What Else is There to Talk About? Dipesh Chakrabarty's *One Planet, Many Worlds*

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In the second chapter in his book of essays, *One Planet, Many Worlds. The Climate Parallax*, Dipesh Chakrabarty chides the Subaltern Studies group, including himself, for their scholarship in the 1990s: “Postcolonial thought of the 1990s—for all its critique of the nation-state and race-class formations—was just as environmentally blind as anti-colonial modernizing nationalisms” (58). These retroactive misgivings suggest that, in the current chain of human crises worthy of consideration by social thinkers and historians, one issue stands above the rest: climate change. Anyone who missed that point thirty years ago seems misguided to the author now and the praise and attention he applies to thinkers like Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Anna Tsing, among others, suggest the paths the author feels he ought to have taken. While I respect the author's humility and capacity for self-critique, the implication that not writing about climate change is a form of missing the boat strikes me as unnecessarily pejorative. As the author asserts in the introduction, human politics are not and never have been one and we cannot expect a unified movement to resolve excessive greenhouse gas emissions and the increasingly dire consequences of an overheated planet. Yet the challenges of our time are multiple and interconnected. While climate chaos is clearly going to touch us all as we move forward into the twenty-first century, there will be many ways of responding to this existential threat, intellectually as well as politically.

One of the key dynamics that runs through this book of synthetic essays is the notion of modernity, a term whose meaning is in constant flux. When Charles Baudelaire was using this novel word in the middle of the nineteenth-century, “modern” meant what “contemporary” or “current” mean today. He wrote that beauty must possess a classical, timeless character, but it also needed a bit of the modern, a way of wearing this classical pose in a new “jacket.”¹ By now, we have endured the

instrumentalization of modernity into modernization which became, in the hands of social scientists like Walt Rostow and many other modernization theorists, a means of differentiating advanced from backward, and a model demonstrating the arc of progress to postcolonial nations who sought to share some of the advantages of wealthier nations. This is a triumphalist modernity, highly self-serving, and it is, of course, exactly this modernity that led to the untrammeled expansion of fossil fuel use across the world that has culminated in our environmental calamity. It is this narrow model of modernity that was considered an unquestioned positive attribute in the 20th century. Based on this idea, I would argue that the work that the Subaltern Studies group did, and particularly Chakrabarty’s own contribution to this scholarship in the form of his book *Provincializing Europe*, was to contest the assumptions of this modernity and the model of development that it represented. This was, in my view, an implicit response to the climate issue because it struck at the foundations that underlie anthropogenic climate change, namely the universally accepted assumptions about the importance of industrial technology, urbanization and, above all, consumer culture. Yet, at this current moment, Chakrabarty seems to see it differently, because on the last page of *One Planet, Many Worlds*, he asserts that “the desire for modernization cannot be separated from certain emancipatory desires that, once European, are now everywhere” (106). It seems Europe’s and America’s ability to provincialize the rest of the world (deeming it backwards in order to assert its own superiority) is connected to the emancipatory desires of postcolonial nations. In this formulation, Chakrabarty seems to agree with Rostow after all, that modernization is linked to emancipation even if it is the cause of so many other problems.

This is puzzling because, on the previous page, Chakrabarty had turned to the indigenous botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, to end his essay, seeing her approach as exemplary as she accepts both science and indigenous knowledge about the natural world. Holding these two propositions together, as overlapping if unintegrated models, allows her work to manifest the “the politics of ‘being with’ in the face of the gathering emergency of climate change” (105). In some ways, we might consider Wall Kimmerer as offering a kind of postmodern Aufhebung of the modernization dilemma because,
instead of negating indigenous wisdom in the service of modern science (or vice versa),

she looks at indigenous wisdom as a means to greater consciousness that both suffuses

and expands beyond the domain of scientific inquiry. And yet, being with does not

expel the threat of climate catastrophe or erase the history of Native American

genocide.

Thus, we come to the parallax in the title: two views of the same thing are

fundamentally incompatible and nevertheless real. The viewer's position is key here

because it makes it possible for each person to see one or the other view of the real,

depending on where she is standing. As such, this seems like a good allegory for our

present moment. Despite all the hand-wringing among those who say that we are not

doing enough to address the crisis, there are many who see no crisis, or who perceive

in the crisis an opportunity to profit from the uncertainty of the market. And all of us

living in modern houses with modern cars are absolutely continuing to burn fossil fuels
to persist in our lifestyles, though we may try to minimize the damage by buying more

new products, like electric cars and heat pumps. Those of us who are concerned with

the climate crisis, even the Earth System scientists who formulated the model and

measure it regularly, still have not been able to reconcile the fundamental reality that

we all contribute to climate change in ways that we both can and cannot control.

So what does this new book add to our lexicon? My view is that it helps us to

understand why our current domain of governments and international agreements

sponsored by the United Nations, the UNFCCC, is not “solving the problem.” In

attending to the challenge of the complexity of human entanglements with other

species and even non-living actors, the author clarifies:

Yet, for all the creative and powerful scientific fabulations that Haraway,

Latour and others have given us, we have not found practical paths

towards transforming the epistemologically acceptable figure of the

human as an entangled entity into an effective political agent in human

institutions—in parliaments, in the United Nations, in factories,
businesses, or anywhere else” (98).
While the complexity of human existence on the planet can be conceived in so many ways, none of these conceptions can fix the political problems that are unleashed from human interaction with our environment. But we will not stop talking about it and that, in itself, is a means of ‘being with’ and reconciling ourselves to accept our collective fate.