



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change

Dipesh Chakrabarty

New Literary History, Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2012, pp. 1-18 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/nlh.2012.0007](https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2012.0007)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nlh/summary/v043/43.1.chakrabarty.html>

# Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change

Dipesh Chakrabarty

*For Homi K. Bhabha*

**H**OWEVER WE COME TO THE QUESTION of postcolonial studies at this historical juncture, there are two phenomena, both topics of public debate since the early 1990s, that none of us can quite escape in our personal and collective lives at present: globalization and global warming. All thinking about the present has to engage both. What I do in this essay is to use some of the recent writings of Homi K. Bhabha to illustrate how a leading contemporary postcolonial thinker imagines the figure of the human in the era of what is often called “neoliberal” capitalism, and then enter a brief discussion of the debate on climate change to see how postcolonial thinking may need to be stretched to adjust itself to the reality of global warming. My ultimate proposition in this essay is simple: that the current conjuncture of globalization and global warming leaves us with the challenge of having to think of human agency over multiple and incommensurable scales at once.

The nineteenth century left us with some internationalist and universal ideologies, prominent among them Marxism and liberalism, both progenies in different ways of the Enlightenment. Anticolonial thought was born of that lineage. The waves of decolonization movements of the 1950s and 60s were followed by postcolonial criticism that was placed, in the universities of the Anglo-American countries at least, as brother-in-arms to cultural studies. Together, cultural studies and postcolonial criticism fed into the literature on globalization, though globalization studies, as such, also drew on developments in the cognate disciplines of sociology, economics, and anthropology. Now we have a literature on global warming and a general sense of an environmental crisis that is no doubt mediated by the inequities of capitalist development, but it is a crisis that faces humanity as a whole. In all these moves, we are left with three images of the human: the universalist-Enlightenment view of the human as potentially the same everywhere, the subject with

capacity to bear and exercise rights; the postcolonial-postmodern view of the human as the same but endowed everywhere with what some scholars call “anthropological difference”—differences of class, sexuality, gender, history, and so on. This second view is what the literature on globalization underlines. And then comes the figure of the human in the age of the Anthropocene, the era when humans act as a geological force on the planet, changing its climate for millennia to come. If critical commentary on globalization focuses on issues of anthropological difference, the scientific literature on global warming thinks of humans as constitutively one—a species, a collectivity whose commitment to fossil-fuel based, energy-consuming civilization is now a threat to that civilization itself. These views of the human do not supersede one another. One cannot put them along a continuum of progress. No one view is rendered invalid by the presence of others. They are simply disjunctive. Any effort to contemplate the human condition today—after colonialism, globalization, and global warming—on political and ethical registers encounters the necessity of thinking disjunctively about the human, through moves that in their simultaneity appear contradictory.

But since I come to all these questions as someone trained in the discipline of history, allow me to approach them via this discipline and by way of a brief historical detour. And I apologize in advance for the slight intrusion of the autobiographical at this point, for I was also a witness to the history I recount here. My entry into the field of postcolonial studies, quite fittingly for someone interested in the theme of belatedness, was late.<sup>1</sup> Postcolonial ideas, as we know, took by storm departments of English literature in the Anglo-American academe in the 1980s. Now when I look back on it, postcolonial studies seem to have been a part, initially at least, of a cultural and critical process by which a postimperial West adjusted itself to a long process of decolonization that perhaps is not over yet. After all, it cannot be without significance that what brought Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Isaac Julien together to read Fanon in the London of the late 1980s and the 1990s was the struggle against racism in a postimperial Britain, a struggle sometimes given official backing by the radical Greater London Council and hosted by the Institute of Contemporary Art.<sup>2</sup>

The American scene with regard to postcolonial studies was admittedly somewhat different. Edward Said wrote *Orientalism* (1978) out of his sense of involvement in the Palestinian struggle and Gayatri Spivak, I assume, was responding in part to the culture wars on American campuses about opening up core curriculum (as at Stanford in the late 1980s) and redefining the literary canon when she introduced the Indian feminist writer Mahasweta Devi to academic readers in the United States. Australian

developments that I personally witnessed in these years drew on both English and North-American instances. I got drawn into debates about “culture as distinction” and about the literary canon that took place in the meetings of the Arts Faculty at the University of Melbourne in the late 1980s. A leading scholar in those debates was Simon During, a pioneer in what was then emerging as the field of cultural studies.<sup>3</sup> The University of Essex conferences on postcolonial studies had just taken place. I was aware of During’s involvement in those conferences. Lata Mani, then a graduate student with the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California–Santa Cruz, had published a path-breaking paper on “sati” in one of their proceedings volumes.<sup>4</sup> But the volumes still had not impacted the world of historians. We began to publish *Subaltern Studies* in India in 1983 without much awareness of postcolonial literary criticism. I remember Simon During returning to Melbourne in the mid-80s from a postcolonialism conference overseas and asking me if I knew of the work of Homi Bhabha. I answered, with some surprise but as any educated newspaper-reading Indian would have answered in those days, “Sure, a major Indian Atomic Research Centre is named after him. He was one of our best physicists; but why would you be interested in him?” That was the day the other Homi Bhabha entered my life, as a problem of mistaken identity, through a stand-in, as a question of difference *within* the identity “Homi Bhabha” (to mimic my dear friend who bears that name).

*Subaltern Studies*, the historiographical movement with which I was associated, emerged out of anti-, and not postcolonial, thought. We were a bunch of young men (initially men) interested in Indian history and were in some ways disillusioned with the nationalisms of our parents. The two Englishmen in the group, David Arnold and David Hardiman, were anti-imperial in their political outlook and rejected the dominantly proimperial historiography that came out of England. The Indian members of the group were disappointed and angry about the Indian nation’s failure to deliver the social justice that anticolonial nationalism had promised. Our historiographical rebellion raised many interesting methodological issues for Indian history and for history in general. Ranajit Guha, our mentor, could easily be seen as one of the pioneers of the so-called linguistic turn in the discipline of history though, it has to be acknowledged, Hayden White had already raised many of the most pertinent issues in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Our analyses of subaltern histories were deeply influenced by Guha’s infectious enthusiasm for structuralism of the kind that was associated with Barthes, Jakobson, and Levi-Strauss, a structuralism one could also associate with Hayden White and with an early moment of cultural studies—especially in Britain where the New

Accent series of publications emphasized the importance of structuralism, and where Guha was originally based. Gramsci—with a selection of his prison notebooks translated into English in 1971—had softened the Stalinist edges of our Indo-British Marxism and attuned us to the importance of the popular, and Mao—many of the historians in the group had earlier been involved in the Maoist movement that took place in India between 1967 and 1971—had helped us to think of the peasant as a modern revolutionary subject. But we did not encounter postcolonial thought until Spivak brought our group into contact with her deconstructionist variety of Marxism and feminism, and made us confront our theoretical innocence in proposing to make the subaltern the “subject” of his or her own history. As we pondered the challenge she posed to the group and embraced its consequences, we crossed over from being merely anticolonial historians (with incipient critiques of the nation-state form) to being a part of the intellectual landscape of postcolonial criticism.

What was the difference? one might ask. The difference was signaled by Spivak’s epochal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” that she had begun to draft in response to the *Subaltern Studies* project and before our first meeting with her took place.<sup>6</sup> The human in our anticolonial mode of thinking was a figure of sovereignty. We wanted to make the peasant or the subaltern the subject of his or her history, period. And we thought of this subject in the image of the autonomous rights-bearing person with the same access to representation in national and other histories as others from more privileged backgrounds enjoyed. A straightforward plea for social justice underlay our position, just as it did in a variety of Marxist, feminist, or even liberal histories. And like Fanon, we saw the subaltern classes as claiming their humanity through revolutionary upheavals. Becoming human was for us a matter of becoming a subject.<sup>7</sup>

This was why Spivak’s exercise in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” was so salutary. It challenged the very idea of the “subject” that *Subaltern Studies* and much anticolonial thought celebrated and invited us to write deconstructive histories of subjecthood.

This critique of the subject was not the same as that performed by Althusserian antihumanism of the 1960s and 70s that so riled E. P. Thompson, the great humanist historian of the last century.<sup>8</sup> Postcolonial critique of the subject was actually a deeper turning towards the human, a move best exemplified for me in the work of Homi Bhabha. It was a turn that both appreciated difference as a philosophical question and at the same time repudiated its essentialization by identity politics.<sup>9</sup> That single move—channeled not through identity politics but through difference philosophies—connected postcolonial thinking to thinking about the human condition in the age of globalization.

To appreciate the close political relations that existed between “rights” thinking and the body of postcolonial thought that drew on the post-structuralist critique of the subject, we have to get beyond some of the fruitless debates of the 1990s. I think it was a mistake of the Left on both sides of the postmodern divide in the 1990s to think of these two different figurations of the human—the human as a rights-bearing subject and the figure of the human glimpsed through the critique of the subject—as somehow competing with each other in a do-or-die race in which only the fittest survived. The critique of the subject did not make the idea of the autonomous subject useless any more than the critique of the nation-state made the institution of the nation-state obsolete. What I have learnt from postcolonial thinkers is the necessity to move through contradictory figures of the human, now through a collapsing of the person and the subject as in liberal or Marxist thought, and now through a separation of the two. Before I discuss what forces us to engage in such border-crossing in our thinking, let me illustrate the fleet-footed movement I am speaking of by turning to some recent writings of Homi K. Bhabha.

### The Human in Postcolonial Criticism Today

Listen to Bhabha writing of the new subaltern classes of today, “the stateless,” “migrant workers, minorities, asylum seekers, [and] refugees” who “represent emergent, undocumented lifeworlds that break through the formal language of ‘protection’ and ‘status’ because”—he says, quoting Balibar—“they are ‘neither insiders [n]or outsiders, or (for many of us) . . . insiders officially considered outsiders.”<sup>10</sup> Classic Bhabha, one would have thought, this turning over of the outside into the inside and vice versa. Yet it is not the “cosmopolitan claims of global ethical equivalence” that Bhabha reads into these new subalterns of the global capitalist order. His eyes are fixed as much on the deprivation that the human condition suffers in these circumstances as they are on the question of rights: “As insiders/outsideers they damage the cosmopolitan dream of a ‘world without borders’ . . . by opening up, *in the midst of* international polity, a complex and contradictory mode of being or surviving somewhere in between legality and incivility. It is a kind of no-man’s land that, in the world of migration, shadows global success . . . it substitutes cultural survival in migrant *milieux* for full civic participation.”<sup>11</sup>

“Full civic participation”—one can see at once the normative horizons on which Bhabha has set his sights. They are indeed those that acknowledge that our recognition of the human condition in the everyday does

not *eo ipso* negate questions of social justice. On the contrary. Bhabha, of course, acknowledges the fact that the politics of (cultural) survival often takes the place of “full civic participation” in the lives of these new subalterns of the global economy. But he has to move between these poles (survival versus civic participation) to see the subaltern politics of cultural survival not only as a zone of creativity and improvisation—which it is—but also as an area of privation and disenfranchisement. It will be interesting, then, to see how it is precisely this freedom that Bhabha claims for himself to think contradictorily—to think mobility (survival) and stasis (civic participation) at the same time—that allows him to turn the tables on his erstwhile critics, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who found in “nomadism and miscegenation” “figures of virtue, the first ethical practices on the terrain of Empire,” since, they argued, “circulation” or “deterritorialisation” were steps towards the goal of global citizenship that entailed “the struggle against the slavery of belonging to a nation, an identity and a people, and thus the desertion from sovereignty and the limits it places on subjectivity” were for them and this reason “entirely positive” developments.<sup>12</sup> “Such an emancipatory ideal,” writes Bhabha, “—so fixated on the *flowing*, borderless, global world—neglects to confront the fact that migrants, refugees, or nomads do not merely circulate.” Rather, he goes on to point out:

They need to settle, claim asylum or nationality, demand housing and education, assert their economic and cultural rights, and seek the status of citizenship. It is salutary, then, to turn to less “circulatory” forms of the economy like trade and tariffs, or taxes and monetary policy—much less open to postmodern metaphoric appropriation—to see how they impact on the global imaginary of diasporic cultural studies. Positive global relations depend on the protection and enhancement of these national “territorial” resources, which should then become part of the “global” political economy of resource redistribution and a transnational moral economy of redistributive justice.<sup>13</sup>

The point of these long quotations is simply to show how juxtaposed and crossed-over remain the two figures of the human in these discussions by Bhabha: the human of the everyday who illustrates the human condition as the embodiment of what Bhabha once called “difference within”—the insider as the outsider and vice versa—the human who improvises and survives, and the human who asserts his or her cultural and economic rights in the expectation of being the sovereign figure of the citizen some day.

This constant movement between normative and onto-existential images of the human in Bhabha’s prose is an index of the human predicament produced by dominant forms of globalization. Bhabha

turns to Hannah Arendt to explain this predicament. Arendt had once argued that the very creation of a “One World” through the positing of so many “peoples” organized into nation-states produced the problem of statelessness, not from “a lack of civilization” but as “the perverse consequence of the political and cultural conditions of modernity.”<sup>14</sup> Modernity created this new “savage” condition of many human beings, the condition of being declared stateless if they could not be identified with a nation-state, forcing them to fall back on the politics of survival. Today, it is not simply the arrangement of nation-states that creates this condition of stateless, illegal migrants, guest workers, and asylum seekers. It is a deeper predicament produced by both the globalization of capital and the pressures of demography in poorer countries brought about by the unevenness of postcolonial development. Whether you read Mike Davis on *The Planet of Slums* or documents produced by Abahlali baseMjondolo, the shack-dwellers’ movement in Durban, South Africa, it is clear that today’s capitalism feeds off a large pool of migrant, often illegal, labor that is cast aside by many as “surplus population”—a process that deprives these groups of the enjoyment of any social goods and services, while their labor remains critical to the functioning of the service sector in both advanced and growing economies.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it has to be acknowledged, refugees and asylum seekers are produced also by state-failures connected to a whole series of factors: economic, political, demographic, and environmental. Together, these groups, today’s subaltern classes, embody the human condition negatively, as an image of privation. No ethnography of their everyday lives can access its object positively through the figure of the citizen. Yet our normative horizons, belonging as we analysts do to one or another kind of civil society, cannot but depend on the measure of “cultural and economic rights” and “full civic participation,” even as any real possibility of effective citizenship for all humans seems increasingly remote. Do not one billion human beings already live without access to proper drinking water? When will the illegal Bangladeshi and North-African workers one encounters on the streets of Athens, Florence, Rome, Vienna, Paris, London—not to speak of illegal Bangladeshi labor in the informal sectors of India and Pakistan—become full-fledged European citizens? There is one predicament of our thinking, however, that speaks to the contradictions of our lifeworlds today. Our normative horizons, unlike those of Marx’s classical writings, say, give us no vantage point from which we could not only judge but also describe and know these classes, while ethnographies of what the marginal, the poor, and the excluded actually do in order to survive yield no alternative norms for human societies that are still in the grip of large and centralizing institutions, corporations, and bureaucracies.<sup>16</sup>



This disjuncture is at its most acute now in what progressive European theorists such as Etienne Balibar or Sandro Mezzadra write by way of placing refugees, asylum seekers, and illegal immigrants in European history, politics, and policy.<sup>17</sup> It may or may not surprise the reader to know that Europe today is dotted with detention centers for these unwelcome people. The number of such centers exceeds one hundred and they extend outside Europe into North Africa.<sup>18</sup> Europe has adopted border protection policies that are reminiscent of those pursued by the United States or Australia, except that in Europe the borders, if a detention camp is indeed a border, are as much inside Europe as outside. It is this indeterminacy of borders that has led Balibar to make the observation that if the nineteenth century was the time when European imperialism made frontiers into borders by exporting the border-form outside Europe, we stand today on the threshold of an age when borders are becoming frontiers again.<sup>19</sup>

However, reading Balibar and Mezzadra on these questions makes it clear that their writing is caught in tension between two tendencies: on the one hand they have to acknowledge the historical and current barbarisms that have in the past acted as a foundation of European “civilization” and continue to do so to some extent even in the present; on the other hand they have to appeal to the highest utopian ideals of their civilizational heritage in order to imagine into being a vibrant European polity that not only practices the ethics of hospitality and responsibility that Derrida, Levinas, and others have written about, but that also grounds itself in a deep acceptance of the plurality of human inheritances inside its own borders.<sup>20</sup> It is no wonder, then, that European intellectuals, whether discussing refugees from outside Europe or internal migrants from the ex-colonies and the question of “Eastern Europe,” are increasingly debating postcolonial theory and are even producing their own readers and translations of postcolonial writings.<sup>21</sup> Europe today is clearly a new frontier of postcolonial studies—and not because the classical peasant-subaltern subject can be found in Europe. No, it is because the new subalterns of the global economy—refugees, asylum seekers, illegal workers—can be found all over Europe and it is by making these groups the object of his thinking that Homi Bhabha arrives at a figure of the human that is constitutionally and necessarily doubled and contradictory.

Let me now turn to the issue of global warming to consider how it challenges us to imagine the human.

## The Human in the Anthropocene

If the problem of global warming or climate change had not burst in on us through the 2007 Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), globalization would have been perhaps the most important theme stoking our thoughts about being human. But global warming adds another challenge. It calls us to visions of the human that neither rights talk nor the critique of the subject ever contemplated. This does not, as I said before, make those earlier critiques irrelevant or redundant, for climate change will produce—and has begun to produce—its own cases of refugees and regime failures.<sup>22</sup> The effects of climate change are mediated by the global inequities we already have. So the two visions of the human that I have already outlined—the universalist view of global justice between human individuals imagined as having the same rights everywhere and the critique of the subject that poststructuralism once promoted—will both remain operative. In discussing issues of climate justice, we will thus necessarily go through familiar moves: criticize the self-aggrandizing tendencies of powerful and rich nations and speak of a progressive politics of differentiated responsibilities in handling debates about migration, legal or illegal. Indeed, one of the early significant tracts to be written on the problem and politics of global warming was authored by two respected Indian environmental activists who gave it the title, *Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism*.<sup>23</sup> The science and politics of climate change have not rendered these moves irrelevant or unnecessary; but they have become insufficient as analytical strategies.<sup>24</sup>

Consider the challenge that climate science poses to humanists. Climate scientists raise a problem of scale for the human imagination, though they do not usually think through the humanistic implications of their own claim that, unlike the changes in climate this planet has seen in the past, the current warming is anthropogenic in nature. Humans, collectively, now have an agency in determining the climate of the planet as a whole, a privilege reserved in the past only for very large-scale geophysical forces. This is where this crisis represents something different from what environmentalists have written about so far: the impact of humans on their immediate or regional environments. The idea of humans representing a force on a very large geological scale that impacts the whole planet is new. Some scientists, the Nobel-winning Paul J. Crutzen at the forefront, have proposed the beginning of a new geological era, an era in which human beings act as a force determining the climate of the entire planet all at once. They have suggested that we call this period “the Anthropocene” to mark the end of the Holocene

that named the geological “now” within which recorded human history so far has unfolded.<sup>25</sup> But who is the “we” of this process? How do we think of this collective human agency in the era of the Anthropocene?

Scientists who work on the physical history of the universe or on the history of the earth’s climate in the past no doubt tell certain kinds of histories. But in Gadamerian or Diltheyan terms, they *explain* and are not required to *understand* the past in any humanist sense. Every individual explanation makes sense because it relates to other existing explanations. But a cognitive exercise is not “understanding” in the Gadamerian sense, and until there is an element of the latter, we do not have history, not human history at least. Which is why, usually, a purely “natural” history of climate over the last several million years would not be of much interest to a postcolonial historian who works on human history.

What is remarkable about the current crisis is that climate scientists are not simply doing versions of natural history. They are also giving us an account of climate change that is neither purely “natural” nor purely “human” history. And this is because they assign an agency to humans at the very heart of this story. According to them, current *global* (and not regional) climate changes are largely human induced. This implies that humans are now part of the natural history of the planet. The wall of separation between natural and human histories that was erected in early modernity and reinforced in the nineteenth century as the human sciences and their disciplines consolidated themselves has some serious and long-running cracks in it.<sup>26</sup>

The ascription of a geological agency to humans is a comparatively recent development in climate science. One of the earliest references I could find of scientists assigning to humans a role in the geophysical process of the planet was in a paper that the University of California, San Diego, oceanographer Roger Revelle and the University of Chicago geophysicist H. E. Suess coauthored in the geophysics journal *Tellus* in 1957. “Human beings are now carrying out a large-scale geophysical experiment of a kind that could not have happened in the past nor be reproduced in the future,” they wrote. “Within a few centuries we are returning to the atmosphere and oceans the concentrated organic carbon stored in the sedimentary rocks over hundreds of millions of years. This experiment, if adequately documented, may yield a far-reaching insight into the processes determining weather and climate.”<sup>27</sup> The Environmental Pollution Panel of the U.S. President’s Science Advisory Committee expressed the opinion in 1965 that “through his worldwide industrial civilization, Man is unwittingly conducting a vast geophysical experiment. Within a few generations, he is burning fossil fuel that slowly accumulated in the earth over the past 500 million years.” They

went on to warn: "The climatic changes that may be produced by the increased CO<sub>2</sub> content could be deleterious from the point of view of human beings."<sup>28</sup> Even as late as 1973, the Committee on Atmospheric Sciences of the National Academy of Science said: "Man clearly has no positive knowledge of the magnitude or the manner in which he is presently changing the climate of the earth. There is no real question that inadvertent modification of the atmosphere is taking place."<sup>29</sup>

We can thus see a progress or inflation, if you like, in the rhetoric of climate scientists. Man was an experimenter on a geophysical scale in the 1950s; by the 1990s, he was a geophysical force himself. Silently and implicitly, climate scientists have doubled the figure of the human as the agent of anthropogenic global warming (AGW). Humans put out greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and the biosphere. Here the picture of the human is how social scientists have always imagined humans to be: a purposeful biological entity with the capacity to degrade natural environment. But what happens when we say humans are acting like a geophysical force? We then liken humans to some nonhuman, nonliving agency. That is why I say the science of anthropogenic global warming has doubled the figure of the human—you have to think of the two figures of the human simultaneously: the human-human and the nonhuman-human. And that is where some challenges lie for the postcolonial scholar in the humanities.

The first challenge is the scale on which scientists invite us to imagine human agency. Consider the point that, collectively, we are now capable of affecting the climate of this planet and changing it, as the geophysicist David Archer says, for the next one hundred thousand years.<sup>30</sup> Such numbers usually function as operators with which we manipulate information. We do not understand them without training. Scientists are aware of this problem and do what historians do to bring vast scales within the realm of understanding: appeal to human experience. The Australian social and environmental historian Tom Griffiths recently published a splendid history of the Antarctic. But how does a social historian go about writing a *human* history of an uninhabited and uninhabitable vast expanse of snow and ice? Griffiths does what all good historians do: go to the experience that past humans have already had of such a region in order to write a human history of this place. He consults the private papers of historical explorers, looks at their letters to see how they experienced the place, and intercalates his reading of these documents with leaves from his own diary of traveling to the South Pole. This is how the Antarctic gets humanized. We use the metaphoric capacity of human language and visual records to bring its ice within the grasp of human experience. The Australian explorer Douglas Mawson went to

the Antarctic for the years 1911–14, having just become engaged to a Paquita Delprat of Broken Hill in Western Australia. In one of her love-lorn letters to Mawson, Delprat wrote: “Are you frozen? In heart I mean . . . Am I pouring out a little of what is in my heart to an iceberg? . . . Can a person remain in such cold and lonely regions however beautiful and still love warmly?” Mawson reassured her that her love had warmed her “proxy iceberg” and that “he felt less cold this time.”<sup>31</sup> It is through such interleaving of experiences and through the employment of figures of speech—some telling metaphors and similes—that we make a human history of the empty vastness and ice of the South Pole.

Scientists interested in creating an informed public around the crisis of climate change make a very similar appeal to experience. For reasons of space, I will illustrate the point with an example from David Archer’s book *The Long Thaw*. Archer distills out of his analysis a problem that turns around the explanation/understanding distinction I mentioned earlier. Human beings cannot really imagine beyond a couple of generations before and after their own time, he says. “The rules of economics, which govern much of our behavior,” he writes, “tend to limit our focus to even shorter time frames,” for the value of everything gets discounted in decades.<sup>32</sup> Archer faces the problem that humans may not care for the science he is telling us about. One hundred thousand years is too far—why should we care for people so far into the future? “How would it feel,” Archer asks, trying to translate geological units into human scales, “if the ancient Greeks, for example, had taken advantage of some lucrative business opportunity for a few centuries, aware of potential costs, such as, say, a [much] stormier world, or the loss of . . . agricultural productivity to rising sea levels—that could persist to this day?”<sup>33</sup> I find it remarkable as a historian that Archer, a socially concerned paleoclimatologist, should be asking us to extend to the future the faculty of understanding that historians routinely extend to humans of the recorded past.

But this is also where we encounter a real problem of interpretation. We write of pasts through the mediation of the experience of humans of the past. We can send humans, or even artificial eyes, to outer space, the poles, the top of Mount Everest, to Mars and the Moon and vicariously experience that which is not directly available to us. We can also—through art and fiction—extend our understanding to those who in future may suffer the impact of the geophysical force that is the human. But we cannot ever experience ourselves as a geophysical force—though we now *know* that this is one of the modes of our collective existence. We cannot send somebody out to experience in an unmediated manner this “force” on our behalf (as distinct from experiencing the impact of it mediated by other direct experiences—of floods, storms, or earthquakes,

for example). This nonhuman, forcelike mode of existence of the human tells us that we are no longer simply a form of life that is endowed with a sense of ontology. Humans have a sense of ontic belonging. That is undeniable. We used that knowledge in developing both anticolonial (Fanon) and postcolonial criticism (Bhabha). But in becoming a geophysical force on the planet, we have also developed a form of collective existence that has no ontological dimension. Our thinking about ourselves now stretches our capacity for interpretive understanding. We need nonontological ways of thinking the human.

Bruno Latour has complained for a long time that the problem with modern political thought is the culture/nature distinction that has allowed humans to look on their relationship to “nature” through the prism of the subject/object relationship.<sup>34</sup> He has called for a new idea of politics that brings together—as active partners into our arguments—both humans and nonhumans. I think what I have said adds a wrinkle to Latour’s problematic. A geophysical force—for that is what in part we are in our collective existence—is neither subject nor an object. A force is the capacity to move things. It is pure, nonontological agency. After all, Newton’s idea of “force” went back to medieval theories of impetus.<sup>35</sup>

Climate change is not a one-event problem. Nor is it amenable to a single rational solution. It may indeed be something like what Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, planning theorists, once called a “wicked problem,” an expression they coined in 1973 in an article entitled “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning” published in *Policy Sciences* “to describe a category of public policy concern that [while susceptible to a rational diagnosis] defied rational and optimal solutions,” because it impinged on too many other problems to be solved or addressed at the same time.<sup>36</sup> Besides, as Mike Hulme, a climate researcher, points out: “This global solution-structure also begs a fundamental question which is rarely addressed in the respective fora where these debates and disagreements surface: What is the ultimate performance metric for the human species, what is it that we are seeking to optimise? Is it to restabilise population or to minimise our ecological footprint? Is it to increase life expectancy, to maximise gross domestic product, to make poverty history or to increase the sum of global happiness? Or is the ultimate performance metric for humanity simply survival?”<sup>37</sup>

Given that it is difficult to foresee humanity arriving at a consensus on any of these questions in the short-term future, even while scientific knowledge about global warming circulates more widely, it is possible that the turn towards what Ulrich Beck calls a “risk society” will only be intensified in the current phase of globalization and global warming. As we cope with the effects of climate change and pursue capitalist growth,

we will negotiate our attachments, mediated no doubt through the inequities of capitalism, knowing fully that they are increasingly risky.<sup>38</sup> But this also means that there is no “humanity” that can act as a self-aware agent. The fact that the crisis of climate change will be routed through all our “anthropological differences” can only mean that, however anthropogenic the current global warming may be in its origins, there is no corresponding “humanity” that in its oneness can act as a political agent. A place thus remains for struggles around questions on intrahuman justice regarding the uneven impacts of climate change.

This is to underline how open the space is for what may be called the politics of climate change. Precisely because there is no single rational solution, there is the need to struggle to make our way in hitherto uncharted ways—and hence through arguments and disagreements—toward something like what Latour calls “the progressive composition of a common world.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike the problem of the hole in the ozone layer, climate change is ultimately all about politics. Hence its openness as much to science and technology as to rhetoric, art, media, and arguments and conflicts conducted through a variety of means. The need then is to think the human on multiple scales and registers and as having both ontological and nonontological modes of existence.

With regard to the climate crisis, humans now exist in two different modes. There is one in which they are still concerned with justice even when they know that perfect justice is never to be had. The “climate justice” historiography issues from this deeply human concern. Climate scientists’ history reminds us, on the other hand, that we now also have a mode of existence in which we—collectively and as a geophysical force and in ways we cannot experience ourselves—are “indifferent” or “neutral” (I do not mean these as mental or experienced states) to questions of intrahuman justice. We have run up against our own limits as it were. It is true that as beings for whom the question of Being is an eternal question, we will always be concerned about justice. But if we, collectively, have also become a geophysical force, then we also have a collective mode of existence that is justice-blind. Call that mode of being a “species” or something else, but it has no ontology, it is beyond biology, and it acts as a limit to what we also are in the ontological mode.

This is why the need arises to view the human simultaneously on contradictory registers: as a geophysical force and as a political agent, as a bearer of rights and as author of actions; subject to both the stochastic forces of nature (being itself one such force collectively) and open to the contingency of individual human experience; belonging at once to differently-scaled histories of the planet, of life and species, and of human societies. One could say, mimicking Fanon, that in an age when the forces of globalization intersect with those of global warming, the

idea of the human needs to be stretched beyond where postcolonial thought advanced it.

## In Conclusion

A little more than half a century ago, “an earth-born object made by man”—the Sputnik—orbited the planet in outer space, “in the proximity of the heavenly bodies as though it had been admitted tentatively to their sublime company.” The author of these words, Hannah Arendt, thought that this event foretold a fundamental change in the human condition. The earth had been “unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice,” but now clearly science was catching up with a thought that “up to then had been buried in the highly non-respectable literature of science fiction.” The Sputnik could be the first “step toward escape from man’s imprisonment to the earth.” “Should the emancipation and the secularization of the modern age,” asked Arendt, “. . . end with [a] . . . fateful repudiation of an Earth who was the Mother of all living creatures under the sky?”<sup>40</sup> Still, Arendt’s reading of this change in the human condition was optimistic. A critic of “mass society,” she saw the danger of such a society mainly in spiritual terms. A “mass society” could “threaten humanity with extinction” in spirit by rendering humans into a “society of laborers.”<sup>41</sup> But it was in the same “mass society”—“where man as a social animal rules supreme”—that “the survival of the species could [now] be guaranteed on a world-wide scale,” thought Arendt.<sup>42</sup> The Sputnik was the first symbol, for her, of such optimism regarding the survival of the human species.

Today, with the crisis of anthropogenic climate change coinciding with multiple other crises of planetary proportions—of resources, finance, and food, not to speak of frequent weather-related human disasters—we know that the repudiation of the earth has come in a shape Arendt could not have even imagined in the optimistic and modernizing 1950s. Humans today are not only the dominant species on the planet, they also collectively constitute—thanks to their numbers and their consumption of cheap fossil-fuel-based energy to sustain their civilizations—a geological force that determines the climate of the planet much to the detriment of civilization itself. Today, it is precisely the “survival of the species” on a “world-wide scale” that is largely in question. All progressive political thought, including postcolonial criticism, will have to register this profound change in the human condition.



## NOTES

A draft of this essay was presented as a lecture at the University of Virginia in December 2010. Thanks to my audience and to the anonymous readers of the journal for constructive criticisms. Special thanks are due to Rita Felski for the original invitation to write this essay and for her helpful suggestions. I am grateful to Homi K. Bhabha for making some of his recent writings available to me and for many discussions of the issues raised here.

1 See my "Belatedness as Possibility: Subaltern Histories, Once Again" in *The Indian Postcolonial: A Critical Reader*, ed. Elleke Boehmer and Rosinka Chaudhuri (New York: Routledge, 2011), 163–76.

2 I discuss these developments in "An Anti-Colonial History of the Postcolonial Turn: An Essay in Memory of Greg Denning," Second Greg Denning Memorial Lecture (Melbourne, Australia: Department of History, The University of Melbourne, 2009), 11–13.

3 DURING gives his own account of these times in his introduction to *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon DURING (New York: Routledge, 1993).

4 Lata Mani, "The Production of an Official Discourse on Sati In Early Nineteenth Century Bengal," in *Europe and Its Others*, ed. Frances Barker and others (Colchester: Univ. of Essex Press, 1985), 1:107–27. The book was published in two volumes out a conference held at Essex in July 1984 on the subject of "the Sociology of Literature."

5 See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983) and Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1973). I have tried to bring Guha and White together in my essay "Subaltern History as Political Thought" in *Colonialism and Its Legacies*, ed. Jacob T. Levy with Marion Iris Young (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 205–18.

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

7 Guha's *Elementary Aspects* was the best illustration of this proposition.

8 On all this, see E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).

9 The *locus classicus* for this position is still Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). See Homi K. Bhabha, "Global Pathways" (unpublished).

10 Homi K Bhabha, "Notes on Globalization and Ambivalence" in *Cultural Politics in a Global Age: Uncertainty, Solidarity and Innovation*, ed. David Held, Henrietta L. Moore, Kevin Young (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), 39.

11 Bhabha, "Notes," 39–40.

12 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2000), 361–62, cited in Homi K. Bhabha, "Our Neighbours, Ourselves: Contemporary Reflections on Survival" (unpublished), 3. For Hardt and Negri's critique of Bhabha and of postcolonialism generally, see *Empire*, 137–59.

13 Bhabha, "Our Neighbours," 3–4.

14 Bhabha paraphrasing Arendt in "Notes," 38.

15 Bhabha, "Notes." Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006). For details on the Abahlali baseMjondolo movement, see their website <http://www.abahlali.org/>.

16 I read Partha Chatterjee's *Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004) as symptomatic of this predicament.

17 See Manuela Bojadžijev and Isabelle Saint-Saëns, "Borders, Citizenship, War, Class: A Discussion with Étienne Balibar and Sandro Mezzadra," *New Formations* 58 (2006): 10–30.

- 18 See the map reproduced in Rochona Majumdar, *Writing Postcolonial History* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 15. Thanks to Sandro Mezzadra for bringing these maps to my and Majumdar's attention.
- 19 Etienne Balibar, "Europe: An 'Unimagined' Frontier of Democracy," *Diacritics* 33, no. 3–4 (2003): 36–44. Also Etienne Balibar, *We the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*, trans. James Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004), 7.
- 20 See Balibar, *We the People of Europe?* and note 21 below.
- 21 Gerhard Stilz and Ellen Dengel-Janic, eds., *South Asian Literatures* (Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 2010); Sandro Mezzadra, *La Condizione Postcoloniale: storia e politica nel presente globale* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2008).
- 22 See the recent documentary film *Climate Refugees* (2009) made by Michael P. Nash. <http://www.climaterefugees.com/>.
- 23 Sunita Narain and Anil Agarwal, *Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism* (Delhi: Centre for Science and Environment, 1991)
- 24 For an elaboration of this point, see my essay "Verändert der Klimawandel die Geschichtsschreibung?" *Transit* 41 (2011): 143–63.
- 25 I discuss historiographical and some philosophical implications of the Anthropocene hypothesis in my essay, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 197–222. See also Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, "The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614–21 and the special issue of *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* edited by Jan Zalasiewicz, Mark Williams, Alan Haywood, and Michael Ellis, "The Anthropocene: A New Epoch of Geological Time?" (2011): 835–41.
- 26 For elaboration, see my "Climate of History."
- 27 R. Revelle and H. E. Suess, "Carbon Dioxide exchange between atmosphere and ocean and the question of an increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> during the past decades," *Tellus* 9 (1957): 18–27, cited in *Weather and Climate Modification: Problems and Prospects*, vol. 1, summary and recommendations. Final Report of the Panel on Weather and Climate Modification to the Committee on Atmospheric Sciences, National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council (Washington: National Academy of Sciences, 1966), 88–89.
- 28 *Restoring the Quality of Our Environment (Report of the Environmental Pollution Panel, President's Science Advisory Committee)* (Washington: The White House, 1965), Appendix Y4, 127.
- 29 *[Report of the] Committee on Atmospheric Sciences*, National Research Council (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences, 1973), 160.
- 30 David Archer, *The Long Thaw: How Humans are Changing the Climate of the Planet for the Next 100,000 years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010).
- 31 Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 200.
- 32 Archer, *The Long Thaw*, 9.
- 33 Archer, *The Long Thaw*, 9–10.
- 34 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004). Also see the debate between David Bloor and Bruno Latour: Bloor, "Anti-Latour," and Latour, "For David Bloor . . . And Beyond," in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 30, no. 1 (1999): 81–112 and 113–29.
- 35 J. Bruce Brackenridge, *The Key to Newton's Dynamics: The Kepler Problem and the Principia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995)
- 36 Quoted in Michael Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction, and Opportunity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 334. Here is a contemporary definition of a "wicked problem": "A wicked problem is a complex issue that defies complete definition, for which there can be no final solution, since

any resolution generates further issues, and where solutions are not true or false or good or bad, but the best that can be done at the time. Such problems are not morally wicked, but diabolical in that they resist all the usual attempts to resolve them.” Valerie A. Brown, Peter M. Deane, John A. Harris, and Jaqueline Y. Russell, “Towards a Just and Sustainable Future,” in *Tackling Wicked Problems: Through the Transdisciplinary Imagination*, ed. Valerie A. Brown, John A. Harris, and Jaqueline Y. Russell (London, Washington: Earthscan, 2010), 4.

37 Hulme, *Why We Disagree*, 336.

38 Ulrich Beck, “The Naturalistic Misunderstanding of the Green Movement: Environmental Critique as Social Critique,” in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*, trans. Amos Weisz (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), 36–57. See also the discussion in Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), chap. 4.

39 Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 47

40 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed., introduction by Margaret Canovan (1958; Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 1–2.

41 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 46.

42 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 46.