A Response, Posted with Gratitude

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This conversation is amazingly rich. So many perspectives, and so many different disciplines and points of view represented here! It is impossible to do justice in my brief response to the wealth of ideas these essays contain. Needless to say, I feel honored and humbled that so many colleagues from the University of San Francisco and from different areas ranging from public health and management to the humanities and the arts should take the trouble to engage with my book, *One Planet, Many Worlds* when the topic addressed in that book—the problem of (in)action on climate change viewed from a humanistic perspective—has already generated a vast amount of literature demanding our attention. A very big “thank you” to Tanu Sankalia and his colleagues for inviting me to this conversation.

The intellectual generosity, creativity, and critical thought on display here—including some strong disagreements voiced by some—have returned me to what I see as the basic paradox of the climate question. The problem of inhabiting a warming planet is undoubtedly a political problem that cries out for urgent and adequate measures of politics and policy; but it is also a wicked problem that allows for a diversity of politics that makes adherence to any synchronized global calendar of action difficult if not impossible. Michael Rozendal is right in diagnosing the problem I tried to pose in my book: “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...* This ongoing and somewhat unresolvable tension between the moral imperative to act on questions of existence and justice—

involving both humans and nonhumans—and the difficulty of collective action makes for another ethical challenge: How should we inhabit this paradox even as we try to get beyond it? How to be in these times? The expression “to be” is, of course, inherently futural in orientation. The question itself speaks of an openness to the future. Since climate change, by the uneven and often-unjust nature of its impact, fragments both the present and the future by producing victims in different and unequal ways, one can only speak of the present and the future in the plural. And the plurality must include a range of positions: from the ambiguity that Jonathan D. Greenberg creatively reads into the word “agitation” to the dissenting voice of Quynh N. Pham that rejects the very premise of my book, that the planet, i.e. what scientists conceive of as the “earth system”—the life support system of the planet—is indeed *one*!

Whatever we individually think of the value of Earth System Science, everyone here agrees that there is no addressing the climate crisis without being mindful of questions of diversity. Annette Regan, who does not have any major disagreements with me, underscores this position by the words with which she concludes her essay: “Without the inclusion of diverse partnerships and community voices, we are destined to repeat … historical examples of human disease and more.” But the issue at hand is, I think, something more than diversity. It is about fragmentation of our sense of our own historical times (noted, for example, in Stephen Kraus’ essay). Political thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often imagined a common future for humanity.
Anti-colonial thinkers—from Fanon to Senghor—followed suit in essaying their own thoughts towards a common future. Historical struggles for socialism or liberal-capitalist democracy—from Marx to Fukuyama—assumed a common destiny for humans, probably a highly secular and morphed version of the old Christian idea of providence. Those futures were all modern, eligible for inclusion in any history of modernity. The current planetary environmental crisis, on the other hand, speaks precisely of the ruination of this modern picture of the future as a common destiny. A shared catastrophe, yes. But the possible futures that we imagine now are many.

The unquestioning belief in modernization and economic growth that was fostered in the post-war and decolonizing world of the 1950s began to come apart in the ten years between the publication of two books, Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) and the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* (1972). But this belief in modernization and economic growth remains a doxa with many powerful nations and individuals of the world. A case in point would be Bill Gates’ book, *How to Avoid a Climate Disaster*. Gates takes the climate crisis seriously but cannot imagine anything beyond making the Western lifestyle available to everybody in the world! His views are shared by many that are engaged in working out technologies for carbon capture and sequestration, and for engineering the climate of the whole planet. Outside of the OECD nations, the most populous nations of China and India are trying to grow their way out of this crisis even as their growths palpably worsen the states of their shared and national “environments.” The position outlined by Gates in his book is widely shared by the leaders of emerging nations who see in “growth” the only practical solution to
questions of mass poverty. What they see as our common future is some kind of green capitalism: the rule of capital with capital and fossil fuel decoupled from each other.

But can one really decouple capitalism or modernization from the environmental destruction of the planet? There is room for skepticism here, giving rise to strong, rational arguments against “growth.” Among scholars on the left, there is a consensus that the consumerist lifestyle—while much more widely available and practiced today than in the past—is simply not generalizable for all. Pursuing this future, as Bill McKibben has often pointed out, will see us run out of the planet! Degrowth remains attractive as a vision of the future but not all arguments for degrowing the global economy are the same. Take, for example, the Japanese Marxist philosopher Kōhei Saitō’s vision of degrowth outlined in his recent book, *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto* (trans. Brian Bergstorm; New York: Astra House, 2024). It is thoughtful book but, as in the long tradition of Marxist thinking, it assumes into existence a world-historical subject—no longer a revolutionary proletariat but a rational, collective “we” that will work together to create a society where all social, economic, and technological choices will be based on rational regulation (see pp, 21, 38-39, 69, 83, 135, and elsewhere). What we do not know is where, historically, this subject would constitute itself. Will all the various elements of our discontent with capitalism coalesce into such a grand-historical subject? We don’t know.

It would be wrong, however, to think that this problem of defining the “we” is Saitō’s alone. The question “what is to be done?” raises what to my mind is the most difficult question of the planetary crisis: Who acts? And in whose name? Dana Zartner’s
engaging piece in this collection shares this problem with Saitō and others. One Planet, Many Worlds, she says—rightly—leaves a critical question largely unanswered: “how do we create this shift in ideas, in worldviews, to get people to consider all living beings, all parts of the Earth and its ecosystem when making decisions about the future?” The question is valid but in its posing fragments time in the way it orders it. The “we/people” distinction brings in its wake a very modernist problematic: the avant-garde “we” and the people in whom “we” must produce a shift in ideas. My point is not that this way of thinking is wrong. My point is about the two out-of-joint orders of time—two different futures, as it were—that hold this statement together. There is the shadow of a modernist understanding of the politics that underpins the actions of an avant-garde “we” who change how “people” think, and thus move the latter towards a desired future. But cutting across that order is the imagination of a new regime of politics in which political agents are no longer simply humans. Other “natural entities” like rivers and trees have legal rights too. It is not that Zartner’s point is hopelessly impractical; it is not. She gives the examples of New Zealand, Bangladesh, Peru, and other nations where some natural entities have been given rights, at least in law if not in practice. But once they have been given a legal standing, will rivers and trees and rocks join the avant-garde “we” as political subjects? I don’t mean this as a rhetorical question. We live in times when the idea of the “political subject” splinters. These practical instances are examples of hybrid or fragmented futures. It is only within a particular imagination of the future that we see these instances as “the beginnings” of where “we” want to be. But we cannot know what these instances are a beginning
of. One cannot divine the future anymore. Only time will tell. To my way of thinking, these instances are indeed parts of the radical plurality of the present.

This contemporary plurality of imagined futures is also indicated by decolonial positions that advocate non-modern futures based sometimes on E. F. Schumacher’s “small is beautiful”-type visions and inspired, in more recent times, by discussions about Indigenous or peasant methods of land management and environmental care. This position is best represented here by Quynh Pham. I do not deny the validity of this line of thinking. Ashis Nandy or Vandana Shiva are thinkers I grew up with. That Indigenous societies were in many, if not all, instances extremely sustainable seems beyond dispute. But Indigenous societies, by their very nature, supported small populations. Humanity may be too deep into modernization to be able to find a peaceful way back to Indigenous futures. The widely respected Canadian researcher Vaclav Smil writes in his book, How the World Really Works (referenced by Tanu Sankalia in his contribution) the following: “Without [the use of ammonia] as the dominant nitrogen fertilizer (directly or as feedstock for the synthesis of other nitrogenous compounds), it would be impossible to feed at least 40 percent and up to 50 percent of today’s nearly 8 billion people. Simply stated, in 2020, nearly 4 billion people would not have been alive without synthetic ammonia” (p.79). And Smil is no admirer of unregulated and unrestrained capitalism.

Our conversation therefore will have to include both Pham and Smil. Dwelling in or staying with (to move between the languages of Heidegger and Haraway) this plurality of diagnoses means acknowledging the different kinds of futures that
sometimes overlap and sometimes clash in our discussions about the present while no one knows exactly where human worlds and the planet will transition to in the time left until the end of this century. It will be a warmer planet, no doubt, now that the average warming of the atmosphere, by all reckoning, is destined to cross the 1.5°C mark.

Staying with this plural present also means engaging, and not just tolerating, difference and disagreements, to develop a capacity to find ourselves in one another’s apparently opposed positions, to be able to see, as Smil does, our implication in an energy-intensive civilization independent of our political preferences. In other words, I ask not to foreclose debates by having recourse to the familiar moral gesture that says: “you are the problem, I am the solution.” I think global modernization has gone beyond that point. Besides, climate change is an evolving crisis. Humans disagree, fight, but are also a species that learns—though they may not always learn in time (see Kraus in this collection). Our debates today—intense, and often divisive (hence political) as they are—may be superseded by the events of tomorrow. The dividing lines may shift. And the only way one can remain—in the present—open to that which is “to come” is by remaining open to the plural, fractured, uneven, and in many instances even unjust futures that orient how we inhabit the present.

Indeed, as I read them, all the contributions of our colleagues here address—directly and by implication—the question of how to be in the present while being oriented to the future. This futural mode of dwelling in a plural and contested present is what many of the contributors emphasize. Their contemplations are both ethical and actional. It does not mean unanimity, but I see points of convergence. Vida Pavesich’s
thoughtful engagement with the work of Hans Blumenberg is an exercise in working out desirable modes of habitation for the human species in this climate-stressed age: “[The] two extremes – [the stratigrapher’s] rock and [the technologist’s] mastery – signify the historically specific parameters – the ‘absolutes’ – from which the species must distance itself” (emphasis in original). Marjolein Oele’s beautiful essay on the rushed nature of our everyday time helps us both to dwell in as well as to dwell on that time. The artificial wall often set up between action and contemplation undergoes a productive collapse in her essay. Virginia Ramos’ literary experiment that rebels against “the purely academic essay” and attempts “to render a natural phenomenon [firestorm] into form” ends up with the figure of the human who will be able to love their vulnerability by learning “the lesson against vanity.” Pedro Lange-Churión’s expressly Badiou-ian take on planetarity as a truth-event is yet another instance of combining the ethical with the political. Kelly McBride addresses the question of being—having-to-be and being actional at the same time—by suggesting another way of being political. She refers to the fact of our being always-already open to “start anew” every time we fail, politically. Kraus and Greenberg speak to questions of well-being in a futural gesture: “Mental health will become a cultural priority.” Greenberg’s state of “agitation” morphs into a hopeful vision of the political and the just. Sofia Gonzalez’s ruminations of loss and nostalgia find our future anticipated in oak galls, a symbiotic relationship between wasps and oak trees that reminds us of slow time when we have lost our sense of bearing in the time of the “great acceleration.” Humans have become strangers to the world, says Melinda Stone. In deliberately being
parochial, however, she finds, as she ponders the etymological origins of the word, intimations of a desirable future: “We must stay tuned in, we must slow down, we must observe and be available to the varied frequencies that are present.” Alice Kaswan’s recommendation of a practice of “pragmatic utilitarianism” for the privilege to goad them into action—not the usual argument about altruism of the rich—is clearly ethical and practical at the same time. Some do not agree with me that “being political” is provincially human. Gerard Kuperus, for instance. I appreciate the force of his disagreement but find in his search for a broader definition of the political, that includes the nonhuman (of various scales including the planet), a conceptual possibility we must always keep open. The parallels that Rozendal finds between my concern with the “humanity-thing” and Frank B. Wilderson III’s Afropessimism are brimming with intellectual possibilities. The theme of deliberate withdrawal finds new and, for me, unforeseen meanings in Stephen Roddy’s explorations of the Chinese philosopher Liang Shuming’s thoughts from the early part of the twentieth century. These discussions are necessarily futural.

I think where I get most push-back in what colleagues have said is on the question of the planet—by which I mean the earth-system, the geobiological processes that support life—being one. Colleagues on the left often seem suspicious of any figures of the One. The One seems imperious and unholy to them. But think of this: Hannah Arendt called her book The Human Condition. Surely she was aware of differences that separate humans but could she have called it “Human Conditions”? Even Sankalia—who is otherwise sympathetic to my project—finds hope in planetary
thinking only when we are “able to find a pluriverse of action within the planetary.” I will leave this debate for another time. I want to simply say for now that there are non-imperious ways of thinking of the One as a non-totality which is how I understand what scientists call the “earth system.”

Let me end, however, echoing Sankalia’s note of hope by referring to John Zarobell’s essay. Zarobell acknowledges that “human existence on the planet can be conceived in so many ways” but “none of these … can fix the political problems that are unleashed from human interaction with our environment.” Yet, he argues, “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.” That is a fine summary of what I think this collective discussion has achieved.

In conclusion, I thank the participants once again for their generous and stimulating engagement with my work. My grateful thanks.