Climate Crisis & the Trouble with “Humans”: Chakrabarty and Wilderson beyond Politics

Michael Rozendal

What is to be done? And who is to do it? Charting the chasm between these two questions, exigence and agency, is the sharp challenge of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax. The “what” of climate crises is clear, present, urgent—this is what he characterizes as the “planetary,” which has been defined by ecological science, linking many different data points into a unified “Earth system”(11). This contrasts with the “global”– our fragmented economic, social, technical order that also circles the world but is keyed to humanity’s shorter history and quarterly profits and disparate demands. The “who” of human agency that might be expressed through politics, that might achieve some resolution that amplifies freedom or, at the very least, minimizes destruction seems a fantasy at best. The fragmentation of human politics, “[o]n the ground then, there is only difference” (16), is fundamentally misaligned with the integrated planetary crisis.¹ Humanity is in trouble, a trouble of its own making, but perhaps not a trouble that is open to our solutions without deep critique of the “human” like that found in Frank B. Wilderson III’s Afropessimism.

Chakrabarty’s “global” is a diagnosis of the failure of humanity’s politics in the face of planetary crisis—the way that we understand humanity and politics have become mystifying impediments to action, though it’s unclear what, if anything, might take their place. Both politics and humanity are based on flawed premises that have been revealed by climate change—“modern political thought […] has defined the human as a political subject by bracketing […] the work of deep history, of the geobiology of the planet including the work that microbes do” (39). Subjectivity is

¹ “But the IPCC recommendations regarding carbon budgets for the atmosphere of the planet could only be made on the assumption that the planet is differentiated and yet one. Humans, on the other hand, are only differentiated, i.e., not-one, politically speaking” (8). Emphasis in original.
enmeshed in ecology, the action of our collective polis actually rests on non-human others who are not included in our deliberations, and the timeframe of change has nothing to do with upcoming elections. Crisis has revealed politics as we’ve known it² as a hubris of the Holocene, and all that we have built collectively might be built on the same shifting sands as Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ozymandias”: “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! / Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare”.

Even more than our politics’ enmeshment in the world, humanity’s planetary impacts are profoundly alienating, not at all about individual or collective intention. If this is the Anthropocene, it is because “Humans [. . . ] have themselves become a thing-like entity, a nonhuman planetary force that can change the geobiology of the planet” (46). The force with which humans exert themselves on the planet is neither the result of political solidarity, or oneness, nor does it stem from a unified vision. Yet, we still phenomenologically experience ourselves at a human level—the personal and interpersonal and social and political.

In Chakrabarty’s multifaceted exploration of “the historicity of humanity as a ‘thing’” (46) in light of environmental crisis, there are resonances with Frank B. Wilderson III’s racially grounded critiques of humanity along with the capacities, sociality, and sovereignty that have been ascribed to this supposedly universal category.³ What Wilderson’s work adds to this conversation is a set of terms around “Blackness” that may offer ways out of the impasses of human politics that Chakrabarty outlines. How so? By embracing the “thingness” that has been the rejected other of human agency and acknowledging the “gratuitous violence” that has always been at the heart of politics. This is a demystification that pushes against a western longing for a return to an lost state of centrality and agency while also perhaps questioning “postcolonial visions of ‘development as freedom’” (Chakrabarty 15).

---

² “The task of politics is to find solidarities across these differences, sublating, articulating, or even suspending them for a while” (16).
³ Chakrabarty considers several thinkers aligned with elements of Wilderson’s project. See, for example, the engagement with Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro 81ff and with Kathryn Yusoff 94ff.
In *Afropessimism*, Wilderson sees the “human” (and humanity in turn) as a relatively recent construct based on an unstated opposition with Blackness, and as he writes, “coterminous with Slaveness; Blackness is social death” (111). Exposing and exploring this foundational, unstated dichotomy within humanity as a holder of capacity (in contrast to the Slave’s incapacity), sociality (vs. social death), and sovereignty (vs. “thingness”), Wilderson claims that there are antagonisms at the core of the global project that Chakrabarty diagnoses, and perhaps these suppressed values offer ways out of this trouble, or at least ways not to reify human centrality and agency. Wilderson raises the possibility that “no slave, no world” (11)—an end to global narratives and systems. If this is an end, then it is not also a promise of a new beginning because “Afropessimism is a looter’s creed: critique without redemption or a vision of redress except ‘the end of the world’” (174).

Why would those who have attained some measure of human agency and capacity turn their back on this modernity, this politics, this ethics despite the violence and destruction at the core of each element? Latour articulates this apocalyptic attachment to modernity on a different level: “Many people think that we deserve modernization. The kingdom of God, in its secular version—that is, wealth and abundance—is our right. We are already in the promised land. Why should we leave this promised land? To wander the desert again searching for another?” (qtd. Chakrabarty 71-2 emphasis in original).

Latour’s assessment of modernity’s appeal in the form of the secularized gods of wealth and abundance adds on to Wilderson’s notion of a looter’s creed: namely that there is no easy answer, or resolution, to stepping outside the modern paradigm, no matter how much more meaningful human freedom⁴ or development can be achieved in that paradigm. This human freedom and development are precisely keyed to climate crisis, but not only to this crisis. Wilderson’s perspective, in its pessimism, might rhyme with Chakrabarty’s sense of the incommensurability between a fragmented globe and a

---

⁴ “While you can think of the idea of freedom in the abstract, most modern, concrete instances of freedom entail the consumption of energy. [. . .] The key to the exercise of rights and freedom is not just the availability of energy [. . .] but the availability of cheap and plentiful energy” Chakrabarty “Climate + Capital” The SEI Podcast Series 8/6/2015.
unified planet. And this rhyme might be a possibility for solidarity, for seeing racial justice and environmental justice as part of a struggle that is not abstract, totalizing (planetary/global) but also lived in ways that are historical and thus open to necessary change.