors. Second, the planetary’s decentering of anthropocentric perspectives requires a renewed consideration of the proximity of the human to the nonhuman world. In a moving chapter, which opens by reading the suicide note of the young Dalit student Rohit Vemula, Chakrabarty considers Vemula’s desire

that his body be understood “as a glorious thing made up of stardust” (quoted at 114). This formulation, Chakrabarty argues, “sees the human/Dalit body as connected to everything else in the cosmos, to its ancient past and its present. The view here is neither anthropocentric nor one that individuates the human body” (117).

It is striking that this planetary conception of the human is voiced by a figure whose caste status consigns him to a suspension between human and animal, life and death. This raises for us the question of whether intellectual traditions which emerged from such positionalities of marginalization and domination might be able to provide anchors for attending both to the agency of the nonhuman world and to a planetary conception of the human. In this regard, feminist and especially Black feminist engagements might prove particularly generative. For instance, rather than decry and reject the association of blackness with animality, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson probes this connection to account for the permeability and plasticity of the human.¹⁹ In her work on what she calls the “free gifts” of nature, Alyssa Battistoni draws on Marxist feminists to theorize the unvalued activity of ecosystems that sustain human civilization and capitalist production. Her account probes the overlaps between the unpaid labor of women’s work and the unaccounted labor of earth systems, illustrating how differentiations like public/private and economy/environment work to keep both “off the books.”²⁰

Battistoni’s work in particular illustrates how imaginative uses of comparison and analogy can bring closer to our perception processes and systems that seem far from our grasp. This is an effort of translation that seeks to employ the analytical tools of feminist theory in service of confronting the political and conceptual dilemmas of climate change. But Chakrabarty worries that translation efforts of this kind are ultimately exercises in displacement in which “humanity as a geological force” appears in the guise of “the human-existential category of power and its sociological-institutional correlates” (159). This is an important worry, as it is in all cases of translation where the original is not simply replicated but transformed in the process. But even as we ought to be cautious about such displacement, can we do without the tools of translation and analogy in attending to the planetary? Identifying modes of translation that can avoid displacement yet help us to comprehend the scale of the planetary appears as a central task for political theorists and humanists more broadly.

¹⁹Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in the Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

²⁰Alyssa Battistoni, “Free Gifts: Nature, Households, and the Politics of Capitalism” (PhD diss., Yale University, 2019), 29. For an earlier version of her argument, see Alyssa Battistoni, “Bringing in the Work of Nature: From Natural Capital to Hybrid Labor,” *Political Theory* 45, no. 1 (Feb. 2017): 5–31.