

Dipesh Chakrabarty

World-Making, “Mass” Poverty, and the Problem of Scale

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One key idea that I have been discussing and debating with Bruno Latour lately is how the philosophy of history emerged in the West. In Marxism as much as in the liberalism expressed by Francis Fukuyama in 1989, this philosophy asks: Where is human history going? Of course, when you examine this idea of history you see that it’s essentially a secularization of a Judeo-Christian idea of human beings achieving some kind of salvation. And when it comes to this history, Latour’s question has always been: How do people misread their own times? Throughout modernity, he argues, human beings were actually moving towards the Anthropocene without knowing it, lurching from one state to another state towards the Anthropocene. He is making the point that there are three or four moments when the planet or the world is, so to speak, brought into being by Europeans.

The first moment is when Europeans expand and discover the “new world” and take other people’s land and create European empires and colonies, coupled with the so-called Scientific Revolution that was happening in Europe. We can consider this the first stage of the making of the world of the globe – Latour uses the word “mundus” for this. The second stage, he says, is the civilizing project that Europeans think they have been carrying out from the end of the eighteenth century. They think it is their job to civilize the whole world, and this is another project of world-making. And then there’s the forging of connectivity from the time of the Industrial Revolution to the Second World War. New technologies emerge to connect the world – the telegraph, steam shipping, fossil fuels, and coal.

And then comes globalization and the deregulation of world economies under Thatcher and Reagan, particularly in the Anglosphere. China then joins in after Deng Xiaoping announces the Four Modernizations plan in the 1970s; Mao dies in 1976 and Deng announced it in 1977. We’ve been living in that world, the intense world of globalization, ever since. In conversation with Latour I have been trying to argue that this intensification of globalization makes – for all of us, for humanists, for nonscientists – the earth system visible. So now earth systems scientists like Tim Lenton and Erle Ellis, among others, explain to us what earth systems mean to citizens. Suddenly this planet becomes visible as a dynamic actor behaving like a system.

Latour makes an interesting point that the planet comes last in this series of world-making. Yet the planet is the most ancient of all the terms. In this European world-making process, which is five hundred years old, the most ancient thing, the earth, which is 4.5 billion years old,

comes last. Latour's point since *We Have Never Been Modern*, and even in his earlier work, has been that this European project was flawed. It was based on the nature/culture distinction, or what he calls the "constitution of the modern." Therefore, it was always self-deceptive on the part of Europeans to think that this world could be made, and that everybody could share in this world. You might call it a flawed philosophy of history. It gave rise to the idea of growth, continuous growth, infinite growth. Therefore, the problem Latour raises is: Why and how did Europeans manage to deceive themselves?

This is exactly where my mild and friendly disagreement comes in. My question, which comes from having grown up in a place like India, is: How did the non-European anti-colonial leaders buy into this vision? Why did Césaire from Martinique, the negritude poet, write in his book *Discourse on Colonialism* that the problem with colonial rule was that Europeans did not keep their promises? They said they would come and modernize us, but they didn't build enough hospitals, enough railways, enough industry, so we should build them ourselves. Nehru says the same thing, Nasser says the same thing. The same thing is said by Mao (before the Cultural Revolution), by Ho in Vietnam, by Nyerere in Tanzania. The same thing. So my question is: Why do all these anti-colonial and anti-imperial figures buy into this regime? Even when you think of somebody like Gandhi or Tagore – who did not necessarily buy into the idea of modernization, of this industrial infrastructure, since Gandhi was anti-industry and Tagore criticized industrial civilization – they, as world-individuals, nevertheless depended on fossil fuel. Gandhi would not have been Gandhi without steam shipping, nor without the railways, which all ran on coal. Tagore made seventy-five or eighty global trips by sea, one by air when he went to Iran, all fossil-fuel based.

Given their sense of cosmopolitanism, their sense of being global, why did they buy into this? Did they fall in love with the material allure of modernization? My answer, looking at Gandhi and Tagore, and even Césaire, is: No, they fell in love with the values of the Enlightenment. They fell in love with the idea of equality. They fell in love. In fact, in an essay, Tagore lists four things the Europeans brought with them.¹ One was peace in public life. Before the Europeans came, you were a nobody if you didn't know how to wield the sword, so becoming an important person in society meant that you had the skills to kill somebody. My ancestors, and those of Tagore, were all products of a pacification of Indian society that the Europeans carried out. The middle class fell in love with the fact that you did not have to know how to kill people in

order to be a human being of note or to protect your well-being. Also on Tagore's list are access to modern science, and the rule of law, the idea that you are equal in the eyes of law. These ideas didn't exist before then. Criticism of untouchability in the caste system was made possible by these ideas, which is why Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the best-known leader of ex-untouchable people in India, the lowest of the low, said in one of his writings that he would like to have Indian history begin in France in 1789. He wanted the French Revolution to be the first event, the inaugural event of modern Indian History.

The problem is what else the Europeans introduced at the same time, alongside these values. Europeans introduced the question of scale. Just as they created this world, a large-scale entity, they also integrated large areas in particular. They created the politico-geographical thing called India and introduced more effective infrastructure for such unification: all-weather roads, the printing press, the railways, the telegraph, a mail system, a uniform legal system and currency, uniform education systems, and so on. They gave rise to the desire for nation-states that replaced the idea of empires. Thus, the Chinese communists would later want to own a big thing, a nation-state called China. The values I have mentioned before, which were inspiring, now had to be scaled for very large areas, and after the Second World War, for very large numbers of people. The idea of equality, the idea of caring for the poor, all these things would have to be executed in India and China, after the revolution or independence, for a growing number of people. The Indian population has grown more than fourfold in my lifetime, as did the Chinese population after their Revolution.

The only way you can *care* for such a large number of people is through a "science" Europeans developed, which is really an art of governance called economics that comes out of eighteenth-century moral philosophy. Adam Smith – and later economists – actually argue that economics is a way of caring for people, which is why somebody like Amartya Sen can write a book called *Development as Freedom*, or champion the kind of capabilities approach that he, Martha Nussbaum, and others employ. Economics was a way of developing a secular spirit of caring. Before that, in India for instance, caring was very religious, like Christian caring. You cared for somebody because they were God's creature. But in economics, having to care for millions of people whom you could never know personally gave rise to the idea of welfare. It was totally human-centric and forgetful of ecology, but it championed one principle that humans and

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even our ancestors the hominins needed, which got written into European political philosophy: the idea that humans have to be protected from predators and natural disasters.

The more humans created a human-dominated world order, an order of life, the more we got rid of most of the wildlife that could have threatened it. And we developed mechanisms for dealing with “natural” disasters, ranging from technology to insurance. The only predators we have left now are viruses, bacteria, and other microbes. In a way, this happened by combining caring with scaling up. When you read Hobbes, the basic principle is that the protection of human life is a fundamental public good. And Hobbes assumes that this includes protection not only from bad people, but also from wild animals. The history of urbanization is basically the elimination of wild animals.

Now we see how the question of protection becomes a question of public health. Looking at today’s world, most of the emerging diseases in the last twenty years have been zoonotic diseases, diseases that come from wild animals. The current pandemic is a very interesting instance of what has happened through this scaling up, of how the global reveals the planetary. On the one hand, the disease is global because we are global; we are large in number, concentrated in cities, and are intensely mobile, so we spread the disease around. That’s a question of scale. But it’s also an event in the history of life, because this microbe has probably lived in the guts of bats for millions of years. Bats have been around for fifty million years, and are a much older species than human beings. This microbe had a small local address, and now its address is global. Basically, it has colonized our bodies and found a new way to become global.

So we have actually scaled the microbe up into a global microbe, and therefore precipitated an event in the history of life and biological evolution. In some way, we have scaled ourselves up to such a degree that we have imperiled our own existence. If the whole principle that humans should be protected from predators came to mean, effectively, that we have no other predators than microbes, viruses, and bacteria, the expansion of our economic and extractive activities has meant that they can now jump species to become very effective predators. And that’s because the interface between wildlife and human life is increasing due to deforestation, logging, road building, human habitation, illegal trade in wildlife, and so forth.

The predicament is deeper than the predicament of the high modernists that Latour criticizes. We will not understand this predicament unless we take the question of mass poverty very seriously. All those anti-

colonial people I named spoke about poverty and development and modernization in good faith. Now people like Prime Minister Modi and others speak of the same things in bad faith. But the fact that China and India, while defending fossil fuel on grounds of removing poverty, sound like they’re making a very powerful argument, shows that poverty itself is a scaled-up problem. It’s a very important problem, and unless we take that into account very seriously, we will not know how to further the critique of planetarity that Latour inaugurated, to take it forward into our time.

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Rabindranath Tagore, "Kalantar" (Change of times), in *Rabindrarachanabali* (The collected works of Rabindranath Tagore), vol. 13 (Government of West Bengal, 1968), 209–15. See also the discussion in my essay "From Civilization to Globalization: The 'West' as a Shifting Signifier in Indian Modernity," in Chakrabarty, *The Crises of Civilization: Explorations in Global and Planetary Histories* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 54–75.

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