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Social, Political, Terrestrial

Latour, Chakrabarty and the philosophy of climate change

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Western political thought is increasingly motivated by the need to reorient itself towards the demands of a new climate-based environmentalism.¹ Given the urgency of this task, there is a tendency to presume that the thought of its main representatives is, at least in broad outline, politically ‘progressive’; indeed, more often than not, radically so. To raise doubts about this presumption is not to contest the political urgency of responding to climate change, its likely already-effective irreversibility, or its projected global social consequences. Rather, it is to draw attention to the ways in which deep-rooted political-ideological divisions, and structures of thought, persist and reproduce themselves anew within discourses that declare them redundant, with often disquietening effects. My specific concern here is with the philosophical frameworks animating certain self-sufficiently climate-based environmentalist political imaginaries.

There are two main parts. The first is a brief diagnostic overview of the current situation and dilemmas of anti-capitalist and more broadly ‘alternative’ Western political thought in what, to use Raymond Williams’s terms, we might call its main ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ forms, respectively (there is currently no ‘dominant’): namely, Marxism, on the

¹ This is the lightly revised text of a public lecture delivered at the Zaha Hadid Foundation, Clerkenwell, London, 16 February 2023. An earlier and somewhat different version was presented under the title ‘Excessively Social?’ as a keynote to the Danish Society of Marxist Studies, 7th Annual Conference, ‘Time and History in the Age of Capital’, Aarhus University, 8 October 2022.

one hand, and a neo-naturalist, planetary-political environmentalism, on the other. The second part looks at two concepts, each of which is associated with one of two influential proponents of what I am calling ‘neo-naturalist, planetary-political environmentalism’: Bruno Latour and Dipesh Chakrabarty in their books *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (2017) and *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021), respectively.² The concepts are ‘the terrestrial’ (Latour) and ‘geo-history’ or ‘Anthropocene time’ (Chakrabarty). As we shall see, there is a significant, broadly later Heideggerian philosophical overlap between these two projects, despite their otherwise often sharp theoretical divergences.³ At stake is how we are to conceive the human, ontologically, in its relations (or non-relations) to ‘nature’ and to ‘Earth’/‘the terrestrial’, on the one hand (the differences between the concepts of ‘nature’ and ‘Earth/the terrestrial’ are crucial here), and politics, on the other. In fact, the concept of politics itself is at stake here in what I take to be a stark opposition between *social* and *neo-naturalist* conceptions.

Situation

Let me start from what seems a fairly uncontentious proposition: in the post-1989 or post-Cold War, globalized capitalist present, there is a still-growing structural disjunction between the social terrains of politics and economics: the former (politics) still predominantly national in socio-spatial form, the latter (economics) increasingly globally

² Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018. (The 2017 French original was titled, *Où atterri? Comment s’orienter en politique.*) Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2021.

³ That is, this is not the Heidegger of *Being and Time* (1927), but rather the Heidegger of ‘Earth’ and ‘dwelling’, after the so-called ‘turn’/Kehre in his thinking, from the mid-1930s through to the end of the 1950s; the period in which Heidegger’s rethinking of his philosophical project was closely bound up with an apologetics for what he believed to be his misunderstood endorsement of German fascism; a position from which he never withdrew.

transnational, despite the powerful populist neo-nationalisms that it has provoked in domestic political agendas. This is a situation in which the collapse of the received (late 19th–late 20th century) forms of socialist and communist internationalist political organization, and the geo-politics of ideologically defined ‘blocs’ (the so-called Three Worlds), has made way for new forms of inter-capitalist competition and a politics of the formally more inter-national organizations set up under Western capitalist hegemony after the Second World War: the United Nations, The World Bank, the World Trade Organization, in particular. These organizations shadow and aspire to regulate the political consequences of competition between the three main capitalist blocs (the USA, China and Europe) and their relations to the disintegrating nuclear-based geo-political power of Russia; though in actuality they have little significant effect upon the way those relations develop, which are primarily economic and military. Following the decline of the Non-Aligned Movement and the post-WW 2 international labour movements, which were always marginal, anti-capitalist organizations figure at this geo-political level primarily as relays for the impetus of sporadic protest movements or ‘revolts’: in the 1990s, ‘anti-globalization’ (Seattle in 1999), subsequently recoded as ‘alter-globalization’ in orientation, associated with the now declining World Social Forums; or as longer-term solidarity movements for subaltern communities in different parts of the global South. This asymmetry between the global social power of capital and its oppositional political formations has for some time now led to calls for a new ‘global’ or ‘planetary’ left politics.⁴ Yet after two decades of callings very little practical or theoretical advance has been made. These ‘callings’ have thus for some time now appeared as little more than cries in the wilderness, making primarily moral appeals to

⁴ See, for example, for a summary, Lorenzo Marsili, *Planetary Politics*, Verso, London and New York, 2021.

vaguely defined, increasingly little more than liberal-humanist Western political constituencies.

In the meantime, Marxist critique of global political economy has generated sophisticated frameworks for the analysis of the political-economic side of post-89 capitalist developments, especially with regard to financial capital and the various innovative forms of value and trading mechanisms created to sustain and expand financial – and thereby also commodity – markets. At the same time, the application of social reproduction theory to global labour markets has done much to explain the political dynamics of the disorganization of labour by capital, through the racialization and gendering of different forms of labour, and the multiplicity of different modes of value extraction that function alongside each other within the value-chains of globally extended capitalist corporations. Yet, much like the main tendencies within Western Marxism from the 1920s to the 1970s, these two major areas of analytical advance within the historical theory of capitalism have primarily only been able to help explain the ongoing historical defeat and suppression of labour and anti-capitalist movements, rather than providing grounds for new, globally engaged political projects.⁵

Hence the growing voluntarism or ‘politicism’ of both Marxist and post-Marxist left political theory since the 1980s (post-Althusserian in particular). Appeals to a combination of *will* and the *contingencies* of events (i.e. an essentially Machiavellian politics) have replaced the older Marxist insistence on understanding the socio-historical basis of political movements, to provide an apparently self-sufficiently ‘political’ supplement to historical

⁵ In this respect, Marcuse’s 1972 diagnosis, in ‘The Left Under the Counter-Revolution’, of a worldwide pre-emptive counter-revolution of capital (a counter-revolution under decidedly *non*-revolutionary conditions, even if they were conditions of sporadic revolutionary rhetoric) seems ever more prescient, fifty years on. Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1972, pp. 1–57. Viz. the now well-documented global redistribution of wealth towards the rich since the 1980s.

materialism. The merely 'aleatory' materialism of such positions correlates with the sporadic and short-lived character of the protest-based revolts of alter-globalization and other left-libertarian movements (the Occupy movements, the movements of the Squares) and also, perhaps, with struggles to bring about new bourgeois revolutions (the Arab spring, the current protests against the religious authorities in Iran). Yet it cannot assist in theorizing the possibilities of more enduring political forms of opposition of capital, on its now transnational and tendentially global scale, since it cuts the connection, in principle, between the social and the political, which grounded Marx's historical theorization of politics in relation to the development of economic processes and their associated social forms (law, in particular). The conceptions of political subjecthood on which this politicism relies have little connection with the structural features of economically emergent socio-historical relations. Indeed, they can sustain no more than a residual empirical conception of history as a series of events, with no deeper and longer-lasting intelligibilities. In this respect, the politicist 'solution' to the problem of an anti-capitalist politics of structural transformations merely buries the problem of its impasse deeper, to the point of its disappearance from view.

It is on the ground of this disappearance of the social from the political that, over the last two decades, a more radically alternative, non- and indeed often explicitly anti-Marxist, neo-naturalist, planetary-political, environmental problematic has emerged. It has been built through the convergence of a disparate and in many ways surprising series of theoretical discourses: Science and Technology Studies (STS), Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and other so-called 'new materialisms' have joined forces in the theoretical imaginary with popularizations of the science of geological periodization (the concept of the Anthropocene), Earth systems science more generally, and a decolonial anthropology of the

proximity of indigenous knowledges to the Earth. This combination is provisional, eclectic and unstable but it has led to a powerfully mutually reinforcing set of theoretical and ideological positions – ideologically powerful positions precisely because of its specific eclecticism and theoretical instability, which allows it to adopt a wide and inconsistent variety of enunciative positions simultaneously.⁶ Taking up longstanding concerns with ecological sustainability (shared by many Marxists over many decades) into the new conceptual space of anthropogenic climate change, this new planetary problematic addresses the established problem of political agency on a global scale not by retreating from ‘history’ (in the collective singular) to ‘peoples’, ‘movements’ and ‘events’, shrinking the scale of political subjects, but by *expanding the concept of a political subject to the planet itself*. This is the decisive late Latourian move.

Latour and the Terrestrial

‘[W]here we are headed’, Latour writes, is to ‘the Terrestrial as a new *political actor*. ...the territory itself begins to participate in history, to fight, in short, to concern itself with us.’ ‘Bring[ing] together the opposing figures of the soil and the world’, he continues, the Terrestrial is the ‘new agent of history proper to the New Climatic Regime’.⁷ Note the metaphysically reifying use of an upper case letter ‘T’ for Terrestrial, and the stress on ‘the new’ from which Latour cannot disengage his rhetoric, despite his constantly stated opposition to ‘the Moderns’ and their temporality of the new, to which I return below.⁸

⁶ I take it to be a discursive condition of an effective ideology that it adopt a wide and inconsistent variety of enunciative positions simultaneously, since it needs a differential address to a specific variety of social subject positions. The mix within Thatcherism of liberal, conservative and reactionary modes of address is a model for this kind of successful ideological formation.

⁷ Latour, *Down to Earth*, pp. 40–41, 93.

⁸ See Bruno Latour, *We have Never Been Modern* (1991), trans. Catherine Porter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1993. This is the crucial text in Latour’s transition from the restricted domain of

Within this framework the Terrestrial has thus come to reoccupy the Enlightenment space of the 'grand narrative' of world-historical political action, from which Marxism has largely retreated, in part because of the Eurocentric universalism of its 19th-century philosophical and scientifically based political ambitions. Indeed, in Latour's speculatively totalizing redefinition of class on the basis of '*everything* that makes subsistence possible'⁹ – a totality of conditions of equal individual significance, all on the same ontological plane, across the physical and life sciences, from the microbiotic to the inter-planetary – the Terrestrial appears to reinvent, on a new scientific basis, something like the 'positive content' of the self-moving substance of Hegel's absolute. At least, it does so in usages like this, in its translational function as a substitute for Lovelock's scientifically discredited notion of Gaia, a term from which Latour retreats in his final writings for primarily tactical reasons. At other times, however, 'the Terrestrial' is given another, more restricted scientific definition (avoiding the auto-poetic planetary subjectivity of Gaia) as 'the thin biofilm of the Critical Zone':¹⁰ that is, the depth of the Earth's surface extending from the top of the canopy of vegetation through the soil to the subsurface depths at which fresh groundwater circulates. The ambiguity is important as the relay – and the blurring of boundaries – between Latour's popular scientific and metaphysical claims. For all its wild-eyed, science-fictional metaphysics (and the fictional element is crucial to its popularity), this neo-naturalist, planetary-political environmentalism aspires to the mantle of the 'science-politics' connection previously worn by classical Marxism, via the new life sciences; a mantle which

his early social studies of science and technology to the broader field of philosophical discourses of modernity. For an acute overview of Latour's career as a whole, see Alyssa Battistoni, 'Latour's Metamorphoses', Sidecar, January 2023, <https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/latours-metamorphosis>.

⁹ *Down to Earth*, p. 96.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Western Marxism had cast off, for the sake of broader socio-cultural formations – and the specifically conjunctural contingencies – of political subjectivities.

Overall, then, one might say: this new coalescence of anti-Marxist life-scientific, neo-naturalist (often so-called ‘new materialist’) theoretical tendencies has become the main ideological challenge to Marxism as an oppositional force to a dangerously under-regulated global capitalism, at the time of the first sustained crisis of its neo-liberal global form – from 2007 to the present; a crisis that has been coterminous with the rise to public consciousness of climate change as a systemic social threat to established modes of human life on earth. As noted at the outset, this planetary-political environmentalism is widely considered a ‘progressive’ as well as a ‘radical’ formation, within Left political discourses as well as left-liberal ones, not least since it identifies ‘fossil capitalism’ as the main source of anthropogenic climate change, whether we periodize this change from 1610 or 1950 (two competing periodizations of the Anthropocene, between which there is actually no need to choose at this point in history, since the idea that one might periodize the *extra-longue durée* of a geological epoch at the moment of its emergence seems historiographically somewhat confused).

The imaginary of the ‘progressive’ (and its converse, the ‘regressive’’) is of course problematic in its conventional interpretation within the linear time-consciousness of a naturalistic historicism, and Latour himself formally rejects it. However, Latour’s is not a dialectical critique of the concept of progress of the kind one finds in the Benjamin-Adorno line of Critical Theory; or on occasion Marx himself, for that matter.¹¹ Rather, Latour rejects

¹¹ See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Progress’, in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, Columbia University Press, New York, 1998, pp. 143–160. In Marx’s writings on India, progress appears, famously, as ‘a hideous Pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain’. Karl Marx, *Dispatches from the New York Tribune: Selected Journalism of Karl Marx*, Penguin, London 2007, p. 225.

outright the comparative terms of modern politics as a whole – the ‘Left–Right’ spectrum from ‘revolutionary’ via ‘progressive’ and ‘conservative’ to ‘reactionary’ – as part of what he calls the ‘front of modernization’ that the Terrestrial cuts across. The primary political conflict of our time, Latour argues is that ‘between modernization, on the one hand, and the condition of being terrestrial, on the other’, and this conflict, he claims, is a ‘palpable alternative to the Left/Right dichotomy.’¹²

Despite his acceptance of many of the findings of Marxist ecological analysis, Latour’s neo-naturalism leads him to reject – indeed, he polemicizes against – recoding of the Anthropocene as the Capitalocene, as a result of what he calls the ‘excessive sociality’ of Marxist analysis. In fact, Marxism appears to Latour as a version of modernist ‘productivism’ that is effectively indistinguishable from the logic of global capitalism itself in its supposed commitment to an indefinite and hence infinite progress, which is metaphysically idealist in theory and ecologically unsustainable in practice. Indeed, he claims, ‘On the whole we [‘denizens of the 20th century’] have remained Marxist’¹³ because we have been trying, albeit necessarily failing, to be modern. The fact that Latour himself applies the ‘ahead’/‘behind’ developmentalist temporal logic of modernization to the new differential conflict he diagnoses between the Modern and the Terrestrial appears to go unnoticed. In this respect, his position replicates, at the level of the concept of modernization, the contradictory temporal self-consciousness of the postmodernism of the 1990s, which also

¹² Ibid., p. 52. See also the final diagram in *Down to Earth*, fig. 6, on p. 109. Note there the reduction of the ‘modern’ to ‘modernization’: a post-WW 2 developmentalist conception of history, building on the time-consciousness of colonial anthropology, associated with US Comparative Political Science and Area Studies, designed as a research branch of US foreign policy, generalized, academically, across the North Atlantic alliance and appropriated in the Soviet countries in an alternative version as socialist modernization. In this respect, modernization is a category of Cold War competition over the future of the Third World.

¹³ Ibid., p. 59.

involved some naïve attempts to replace a temporal with a spatial problematic, rather than investigating shifts internal to necessarily integral but dynamic spatio-temporal structures.

The fact that Latour's concept of modernization is both indifferent to the distinction between its capitalist and socialist variants and seemingly unaware of the critical literature on its temporal specificities evacuates from it all social content that cannot be reduced to the abstract spatial difference between the local and the global. There are no nation-states, for example, in this political imaginary; there is no colonial or imperial dimension to the globalization of the world market; and there are no dilemmas or contradictions of postcolonial social forms. The recoding of colonized and postcolonial space as 'local', to accommodate it to this problematic, by which some might be tempted, cannot be sustained, since the main issue there concerns the intricacies and contradictions of *postcolonial modernization* in which the 'local' and the 'global' are combined in varying ways. The lack of social content in Latour's account here is not accidental; it is very much a part of its theoretical standpoint, from which the social can never, in principle, provide enough 'reality' for politics. '[E]ven if "class cultures" are added to "class interests", Latour writes about Marxism, "these groups do not have *territories* around them that are populated enough for them to be able to connect integrally with reality and become self-aware. Their definition remains social, excessively social.'¹⁴ 'Territory', note, somewhat extraordinarily given the history of the concept, is not itself considered a socio-political concept here.¹⁵

The basic ontological assumption of Latour's worldview, and the ground of his new conception of politics, is that agency is distributed associationally across a single plane within which there is no ontological specificity to the human as the social, producing a

¹⁴ *Down to Earth*, p. 61–2.

¹⁵ For a history of the concept of territory, see Stuart Elden, *The Birth of Territory*, Chicago University Press, 2013.

multiplicity of singular network effects. Here, the word ‘agency’ denotes the site of the co-production of things ‘all the way along a causal chain’ to embrace the totality of their conditions – something grasped by Kant as ‘idea’, since beyond possible experience. In Kant’s technical terms, the Terrestrial is Latour’s Idea, except that for Latour it is assumed to be an object of empirical scientific investigation, qua totality. Each link in the chain is considered an ‘actor’. This involves a reconceptualization of the natural sciences as ‘encompassing all the activities necessary for our existence’. This totality is no longer thought of as nature (which is the product of pragmatic human objectifications by foolish moderns) but rather as ‘the Terrestrial’. In Latour’s own words, this is ‘a system of engendering’ that ‘is not interested in producing goods for humans, on the basis of resources, *but in engendering terrestrials* – not just humans but all terrestrials’: all living and non-living things on and of Earth. The relations of dependency between these terrestrials, as a whole, is taken to generate ‘a new form of obligation’, and hence a new politics. Politics appears as mutual obligation, a collective form of morality, spanning all ‘terrestrials’ from the microbiotic upwards.¹⁶ This is Latour’s version of the new materialism.

The main ideological function of this new materialist moral-political metaphysics is by now apparent: the dissolution of any distinctive sense of the social and the historical as an ontologically emergent domain, along with ‘nature’ as the name of the other side of the ontological difference engendered by the emergence of social and thereby historical temporalities (which is not the same thing as the domain out of which this difference emerged or evolved).¹⁷ In this respect, the disavowed neo-naturalism of the new Earth-

¹⁶ *Down to Earth*, pp. 76–83.

¹⁷ This ontological sense of ‘emergence’, associated in the philosophy of science with the general notion of ‘emergent powers’, registers human sociality as a distinct mode of being or form of existence (with its own distinctive temporalities), irreducible to the conditions out of which it arose, which nonetheless remain constitutive of it as the biological and more generally ‘natural’ basis of its existence. Raymond Williams’s

based planetary problematic (disavowed since it *rejects* the category of ‘nature’ as an effect of human objectification in favour of a planetary conception of the terrestrial) has the same *anti-historical* ideological function as other naturalisms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in distinction from the historically critical, anti-religious, and essentially socio-economic character of 17th and 18th-century Enlightenment naturalisms of needs and interests.

The abolition of the social (specifically, in relation to Marx, of a *relational concept of practice* and a *social concept of need* – which is not to say that it does not have a ‘natural’ ground, out of which it emerges) is a kind of collateral damage of the generalization of the vocabulary of actors and agency, which derives from Latour’s earlier work in Science and Technology Studies and was extended sociologically, in *Reassembling the Social*, by the replacement of ‘the social’ by an ontologically generalized conception of ‘association’.¹⁸ Yet despite its supposed obliteration as an ontologically emergent domain, connotations distinctive to the social are retained across the whole new generalized field of agencies, actors and ‘actants’, allowing for the metaphorical transfer of social and political characteristics to non-human and non-animal entities and processes. Besides this, human social agency palls into relative insignificance, other than at the level of the unintended material consequences of deep-rooted and long-term earth-systemic effects of fossil-fuel based industrial production (the Anthropocene). Although these are attributed not to any

conception of ‘emergent’ cultural forms – alluded to at the outset of this piece – is internal to the historical temporality of the social ontology that is thereby established.

¹⁸ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005. Latour retrospectively found the precursor of this move in the work of the nineteenth-century French sociologist Gabriel Tarde. See Bruno Latour, ‘Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social’ in Patrick Joyce, ed., *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 117–32. Significantly, the concept of the social that is rejected there, by Tarde, in his polemics against Durkheim, is that of a distinctive ‘symbolic order’ or ‘society’ *sui generis*. This is a concept that has equally been the subject of Marxist critiques. See for example, Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology* (Lectures, April–July 1968), trans. Edmund Jephcott, Polity, Cambridge, 2000.

socially particular practices (despite the apparent acceptance of the concept of ‘fossil capitalism’), but generically to ‘humans’ – the ontological specificity of which has elsewhere been denied.

The theoretical point of this move, however, is not to found a new naturalism (although this is its de facto effect), but rather in obliterating the social-natural distinction, to ground a new monistic planetary ontology of ‘the Earth’ which possesses an integrity indifferent to the ‘human’ or the ‘social’ insofar as these terms denote anything ontologically emergent out of other relations within the earth system. Anything other than this indifference, theoretically, is considered ‘anthropocentric’, despite the acceptance of the idea of the Anthropocene (which precisely singles out the human), as a politically polemical, quasi-scientific concept motivating the discussion. Inauguration of the Anthropocene by humans is the original sin which distinguishes the human from other terrestrial entities. The sole *species differentia* of the human is in this respect guilt. Others too have pointed to the religious character of Latour’s new scientism.¹⁹

For Latour, we should no longer conceive ourselves as social actors but rather as part of ‘collectives’ in which the term ‘collective’ is extended beyond the ‘range of associations’ of the social, to include the full scope of the Terrestrial and in particular what Latour calls the ‘land’ of our ‘belonging’.²⁰ ‘Existing as a people and being able to describe one’s dwelling place’, Latour writes in cod-Heideggerian mode, ‘is one and the same thing.’²¹ Indeed, Latour does not shy away from propounding a political ontology of ‘the soil’, which, if taken seriously seems far more likely to exacerbate social conflict over land in the face of climate

¹⁹ See for example, Gunnar Skirbekk, ‘Bruno Latour’s Anthropology of the Moderns: A Reply to Maniglier’, *Radical Philosophy* 189 (Jan/Feb 2015), pp. 45–7; and Barbara Hernstein-Smith, ‘Latour’s Climate Evangelism’, *New Formations* 107–108, special double issue, *Living With Extinction*, 2002, pp. 230–35.

²⁰ Latour, *Down to Earth*, p. 57, n50.

²¹ For example, *ibid.* p. 97.

change and mass migration than to change the fundamental terms of modern politics, as he thinks. (After all, fascism has been a fundamental term of modern politics for a hundred years now.) The repeated generalized references to ‘one’s plot of land’²² – despite the fact that by 2022, 57% of the world population was estimated to live in cities – make Latour’s purported planetarianism parochial in the extreme. This is a radically anti-metropolitan political theory. Yet Earth is, in Mike Davis’s evocative phrase, a ‘planet of slums’. Indeed, Davis has argued, not only is the urbanization of humanity ‘the single most important cause of global warming’, it is ‘also potentially the principal solution to the problem of human survival in the later twenty-first century’.²³ Any ecological political theory that chooses to ignore the possibilities of an alternative urbanism in favour of the generalization of the mode of life of the rural French petit-bourgeoise seems very far from being ‘down to earth’.

Chakrabarty and Geo-history

Latour’s attempt to outline a new politics of the ‘climatic regime’ is in various respects philosophically implausible and politically reactionary. Chakrabarty offers a more direct attempt to think the temporal difference of climate change science for history. Yet he ends up with little more than contradictory humanist appeals to reconceive ourselves as natural beings along the lines of the new earth and life sciences, with a rediscovered ‘reverence’ (his term) for the planet, associated with the religious dimension of pre-capitalist communities. The crux of the matter here concerns Latour’s extension of the meaning of the prefix ‘geo’ in geo-politics from the ‘geo’ of geography, via a de-socialization of geographical space, to the ‘geo’ of geology: geo-politics becomes *geological politics*. It is in

²² Ibid., p.53.

²³ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*, Verso, London and New York, 2005; Mike Davis, ‘Who will Build the Ark?’, *New Left Review* 61, Jan/Feb. 2010, pp. 29–46, p. 30.

this sense of 'geo' that Chakrabarty writes of 'geo-history' as 'history in a planetary age', an age of purported geological periodicity: the Anthropocene epoch. However, this is a strictly antinomical concept for Chakrabarty since he finds the differing temporalities of 'Earth'/'planet', on the one hand, and 'world/history' on the other, to be incommensurable, unable to be related or mediated in experience.

Latour's Heideggerianism is rarely thematized and largely disavowed.²⁴ His lack of interest in theoretical genealogies leads him to credit Donna Haraway with the coining of the verb 'worlding'; and the planetary-political use of 'Earth' is presented as a consequence of recent earth systems science, despite its clearly Heideggerian lineage. Chakrabarty, on the other hand, is enthusiastically Heideggerian about 'Earth' and 'dwelling'. This is less surprising, given the place of Heidegger's thought in his previous book, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) in which 'concrete history' is conceived as an effect of the combination of two discrete forms, which he calls, in a peculiar analytical formalism, History 1 and History 2: universal and particular forms, which are represented theoretically by Marx and Heidegger, respectively.²⁵ Nonetheless, the political connections between the new 'planetary' problematic and the German ontologies of the 1930s go unremarked – despite Latour and Chakrabarty's mutual embrace of Carl Schmitt's postwar geo-political thought in his 1950 *The Nomos of the Earth*; although Latour's more recent, deliberately provocative, 'Comment on a Dialogue by Carl Schmitt' takes a more startling post-war Heideggerian line. Referring to Schmitt's 1939-1940 'Contribution to the

²⁴ An exception is the attempt to generalize Heidegger's concept of 'the thing' (*das Ding*), as a gathering, by including in it the objects (*die Gegenstanden*) that Heidegger excluded from it, in order to move, ontologically, from 'matters of fact' to 'matters of concern'. See Bruno Latour 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004) pp.225–48; specifically, 232–7.

²⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2000; 2008.

Concept of *Reich* in International Law', which provided legal justification for Hitler's concept of a Greater Germanic Estate, Latour writes: 'Even if, at the time, Schmitt's position looked infinitely more criminal than the positions of the winners [the winners of the Second World War – PO], are we so sure today, now that the twentieth century is revealing its true nature, of the lasting asymmetry between the two? ... To the crimes committed in the name of the *Grossraum* and *Lebensraum* might now be added those committed in the name of a flight away to the Globe. ... a whole century has been wasted trying to ignore what it means to be *human on Earth*.'²⁶ This should give us some pause for thought about the territorial politics of this new planetarianism and how it might come to play itself out in – and against – a disavowed social world.

Chakrabarty's book, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, offers a condensed series of summary expositions of the relevance of a wide range of recent scientific literature (in its popular-scientific presentations) to the politics of climate change. This is extraordinarily useful to scholars in the humanities. However, it is oddly unable to do any more than state – and restate (there is a lot of repetition) – its problem in anything other than a form in which it appears as structurally insoluble, and thereby effectively de-politicizing. Chakrabarty appears to identify with Latour's perspective – the book ends with a mutually congratulatory 'conversation' between the two of them seemingly designed to transfer prestige between their respective fields – yet Chakrabarty's ontological presuppositions are quite different, in fact, the reverse of Latour's. Not a monistic plane of distribution of associations between a multiplicity of agents but a radical *difference* between the pure 'naturalism' or physicalism of the earth system sciences concept of the

²⁶ Bruno Latour, 'How to Remain Human in Wrong Space?' A Comment on a Dialogue by Carl Schmitt', *Critical Inquiry* 47 (Summer 2021), pp. 699–718; p. 718.

planetary/Earth and a humanistic conception of the human as the domain of *meaningful experience*: an idealist version of that same ontological difference that Latour takes to be that bad illusion which needs to be scientifically dispelled by the Terrestrial. If Marxism is for Latour 'excessively social', Chakrabarty's position surely cannot but appear as anything other than excessively (and backward-lookingly) 'humanistic'. Indeed, the two of them appear to be restaging a version of the neo-Kantian debates of the later 19th and early 20th centuries about the methodological autonomy of the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In this respect, the antinomy expounded by Chakrabarty is pretty straightforward. It runs like this. (i) We are part of what we think of as the natural world, now reimagined as the Earth/the planetary on the basis of earth system sciences. (ii) We also transcend that world, albeit here in an exclusively phenomenologically conceived manner, through 'meaning' and 'historical experience', rather than through the transformative power of social practices. In the first respect, the temporality of the earth's climate has various rhythms of duration between one hundred thousand and several million years, yet, despite our short lives, we are now effectively inscribed within this timescale by virtue of human actions leading to anthropogenic climate change: in Chakrabarty's description, the actions of the 6 billion plus humans recently and currently on earth – a very liberal-demographical depiction of the human. However, the chronological time-scale of such changes, systematically understood, it is claimed, is beyond the scope of the human experience of time as meaningful, and can only be grasped in an abstractly cognitive way. Conclusion: the concept of history, which must now be naturalistically expanded to the scale of geological time to encompass anthropogenic climate change, is thereby internally fractured, since history in its humanistic sense must retain a basis in meaningful individual experience. Hence the antinomy: the concept of history is that of a certain type of meaningful experience; but geo-history cannot

be given such meaning, of the kind required to motivate planetary action to halt or at least seriously slow down climate change. We thus have what Chakrabarty conceives of as an insoluble ‘crisis of temporal management’, in which synchronization of the scales seems impossible. ‘We are required to behold ourselves from two perspectives at once’, Chakrabarty writes, ‘the planetary and the global. The global is a humanocentric construction; the planetary decentres the human.’²⁷ The new geo-biological view thus produces a kind of planetary melancholy within the historical subject. Chakrabarty’s book is largely a constant back and forth between ‘we must do this’ but ‘we are incapable of doing that’, where the ‘we’ refers to the totality of living humans imagined as an aggregate of individuals.

But is it really so hard ‘to behold ourselves from two perspectives at once?’ Is this not, metaphorically, a strangely *pre-cubist* theory mode of political thought? Do ‘we’ – denizens of the capitalist societies of the 21st century – not in fact behold ourselves in *multi-situated ways*?²⁸

I cannot here go into the theoretical problems associated with the philosophical crudeness of Chakrabarty’s concepts of time and history – other than to say, summarily, in brief: (i) Differing chronological time-*scales* do not seem to pose the problem he suggests, since they are precisely part of a common chronological measure, which is indeed precisely ‘abstract’. But (ii) why is ‘abstract cognition’ not as much a part of ‘experience’ as its other elements? Do we not live, in 21st-century capitalist societies, at least in part, deeply embedded *within* abstraction? More fundamentally, can we ‘experience’ anything at all

²⁷ Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, pp. 18–19.

²⁸ I take this term from Kaushik Sunder Rajan’s recent book, *Multisituated: Ethnography as Diasporic Praxis*, (Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2021), which is an important counter to some current trends which ontologize the standpoint of the ethnographic other of traditional anthropology.

without such abstract elements of cognition? (iii) The issue is not time-*scales* so much as the interacting *plurality of 'temporalities'* to which 'we' (denizens of the capitalist societies of the 21st century) are subject at various socio-political and existential-ontological levels. (iv) As suggested at the outset, the problem of political action at the level of *historical* temporalities, in the world-historical sense, precedes the problem of the integration of planetary time-scales, and retains the same structure – at the level of political action – once they are integrated at the level of the projected consequences of various social practices and processes. In other words, there is no new philosophical problem here. Historical time, as Chakrabarty's own previous dualist but combinatory conception acknowledged, exceeds its phenomenological register, without thereby ceding to the naturalistic chronologism of nineteenth-century historicism, with which most historians still persist. On Paul Ricoeur's philosophical account of historical time, for example, in his three-volume *Time and Narrative*, historical time is a narrative *mediation* of cosmo-physical (let us now say, 'planetary') time and social-phenomenological time. In this respect, Chakrabarty's apparently insoluble problem is simply the dialectical structure of historical time itself. Surprisingly, given Chakrabarty's previous work, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* actually has no concept of 'history' at all, at a socio-temporal ontological level.²⁹

For all Latour's scientism and Chakrabarty's humanism, the two share three things in their appeal for 'a redefinition of human relationships to the nonhuman':³⁰ (i) The refusal of a theorization of the *socio-historical* at an ontological level. (ii) A place-based account of

²⁹ See Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 volumes, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1984–88. For a systematic reading of the argument across the three volumes, see Peter Osborne, 'One Time, One History?', in *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, Verso, London and New York, 1995; 2011, Ch. 2. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2004. It is striking, given its topic, that in *The Climate of History* Chakrabarty makes no reference to literature in the philosophy of historical time.

³⁰ Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 20.

human 'belonging', which nonetheless fails to register over fifty years of theorizations of *social space* – from Lefebvre, via Castells, to Harvey and beyond – and its transformation by the 'flows' of digitized communication systems (although Latour's final Schmittianism attempts a direct politicization of space itself, not dissimilar to some post-Marxist 'politicisms'). (iii) As a result, a generic appeal to a liberal humanist 'we' of aggregated individuals – albeit, for Latour, this is an appeals to transmogrify into proper 'terrestrials' by opposing 'the modern', while for Chakrabarty, it is a call to rediscover 'reverence' and do the best 'we' can with what we have – which turns out to be the United Nations. For Latour the social is dissolved into the terrestrial; for Chakrabarty, the social exists only as relations of meaning and morality between individual humans living in 'communities' – 'communities' note, not societies or states or capitalist economies or regional geo-political blocs.

Might we not do better, at this point, to reverse the Latourian critique of Marxism as 'excessively social' and draw attention to the fact that most recent Marxist and Post-Marxist conceptions of politics have been *insufficiently* social in their failure to situate political organization and action immanently within the changing flux of the totality of social relations to which they are subject. This includes the effects and the affects of the constitutive role of the purely social realm – of the alienated objectivity of the concretely abstract forms of value (commodity-money-capital) – on the structures of subjectivity of political agents. For the political is a modality of the social, which is itself always already a socio-natural as well as a socio-historical set of relations, processes and practices. The problem is a practical one.