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Global gloom and planetary promise: Reflections on Dipesh Chakrabarty's
globe/planet distinction in the climate crisis

Tanu Sankalia

"The globe/planet distinction, [...], could be foundational for a possible and new philosophical anthropology at this moment of a world-wide environmental crisis."

- Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax*, p. 3

In Dipesh Chakrabarty's globe/planet distinction, I see (optimistic) possibilities for engaging the climate crisis through a planetary lens, whereas I find the global perspective pointing towards a (pessimistic) horizon replete with differences and challenges. The very phrase "philosophical anthropology," cited in the epigraph above, understood plainly as pertaining to human knowledge and human nature, contains within it the foundational globe/planet distinction: human knowledge is that of our planet, its geo-biology and deep time, whereas human nature shapes and is shaped by the "globe of globalization"—our interconnected political-economic order (3). To elaborate, "planet" is an *astronomical entity* that speaks of physical attributes (size, mass, density), includes the features that shape its surface (oceans, mountains, forests, volcanoes) as well as the swirling atmospheric elements that engulf it (fire, water, air), which, in turn, give us climate (long-standing conditions) and weather (short-durational conditions). "Globe," considering its usage today, is a *political, economic, and social paradigm* that maps nation states, the movement of people and goods, and the politico-ideological similarities and differences of East-West, and global North-South.

One way to comprehend our planet, Chakrabarty points out, is through Earth System Science (ESS), which offers a "deeper understanding of the physical, chemical, biological and human interactions that determine the past, current and future states of

the Earth.”¹ But arguably, for most, this science may be too difficult to grasp. Even though ESS can spur scientific inquiry and climate solutions, its exceedingly arcane, scientific, and abstract character makes it well beyond the grasp of most ordinary people. Therefore, using Chakrabarty’s own formulation from *Provincializing Europe* in regards to “political modernity” in the Global South, I suggest that earth science is indeed “indispensable” yet “inadequate” as a way for us to construct knowledge with which we can live on our planet in an age of climate change.²

Can earth science then be complemented by a sustained engagement with phenomenological experience and indigenous knowledge so as to make it less abstract and more approachable? Even if the “planet” conception “decenters the human,” as Chakrabarty points out, can human experience (of the planet) add to it (3)? Indeed, Chakrabarty concedes that there may be “other understandings and representations of the planet than that proposed by ESS” (9). In this regard, I find philosopher Michel Serres’s *Biogea* to be an evocative set of meditations about our “ways of knowing” the planet—*Gea* (“earth”): “seas, rivers, lands, glaciers, volcanoes, winds;” and *Bio* (“life”): the “fauna of rats, wolves, jackals, and the flora of trees, wisteria, oaks, and lindens”—that can harness phenomenological experience to add to our understanding of the planet.³ Serres asks if we can tune into the sounds of nature that are precursors to language so as to “decipher the codes of living things,” and even those “inert things of the earth [that] receive, store, and process information.”⁴ Thus, following Serres, I propose we complement earth science and scientific discourse with the phenomenological experience, or “ways of knowing,” that people and communities possess across the globe. This diverse yet interrelated knowledge of the planet—a

¹ See <https://serc.carleton.edu/introgeo/earthsystem/nutshell/index.html> Accessed February 1st, 2024

² Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press; 2000.

³ Serres, Michel. *Biogea*. Univocal. 2012. p. 196

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 96

form of planetary thinking outside of hard science—may produce more relatable approaches to countering climate change.

The “oneness” of Earth System Science, Chakrabarty argues, “hides the fact of differentiation of humans that is the condition of its own possibility” (10). This possibility is one that can be embraced so as to productively “split the planet” into a pluriverse, as Chakrabarty puts it. What if we are able to find a pluriverse of action within the “planetary”, so to say, through ESS, phenomenology, everyday experience, and situated knowledge? Along these lines, we may differentiate the manner in which the Nahua in Mexico respond to the biosphere of the Mexican Altiplana from the way Bhils in Madhya Pradesh, India, carve out their existence on the Vindhyan plains. Mumbai’s climate adaptation strategy to sea level rise can be drawn from experiences of Koli fisherfolk based on their encounters with the ever changing seas and tides, while San Francisco may choose to take a more “data-driven” approach consistent with the region’s tech ethos. In this way, the planet is splintered, but the question is not a “global” one, in the sense of the use of resources, or of “development and freedom” (Chakrabarty’s use of Amartya Sen’s much quoted phrase, 15). Rather, such faithfulness to differentiation offers a way to “stay in the [realities of the] present”—that of the climate crisis (17).

Chakrabarty defines the “global” as a “human made” construct of “empires, capitalism, and technology” (4). He contends that this “global” has been intensified by the Great Acceleration, which is a period beginning in approximately c.1950 that ushered in relentless extraction, particularly by Asian countries, of fossil fuels for development and growth. The ensuing exploitative relationship with the planet has brought on the Anthropocene—an age in which the transformation of the planetary biosphere is pinned to human activity. And the resultant, rapid change of our biosphere, climate scientists warn, is a path to climate catastrophe—unbearable spells of heat and cold, destructive cycles of drought and deluge. Climate scientists argue that the “right” human action could possibly mitigate climate change and avert disaster. In this vein, Chakrabarty hopes for a “unilateral withdrawal” from our current resource exploitative existence to “scaling back the realm of the human-modern” (42).

The looming question though is: who will scale back? From whom can we expect, or hope for, a “unilateral withdrawal”? The energy scientist Vaclav Smil, in his book *How the World Really Works*, asks how can the majority of humanity that lives in conditions that a small minority left behind generations ago, catch up?⁵ Smil offers a simple comparison: In 2020, 3.1 billion people in Africa used the same amount of energy as “Germany and France in 1860!” For that population to achieve a higher standard of living, “boost their food production, and build essential urban, industrial and transportation infrastructures,” their energy outputs would have to be tripled. Inescapably, Smil points out, “these demands will subject the biosphere to further degradation”(5). Smil writes that the “complete decarbonization of the global economy by 2050 is now conceivable only at the cost of unthinkable global economic retreat, or as a result of extraordinarily rapid transformations relying on near miraculous technical advances”(5-6). Smil disabuses us of our “fashionable claims” about a dematerialized economy “dominated by services and miniaturized electronic devices.”(5-6). Feeding the planet itself will require a vast quantity of direct and indirect fossil fuel inputs, and even more of them to produce what Smil calls the four pillars that gird our modern lives—ammonia, steel, concrete, and plastics.

In my own discipline of architecture, as I write, I read news of two new “highest towers in the world” being proposed—one in none other than Dubai, and another in Oklahoma City (of all places!).⁶ While many would agree that we don’t need mile high towers, these examples are signs that there is no “scaling back,” literally, and that more and more buildings that require higher inputs of capital, energy, materials, and labor are continually being proposed across the globe as cities try to do outdo one

⁵ Smil, Vaclav. *How the World Really Works: A Scientist’s Guide to Our Past, Present and Future*. Viking; 2022.

⁶See, <https://archinect.com/news/article/150413804/the-tallest-building-in-the-us-may-be-built-in-oklahoma-city-following-design-revision> and

See, <https://archinect.com/news/article/150413726/burj-azizi-dubai-s-future-second-tallest-tower-begins-construction-in-the-uae>

Accessed Feb 9, 2024

another in the race for being the tallest, biggest, wealthiest. These architectural instances are the real, material challenges we face as a global polity to shape a climate-aware future.

Despite the microchips, communications, and transportation that connect our world, the “global” remains greatly divided and sclerotic. This vastly different “globe,” Chakrabarty points out, is chopped up by nation states, ideologies, religions, diverse social formations, and radical material differences. It requires sustained political engagement. In this regard, rather than relying entirely on ESS’s engagements with the planetary, which I claim can be hard for everyone to follow, I pin more hopes on the “planetary” as a hybrid of indigenous, local knowledge of the planet drawn from phenomenological experience and earth science. Perhaps comprehending the planetary in all its myriad ways—ESS as well as our phenomenological situated understanding of it—might actually help shape a better, i.e. more complex and nuanced, response when it comes to the “global” by “making kin with opposing positions,” and allowing us to “orient ourselves in these disorienting times” (103).