

ALIENOCENE – THEORY/FICTION

# THE PLANET DOES NOT RETURN OUR GAZE



DIPESH CHAKRABARTY

*Some researchers are not satisfied by introducing a decisive break in their field of expertise, one that brings new horizons: they also know how to move away from this very break to turn the page a second time, and achieve a second intellectual revolution. Distinguished professor at the University of Chicago, the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty is the author in the year 2000 of a seminal essay in post-colonial studies: Entitled Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference. The book diagnoses the biases induced by the Western point of view in the writing of history, but it also shows how, in unravelling the narrative of the world from its European matrix, one profoundly renews the historian's arsenal.*

*Now, in the fall of 2019, a striking article appears in the journal Critical Inquiry: "The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category," Chakrabarty invites us to a new shift. According to him, globalization - as a narrative and as a process centered on the unification of the world through and for human activity - is coming to an end; Global warming introduces us to a completely different perspective, that of the "planetary." This compels the humanist to enter into a new dialogue with the sciences, the historian to situate himself in another time scale, the citizen of the world to renew her ethical and political categories.*

*Opening in September 2020 at the Centre Pompidou, the cycle devoted to contemporary cartographies of thought and creation is entitled Planetarium. To speak with Dipesh Chakrabarty is to measure what such a title commits to: nothing less than a decentering of the [human] world.*

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*Mathieu Potte-Bonneville: Your intellectual trajectory ranges from post-colonial issues to environmental problems in the context of post-globalization. What link do you establish between these two sets of reflections?*

Dipesh Chakrabarty: My trajectory is intrinsically linked to globalization: my interest in post-colonial issues is part of a global story. For example, India in the context of the 18th century was the last theater of conflict between the French and the British, who were fighting for the domination of a single empire. And it was the French who lost. When the British historian E.P. Thomson, while visiting India, observed that Indian Marxism was the same as English Marxism, a friend of mine replied: "If this is so, it is because the French general called Dupleix lost the [nascent French] Indian empire and the English general called Clive won it [for the British], no more and no less. If India had become a French empire, everybody would have spoken the language of structuralism. You governed us, so we speak your language, but that has nothing to do with the world view that the French had."

With the abolition of the Empire, the time was in opposition to imperialist ideas, and that's what I inherited from my parents. During my childhood, in the mid-1960s, former colonial powers such as the United States, Canada, and

Australia, eased their migration restrictions, which encouraged people of my class to migrate westward. Of course, the emigration of the working classes goes back much longer, and the presence of Africans or Caribbeans in post-colonial England or France was established long before other people belonging to occupational categories began to migrate. All these groups encountered what I would describe as metropolitan forms of post-imperialist racism. Actually, the English in England were often perceived to have been much less racist towards Indians when India was part of the Empire!

Post-colonialism was, in some ways, a response to post-imperial racism; but at the same time, it was part of a dynamic of globalization. If you think about it, around the 2000s, the bulk of the consumer middle class was composed of Europeans and Americans, North Americans. Today, they have given way to non-Europeans and non-Americans, especially Chinese and Indians. Europeans and Americans now make up about 35% of the world's consuming classes. In a way, my thinking on globalization has followed the sense of history that we saw being written before our eyes: my life was part of this historical flow. It was the development of a post-global sensibility that was a major accident from my point of view.

*MPB: Precisely when did this change of perspective occur for you, which leads you today to question the “planetary” rather than the “global”?*

DC: I began to formulate things in this way following a conversation with a French philosopher, Catherine Malabou, who told me how for her, the globe of globalization and the globe of global warming had two different meanings. This helped me clarify many questions that I had actually been asking myself for a

long time. I went to Australia for my PhD and discovered the great outdoors and Australian nature, and loved what I discovered. It was a tragic shock when in the year 2003, in the middle of an unprecedented drought, a big fire broke out in Canberra, the capital, destroying 300 houses, killing nearly 25 people as well as thousands of animals, and burning down all the bush around the city that I loved. So, I wondered how such devastating fires could happen, and my Australian friends, environmentalists, explained to me that this drought was not normal, that it was the result of climate change. I asked what climate change was. I had no idea, and was amazed to read that scientists believed that human beings had the power to push back the next ice age by more than 50,000 years. As a historian, I had never thought of applying this scale to human beings. I was first and foremost a historian of European expansion, of colonization, on a scale of 500 years. And I told myself that what had to do with the planet was in the realm of science and that I didn't need to be interested in it.

I sometimes compare this story to having diabetes, which is the case for many Indians. Your doctor tells you overnight that you have diabetes; he asks you questions, and then your story expands! Mine first explained to me that being a professor, I didn't get enough exercise; but then he asked me if my parents also had diabetes, which got us into the field of genetics, and asked about my main diet. When I mentioned rice, he said that, indeed, those who eat rice often end up being diabetic. How long did you follow this diet? I said to myself: for 5,000 years! All of a sudden, my story was no longer limited to the last 500 years; it enveloped the history of agriculture.

*MPB: In the distinction you propose between the “global” or “worldwide” (mondial) and the “planetary,” you emphasize how the concept of globalized history seems to you to be linked to a limited perspective, that of Europe. In what way is talking about globalization Eurocentric?*

DC: Because it emanates from a process that Heidegger called “the Europeanization of the Earth.” This geographical and political conceptualization is born in the modern era, as Europeans venture further and deepen their knowledge of the oceans to build their empires. The discovery of the oceans and the ability to cross them have represented decisive challenges. You cannot separate what has been called “the Earth” from European expansion and trade, with their effects on cartography and the development of navigational instruments. Another very important distinction between what modernity called the globe and what I call the planet is that the globe could appear as an object accessible to our perception: even the telescope was a means of extending the capacities of our eyes, where what scientists today call “planet” is first of all the object of a mental, intellectual reconstruction.

*MPB: But you insist on it: even if the image of the planet, as it emerges today from SSE (Earth System Sciences) is an aggregate of very abstract scientific data, it is the object of a form of existential concern. Modernity had however accustomed us to distinguish objective science from the register of our emotions.*

DC: Indeed, I have often been struck by the extent to which scientists working on the Earth system have emotional dispositions towards their object. Even if it is not something we perceive with our own eyes, this object affects us, as when

scientists raise questions such as: can we govern this planet? Can we control it? Can we become the rulers of the planetary system? Can there be a positive Anthropocene? All these questions emanate from existential questions: what would happen [to humans] if we were not capable of all these things? While reconstructing the planet in their minds, as an abstract entity, they answer this question in the most human existential terms. Basically, my starting point for answering the question: “How does the planet become a category of humanist thought?” is the situation that scientists are confronted with, the way they experience an object that cannot be experienced.

*MPB: The picture you give of Earth-system science complicates what we usually call “ecological consciousness – for example, where it emphasizes the uniqueness of our world, the fact that “there is no planet B.” You emphasize how much for scientists to understand our planet implies comparing it to others, real or possible?*

DC : This is one of the fascinating aspects of contemporary planetary science. For example, global warming: once you know the effect of carbon dioxide, you can explain why Mars is cold and Venus is warm, can’t you? It’s comparative in that sense. Understanding our world, including in its singularity, implies bringing it closer to other planetary configurations. Even the question: “What makes a planet habitable?” is intrinsically comparative; even if we do not have another habitable planet to study at the moment, we can imagine that if there were life on another planet, certain laws would apply, such as natural selection, etc., and that we would be able to understand how the planet could be inhabited. This shifts the point of view that human action should be at the center

of reflection and should be the only point of reference for thinking about the processes that concern our globe. At the same time, let's not lose sight of the fact that even today, several conceptualizations of the planet clash: as Bruno Latour said, not only over the course of time have men imagined the planet in different ways, but nowadays, Elon Musk's idea of the planet, or that of Trump, are not those of Earth system scientists.

*MPB: You point out that thinking about the planet implies breaking away from a face-to-face form of thinking that marked our traditional view of the world. I quote you: 'To meet the planet is to meet something that is the condition of human existence and yet remains profoundly indifferent to this existence.' In this confrontation with the inhuman, we almost find echoes of the 'fatum' of the ancients.*

DC : Contrary to what most religious doctrines teach –Christianity, Islam, Judaism, even Hinduism, which make humans feel special—one could say that the planet does not return our gaze. In Heidegger's conception, when you approach a tree, it is as if the Earth is sending the sap up the tree to welcome you with a fruit. Of course, he adds that our relationship with the Earth is based on conflict because to inhabit it, we want to be safe, but cannot ever be fully safe because of earthquakes, thunder, animals, floods, and so on. But he immediately points out that if there is conflict, there is also mutuality. Conversely, to experience the planet is to experience something completely non-mutual. It's more reminiscent of certain ancient spiritualities, and you're right: I've always told myself that my work probably stemmed from stoicism. In my opinion, planetarity is so inhumanly vast, in all its dimensions, that we depend on it, that



we are at its mercy, and this situation disorients us. This is also what takes me away from the view that overthrowing capitalism would be enough to solve the problem: in the face of such a crisis, some problems can be solved, in a human time scale and by human institutions, but some are too vast to be answered. To think clearly, you need stoic resources.

*MPB: Does this mean that, from a political point of view, the global horizon is out of reach? In what sense are our political concepts for you linked to the global perspective?*

DC: On this point, I was influenced by Heidegger's reading of Plato's allegory of the cave. He insists, as you know, on the distinction between sunlight and the realities it shows: when the prisoner escapes from the cave, he discerns trees, birds, mountains, and each of these realities is a form; but while light can enable us to distinguish these forms, it has no form itself and therefore cannot be perceived directly. Similarly, when we ask ourselves questions such as "Is India a more democratic country than China?" or "Is India becoming authoritarian?" or when one asserts that there should be climate justice, this can only be done by mobilizing formal concepts, and these forms depend in some way on the global horizon. It is within this global sphere that we reflect, that our ethical and political imperatives are born.

But the planet, for its part, is an object that escapes any global grasp: we attribute certain properties to it, such as ocean currents or the movement of tectonic plates, we imagine it in fragments, such as sketches in geology textbooks, models, but it remains in the background. Thus, the planet is a bit like light, in the Heideggerian reading of the allegory of the cave. It is the informal

condition of forms. And this is also why it resists politicization. There is nothing in the history of the planet that provides a basis for our political imperatives. Take the example of biodiversity: it is an issue that, in a sense, only interests human beings, since they are the products of this biodiversity, of this multicellular form of life. But multicellular life appeared barely 500 million years ago, whereas the Earth is more than four billion years old: nothing obliges it to be habitable! This planet could have been similar to any other telluric planet, without life.

*MPB: Would you then say that in this new context, our task is to invent new forms to deal with the political issues at hand? Or rather to find non-formal ways of thinking and creating, to bring us up to the level of the planet itself?*

DC: In the last chapter of the book I just finished, I try to answer the question: "What do you think, where do you stand, when you admit that the planet is not in a relationship of mutuality with us?" First of all, let's be clear: from an existential point of view, humans must do something. This planet must be our concern. There is no alternative to activism, no alternative to reacting. But part of it is to accept that human beings have nothing special, that they don't have any special claims on the biosphere. The fact is that the axial religions, all the religions invented since the erection of cities about 5,000 years ago, postulate that human beings are special. But if you look at the indigenous religions, those of the Aborigines of Australia, the Africans, the Indian tribes, the Amerindians studied by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, you realize that these religions are all related to other forms of life, and even to non-living elements such as rivers and mountains, and that they do not make humans special.

I understand that we are facing an emergency: there are 7.5 billion of us on Earth thanks to industrial civilization and fossil fuels; there will soon be 9 billion of us. We have experienced very rapid growth: in 1900, there were about 1 billion of us or a little more. So, the question arises: how to adapt the social systems of yesteryear, designed to support a limited number of inhabitants, to such a high population density? That being said, our form of life is still the one of a minority: the current pandemic only serves as a reminder that the dominant proportion of life on Earth is microbial. Microbes far outweigh animals, and within animals, humans are a minority form of life. And it is this form of life that dominates the order of things and creates a biodiversity crisis.

So, I think we should take inspiration from minority forms of thinking. And I'm not just talking about indigenous people, but about groups that have historically lived as minorities and developed a way of thinking that was no longer governed by the desire to dominate. We have to look at the losers, at Kafka, at minor literature. Whether at the beginning of the modern era or even at the beginning of the globalized era, small groups of merchants lived in the port cities, Jews, Armenians, Indians, on the African coast. Moreover, when Gandhi traveled to South Africa, he went to meet these minority groups. He founded his Ashram in which people from all over the world came to live. If you read Gandhi in his early days, you will understand what constitutes a minority form of thinking for me.

*MPB: Twenty years ago, you called for "provincializing Europe" to put it back in the context of a global history. Now, it seems as if you are inviting us to provincialize globalization itself, and to rethink humanism against the backdrop of a much broader planetary horizon, on which we depend without being able to claim to be at its center.*

DC : Let's take an example: the air we breathe is an essential condition for our individual and collective existence, as well as for plants and animals. And if we look at the history of this condition, the history of our lungs, we see that biodiversity has kept the atmosphere at a level that has prevented forests from going up in smoke, or us from being choked, for nearly 400 million years. This is what Earth system scientists call the planet's "modern atmosphere" - a modernity that is not intrinsically human, even though we have been the beneficiaries. Incidentally, it makes me smile to hear historians talk about the modern world in terms of the Renaissance or the Age of Enlightenment, whereas for scientists interested in the Earth system, this period spans 400 million years. It is this change in perspective that interests me: we must find a way of life that starts from the principle that we are not at the center of things, that we are a minority form of life and that we depend on the life forms that surround us. Modernity in the sense of humanist historians who equate it to the rise of capitalism depends on a non-human modernity, linked to the balance of the living. And in a very profound sense, I would say that contemporary capitalism is opposed to life.