

Climates: Architecture and the Planetary Imaginary

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The Universals and Particulars
of Climate

Dipesh Chakrabarty
in conversation with James Graham

JAMES GRAHAM

You've argued that one role of the humanities in a time of climate crisis is to help think about the cultural values attached to climate. You mention that the oft-cited 2 degrees Celsius—the maximum global warming target of international climate talks for the past few years—isn't scientifically dangerous so much as *culturally* dangerous, in the sense that it's a politically constructed threshold at which we've agreed that what we value as "human civilization" is threatened. "Danger" is a statement of value rather than a statement of science. So I'd be interested to hear more about how the humanities or creative fields are implicated in the ways we talk about climate change.

DIPESH CHAKRABARTY

There are two aspects to this question. One is the point I've made on other occasions—climate change as such is a geophysical problem defined by climate and earth system scientists. But the word "dangerous" cannot be a scientific word. As historian Julia Adeney Thomas has pointed out, "dangerous" here assumes questions of value (priorities) and scale. These are typically issues addressed by scholars in the humanities. So "dangerous climate change" is indeed a humanistic concept. But climate scientists, by ascribing to humans a geophysical agency of enormous scale (an agency capable of putting off the next ice age, say), pose challenging problems to humanities scholars who are used to thinking of "agency" in particular ways, as figurations of autonomy and sovereignty. So some people take issue with one of my propositions in the "Climate of History" essay, which is that humans have no ontological access to being certain kinds of entities—say, a species or a geophysical force.¹ These scholars often argue in favor of art as a form of auto-access or self-knowledge—that things like films or paintings or installation art can bring about a kind of consciousness of humanity's planet-shaping capacities. There's a lot of "Anthropocene art" that attempts similar things, and much of it is very creative and suggestive. But that does not refute my point about trying to access, or trying even to bring within a sensible grasp, something that is of a scale that is strictly incomprehensible. This is not to dispute the role that art can play in giving us some way of imagining things that defy ordinary human experience. When I was growing up in India, an American physicist named George Gamow was very popular among high school or undergraduate students. He had many books on relativity and other wonders of physics, and he would try to represent them pictorially—to represent curved space, for instance. To think that these representations bring things that defy human experience within sensible (as distinct from conceptual) grasp is, I think, problematic.

JG

Could we list architecture as a marker of "dangerous climate change" too, not just as a technical object but also as a carrier of values? Its ability to represent the scope of climate change is similarly compromised. The scale at which it can address the climate crisis, as an architectural object, is limited to a somewhat localized part of a far more complicated set of interactions between buildings and environment.

DC

Architecture is a nice blend of technical things and humanistic impulses. I'm fascinated by Kate Orff's work on the New York City coastline, which was shown at the Columbia conference. There's a very constructive side to that kind of work: "Okay, a lot of the coastline may go underwater, which means we'll be left with a new coastline. How do we build that new coastline, having learned some of the lessons of previous mistakes?" It's an incredibly interesting proposition. And that kind of work also points to how the realities of climate change are seeping into people's consciousness—that we share this planet with other creatures and other things, that we are connected, that our institutions (whether capitalism, housing, the state) are all embedded in processes that support life.

This is why I'm so interested in that division that begins in Aristotle and runs through Agamben, between *bios*, the life of a citizen, and *zoe*, life in general. (Some Aristotle scholars do not agree with this proposition but I am following Arendt and Agamben in holding on to it, provisionally, to make a point.) To some degree it de-centers the human, by which I mean that it stops us from thinking a thought that many religions have helped us to think—that the world was made for us. The real lesson to learn from the humanities is not that we can be non-anthropocentric, but that we can at least see the mistakes of imagining ourselves at the center of things. We often tend to assume that this planet and everything on it is ours, and that those things that aren't for us have to be kept at a distance or gotten rid of. Unlike the ecomodernists, I don't think the world can be our garden.² You can't put a human order on it.

JG

It seems to me that you're asking for a sort of generosity or even empathy in how we think about climate change. This shows up in how you talk about fossil fuels, which you've framed as a problematic form of dependency but not a moral failing, exactly. But it's also an interspecies kind of empathy, in that you ask us to consider the question of habitability, not just for humans, but for animals. In architecture at least, we tend to focus on the urban problems of sea-level rise—and an idea of resiliency framed by water—that leaves out some of these questions of habitability and habitat.

DC

The real problem is that a lot of stuff in the world is inimical to human life, or at least puts us in danger. The primary duty of the state and public institutions is generally thought to be to secure human lives, which in turn becomes a problem of population—our population size has to be such that in securing the lives of all humans we don't endanger the forms of habitability that other life forms have, or at least not to the degree to which we will if we are securing the lives of nine or ten billion or even more people by the end of this century, because securing the lives of these vast global populations means that those people should enjoy the fruits of development. Without development, you can't secure their lives. That's where we come to a real dilemma. Any positive proposal of reduction in population—which has to be a part of how we conceive of moderating our effects on the planet—in effect will be an anti-poor proposal and therefore

morally unacceptable. We have to find some natural way of first allowing populations to peak and then finding harmless ways, or at least democratically acceptable ways, for reducing our numbers.

And at the same time, even if it happens over generations, we have to give up what we're calling "fossil fuel attachment." The attachment is not to fossil fuels as such, but to what fossil fuels have made possible. I often emphasize to people that you can't get too moralistic about fossil fuels because a lot of our moral possibilities and universes have been enhanced by fossil fuels.

JG

I'm really interested in how population has been central to your thinking about climate crisis, in that you're echoing—and, at the same time, recasting—certain terminology that began with a set of 1970s ecologisms. There's obviously been quite a bit of criticism over the past decades of population alarmists like Paul Ehrlich. But I'm thinking especially of your use of the term "ecological overshoot," which is an incredibly useful and poignant phrase that also derives from that early-'70s sense of crisis. That was William R. Catton's term. So I'm curious about how we should be reading those figures, or not, for the present moment.

DC

I've tried to distinguish between that position and mine by making a distinction between *evolutionary* growth and the pace of it, and the growth that we've seen at a much faster rate than the pace of evolution. This is why I was using the work of the Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who argues that the rise of humans to the top of the food chain wasn't an evolutionary rise. We didn't individually become majestic animals. We used our brains and our symbolic systems and our capacity to create technology, and our ability to band together in larger numbers, to make it possible for us to be at the top of the food chain. If other animals are growing at the evolutionary pace, then our fast-paced growth of the last, let's say, seventy to eighty thousand years doesn't give other animals and their ecosystems the chance to adjust to our growth. There are certain moments along our journey to the top of the food chain when things get ratcheted up. The last of those moments was the post-Second World War world, after which population and consumption and many other indices of human growth and footprint really shot up. The question is not whether we can feed this population—though that is a complex question, given how climate change will affect agriculture. The real question is what kind of implications would there be for other forms of life, if ten billion people on this planet ate well. It's clear that if other forms of life are destroyed or put into crisis, then we suffer because the food chain suffers. You have to think about the general distribution of life. Even in this moment when most people don't get enough to eat, humans and the animals that we keep and eat claim 95 percent of what the biosphere produces.

And there can of course be genuinely alarmist scenarios. Some scientists are claiming that if the oceans get hotter by 6 degrees Celsius, then the phytoplankton—which currently supply about 60 percent of the oxygen in the atmosphere—will die off, meaning there will be radically less oxygen to go

around. These types of scenarios depend on the actual increase in temperature under consideration—they're not produced by alarmism or rhetoric; they're simply produced by the logic of the argument.

JG

Thus the discussion around the idea of “pre-traumatic stress disorder” among climate scientists, which Emily Scott mentioned at the conference. The science doesn't need alarmism to be deeply alarming.

DC

Though when you de-center the conversation from the human again, and approach it from the perspective of planetary life, the problem becomes a different one. If there's a massive extinction, we may go extinct entirely, or only a minuscule number of humans may survive—like the avian dinosaurs survived even when the dinosaurs went extinct. The most dominant species never continues its dominance after a major extinction. When dinosaurs and reptiles were ruling the planet, mammals were basically rodents. It's only when the reptiles ceased to be dominant that mammals took over, and of the mammals, we eventually became the dominant ones. Since earlier mammals were all forms of rodents, our ancestors basically all had night vision—we and the monkeys, to some degree, lost it.

JG

That's amazing.

DC

It had to do with monkeys needing to find fruit in the forest. As the forests became denser, trees couldn't depend on wind to disseminate seeds, so they had to find other ways. So fruits came along, and the trees needed animals that would actually eat the fruit. They used color to attract animals to eat the fruit, so there was a kind of reverse engineering that brought color vision to the eyes of apes and monkeys, and eventually us. It's important that it happened as a kind of collaboration with the larger ecological systems that were maintaining varied forms of life at the same time.

The point of all this is really to ask: What would our theories of capitalism, our theories of governance, our theories of economy, and our theories of politics look like if we saw all of that history, biological and otherwise, embedded in the processes that support life—that we were and still are a part of the history of life on this planet?

JG

One of the tropes that's found in most discussions of climate change—and your work in subaltern studies seems incredibly useful for thinking through it—is this universal, globalized “we” that's spoken of as the subject of climate. It's a language of solidarity and commonality, which is certainly important in many ways. That's the kind of world that was being represented in Paris. But we're also reminded—and I'm thinking here of Adrian Lahoud's presentation at the climate conference—that we have to temper our use of that “we” with a recognition that

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climate change is going to have radically particular effects in different places, that there's an uneven distribution of both the production of climate change and its effects on the ground. The "we" has a way of breaking down.

DC

Not only that, but this question of unevenness also applies to the making of the knowledge of climate change. It is defined largely by big American Cold War science. It came out of the studies of how one could colonize and weaponize space and atmosphere. That led to NASA research on life or its absence on other planets. It's not insignificant that people like James Lovelock and Jim Hansen come out of NASA. Lovelock used to study Mars before he developed his Gaia hypothesis. Hansen used to study Venus, which he saw as a case of runaway planetary warming. He wondered if similar processes were taking place on Earth. As he tells the story, he took a few months' leave to work on it and discovered that global warming was indeed happening here. So he left Venus and came back to this planet. *[Laughter]* I often think of climate change science as a problem of comparative planetary studies.

JG

Comparative planetary studies—that's great.

DC

But to return to your question about unevenness, it has been interesting for me to observe the conversations around climate in India. I haven't looked at the situation in China so much because of the language question, but I imagine it might be the same. Compared to the Western discourse on climate change, the Indian discussion in the public sphere has a much smaller bandwidth. The argument is mainly anti-Western: "The West did it; they should pay for it. We need to develop." There are some other voices that are marginalized, but this is the main position in India, whereas if I look at the literature coming out of England, France, Germany, the United States, to some degree Italy, there are many more voices at play—Marxists debating with non-Marxists, energy specialists and policy specialists and economists, all writing different kinds of things.

What we saw in Paris was a meeting of two hundred nations, but nations that aren't equally resourced to create a real public sphere of climate discussion. The discussion on globalization in India is far wider, richer, and more nuanced than the discussion on climate change. So I thought, why is it that climate change, which is a planetary issue, is a much less "global" issue than globalization? Why do people come to Paris from India and other places with such a monochromatic understanding of what's going on? In America, there is the possibility of talking about much broader stakes and longer scales—there are people like David Archer, a geophysicist who wants to talk about climate over the span of a hundred thousand years. Those voices, and voices like mine, are more able to exist.

JG

I was recently revisiting your *Provincializing Europe*, first published some fifteen years ago, and I was struck by your opening lines from Gadamer. The quotation begins, "Europe since 1914 has become provincialized," which is a sensible

epigraph, given your title. But you continue quoting Gadamer as he writes that “only the natural sciences are able to call forth a quick international echo.”³ This seemed, in some sense, like a bit of an uncanny glimpse of your work to come on the topic of climate change.

DC

That’s so interesting that you say it. Finish your thought, and I have something to add to it.

JG

Well, on the one hand, the passage contains that classic modernist division of natural history from human history that you’re out to trouble. But it also seems like it might point to a possible relationship between the project of subaltern studies and climate change. You argued in “Climate of History” that climate change was in some way challenging post-colonial thought. But it seems to me that for you, in *Provincializing Europe*, there’s always a kind of oscillation between universals—which allow us to think certain forms of freedom—and a very particular resistance to those universals, and we can find that same oscillation in the debate around climate.

DC

I try to sit on a fence between the universal and the particular, sure. In the case of climate science, the West is still seen as the master bearer of technology, and therefore of the science that supports technology and also the economies that support technology. These are societies that can produce a wider-ranging discourse about this problem, because it’s really the science and technology domains of these societies that are *defining* the problem. When Indian scientists write, they write about whether particular glaciers are expanding or staying the same or receding. There’s a fundamental difference in the scope of the discourse. Coming back to your question, when I was writing *Provincializing Europe*, which was rejoining the debate on globalization, it was much easier to make a place-specific argument—to say, “Look, capital itself can be place-specific.” Whereas with climate change, the formulations of the problem literally relate to an interplanetary space. The scales are as big as the scales on which you study black holes or other planets. And this is made possible by the discussion of science—although of course the value judgment of “danger” always brings the humanities back into the question.

Where the Gadamer quotation becomes relevant to me—and I hadn’t thought about it this way until you mentioned it—is that countries like China and India are now investing a lot in science, technology, and R&D. In India we talk about a crisis of the humanities because the country isn’t investing enough in them. But when I look at the climate debate, it’s clear that it’s a debate that is both provincial and universal at the same time. It’s provincial in the sense that the richest debate is located in only a part of the world—what we would broadly call the public sphere of the West. That “quick international echo” isn’t fully there. Even people who are critical of what they see as the very particular interests of the West in the debate, like Marxists, are still operating within a public sphere that is basically Western.

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What would a *Provincializing Europe* approach be for climate crisis? That's a hard question to answer until the public spheres in other countries are actually resourced to widen their voices and to create a more plural discourse.

JG

It seems to me that one of the geographical rifts occurs because the scientific discourse is being primarily framed through these Western channels, while the question of something like climate justice is generally thought to be sited in a different kind of territory.

DC

Yes—climate justice discourse really comes out of a pamphlet called “Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism,” which was published in 1991 by two respected Indian environmental activists. Its rhetoric is absolutely anchored in a Third World—ist, anti-colonial understanding of the global economy. But keep in mind that back in 1991, China was way, way down the list in terms of total emissions; India was barely in the picture. In the last twenty-five years, China has become the largest total emitter; its per capita emissions are higher than the EU's. India has become third or fourth in total emissions, depending on how you calculate the EU's emissions. The climate justice argument has largely kept its picture of the world as it was in 1991. That's why I'm saying that there's a lack of nuance and a small bandwidth of discussion. Indian intellectuals are incredibly up-to-date with respect to globalization, and I kind of wonder why that doesn't happen with climate—with climate science or the idea of climate justice. One reason might be that Indian scientists have not written any books discussing or explaining to Indians the nature of the problem.

JG

And you mentioned the problem of research infrastructure, which creates certain self-perpetuating patterns within discourse.

DC

If the problem of climate change hadn't arisen, I think I wouldn't have noticed the poverty of this public sphere, which really has to do with the historically evolved role of scientists. This wasn't true of the period of nationalist struggle, when scientists were part of the larger public sphere. But they are becoming extremely technical, and they write technical papers. There are good geologists and good oceanographers who write on particular problems. But there is no Jim Hansen or David Archer speaking to or from India.

JG

So in that way, another role of the humanities in the discussion of climate change includes, as always, to assist in the work of constructing that public sphere.

DC

This also returns to your question about the universal “we.” The climate scientists' way of producing a sense of a crisis is to frame it as a crisis for everybody.

When Jim Hansen went to speak to the Senate in 1988, his sense of urgency was not altruistic. He wasn't saying, "I'm concerned that Indians will suffer." He was concerned that everybody would suffer, including Americans. So his book is called *Storms for My Grandchildren*—not *Storms for the Grandchildren of My Friends in India*. Even though the science is provincial in the sense that it's located in particular places, dependent on particular technologies and institutions, it defines its crisis, at its extreme, as a crisis of life on this planet. That's why I go back to interplanetary studies—the original question of climate science was "Why is Mars so cold and Venus so hot, and both so incapable of supporting life?"

JG

One of the central observations of your "Climate of History"—and this gets to the question of the public sphere in certain ways—is that the period of 1750 to the present, known broadly to historians as the Enlightenment, with all of its attendant ideas about rationality and human freedoms, is also the period that scientists identify as the Anthropocene. These philosophical and scientific periodizations are bound up in each other. And we know from so many scholars, like Timothy Mitchell, that the institutions of democratic governance as we know them are bound up in carbon-based energy infrastructures.⁴ Could we talk more about the new kind of politics that might be demanded of this moment, which in certain ways might run counter to those freedoms promised by the Enlightenment? The formation of a genuine politics around climate change seems to be a major challenge, right?

DC

Technically speaking, the origins of the Anthropocene period are still being debated. But the Paris Conference on climate change is a good example of the contradictions we inhabit. Recently, at a conference on art and the environment in Florence, I was listening to a very interesting philosopher. His argument was that if you have a genuine crisis, which we do, then to simply say, "we have a crisis," while keeping on doing the same things, leaves you with a merely managerial approach. You acknowledge the crisis but you go on as before. A *critique* can emerge out of a crisis only if you arrest the things that you're actually doing.

My response to that was, "Look, because you're a philosopher and thinking philosophically, you probably think in more absolute terms than a historian would." Because as a historian, I think the reality for all the negotiators at the climate conference in Paris was that they were not negotiating climate change in a world in which climate change was the only global problem. There are other problems operating alongside it. Some people say, "We have a lot of poor people to bring out of poverty." Others say, "If I shrink my economy and de-scale my growth and become economically weaker, and therefore militarily weaker, my enemies will take advantage of that." To evenly contract economies at the same time, in all parts of the world, is an impossible condition to achieve in the real world.

And then you can look at the politics of climate change as the process of trying to produce this global humanity. But then, as I was saying to this friend in Florence, you are trying to produce it in a world in which moral life is already

riven by other questions, where humans don't see climate change as the only problem. That's why it's a predicament that our collective animal life has produced—a moral problem that comes in the shape of an odd question. We are asked, "What should we do?" But the moment we ask, "What should we do?" we discover that the "we" needs to be constructed. By the time that we are able to produce that "we," even if we are successful in that nearly impossible project, it may be too late in terms of the IPCC [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change] timetable.

JG

With a few weeks of distance from the Paris Conference, how do you think we did at constructing that "we" thus far?

DC

I think the basic thing about the Paris Conference is that the "we" was realized to the degree that all the signatory countries now have at least deliberately made themselves available for peer-group pressure and review. But in terms of commitments, just to give you a single example, they agreed that from 2020 onward they'll create an annual \$100 billion fund for climate-related adaptation and mitigation. But \$100 billion is a very small sum. I was reading somewhere that the total sales figure for cell phones currently is \$147 billion. Energy production is subsidized to a much, much higher degree (one figure I have come across is \$5.3 trillion globally). So if we get serious, we'll need to reorient those numbers. In India, they've put the fossil fuel guys in charge of the transition to solar.

JG

Ah! Of course. It's a global phenomenon, I'm sure. It's like the rebranding of BP to connote green energy production.

DC

When I was more of a Marxist, I used to read Paul Baran and all these people on American monopoly practices. I remember it being discussed that the American automobile companies would take out patents on electric cars only to defer their production, so that they could make maximum profits on petroleum-based cars—and then one day move on to electric or whatever. With the energy industry in control of the transition, they can obviously decide to some degree how to amortize their investments in fossil fuels as the transition happens. You can imagine all the financial processes involved.

What happens, philosophically, is that I think we're living in a world where the climate crisis is producing one timetable for action. Global capitalism then produces another timetable, or multiple timetables, for actions. The companies do it internally, in terms of scenario planning. They do it sector-wide. Then there are national timetables. You can see that there are many negotiations going on around different regimes of temporality and different regimes of politics and legality. I often say that we will enter an age of mismatched calendars. To imagine that the IPCC timetable could be met seems to me too optimistic, but what produces some optimism is the fact that countries have all agreed to make themselves more accountable, though maybe not in a legally binding way, to their peers.

Another ground for optimism is that as the crisis deepens, we will be forced to act—it's not a static situation. Last December, India had huge floods in Chennai;

it recently snowed in Rajasthan, which is one of the hottest parts of the country. Weird things are happening, and that—coupled with the large costs of these kind of weather events—may galvanize more action than we can imagine at this point. We may have to go down the melancholy path of climate change. But I don't see a scenario in which action issues from sheer collective wisdom, or an operative political agency that is being driven simply by wisdom.

JG

I wanted to posit one more connection between your work on climate change and the disciplinary history of architecture, maybe a slightly spurious one. But I was very interested of your readings of Benedetto Croce and R. G. Collingwood, following Vico, in “Climate of History.” They're also figures within the history of art and architecture, in that they've both theorized aesthetics: in particular, how aesthetic fields behave linguistically. You quoted Collingwood: “So far as man's conduct is determined by what may be called his animal nature, his impulses and appetites, it is non-historical; the process of those activities is a natural process.” So for Collingwood, the distinction of *bios* and *zoe* also maps onto a kind of historical versus non-historical binary.

The reason I've latched on to this passage is that at roughly the same moment as Croce is writing, we have Banister Fletcher writing his *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. It includes his much discussed “tree of architecture,” where the categories of “historical” and “non-historical” styles are used to distinguish the main trunk of that tree—the Western classical architectural tradition, which for Fletcher ran from Greece to America—from the dead-end branches, which carried the “non-historical” styles, by which Fletcher bracketed out the “non-Western” architectures of India, China, Peru, Egypt, etc. These were architectures that sat outside of his developmental narrative. So it seemed like there was something in this question of *zoe* and *bios* that could relate to the historiography of architecture, and how we've framed that problematic “Enlightenment” arc of architectural tradition relative to other architectures on the planet.

DC

It seems to me that, in effect, in this empirical view of architecture, he's relegating the Aztec architecture to the realm of nature, and therefore the *zoe*. From that point of view, you could think of the massive Aztec structures as kinds of human replications of an insect mound—constructing at a human scale what a social insect might create. That returns us to what I was saying I liked about Kate Orff's work. By looking at the marine creatures in the ocean, by looking at the wind, her project was really looking at habitation as something that exists in the *zoe*, and therefore in the question of life in general. It was giving up on an idea that I've also often critiqued, which is the ecomodernist notion of stewardship.

I see this distinction in Collingwood going back to Kant’s “Speculative Beginning of Human History” of 1786, where he basically says that the humanists should study the moral life of the species and not its animal life, which will be studied by scientists. But the problem today is that our animal life is so expanded because of our population and technology—the amount of stuff we eat, the energy we process, all the things we do—that we’re facing a crisis for the general distribution of life, such that even scientists are forced to ask a moral question: “So what should we do?” And there, of course, you encounter all the problems of moral life.

So in a sense, it seems to me that architecture may have maintained the *zoe/bios* division through the writing of its history, which has allowed the main Western trajectory to think of itself as belonging exclusively to *bios*. Whereas in fact, the challenge today is for Western architecture to take itself out of *bios* and into *zoe*.

JG

Returning architecture to the *zoe*—that seems like a wonderful place to end. Thank you so much, Dipesh.

1

Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197–222. See also Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Human Agency in the Anthropocene,” *Perspectives on History* (December 2012): 35–36.

2

For a description of the ecomodernist movement, see Michelle Nijhuis, “Is the ‘Ecomodernist Manifesto’ the Future of Environmentalism?” *The New Yorker*, June 2, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/is-the-ecomodernist-manifesto-the-future-of-environmentalism>.

3

Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 3.

4

See, for example, Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

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