

articles

“Cultural Studies” in the Era of Climate Change: *Who is Knocking at the Doors?*

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Abstract

Are “Culture Studies” doomed by the coming ecocide? Or have they already become or made themselves zombies in academia and in the struggles against our possible extinction as a species? Are they complicit in that ecocide? What, if anything can be done to remedy or ameliorate the degradation of the planet’s economies, environments and intellectual life? Instead of looking backwards to the past or only studying cultures in the now conventional sense, we may need to look with urgency at what humanity has done to its world in new ways.

Keywords: Culture Studies, Ecocide, Anthropocene, Utopism

Many scientists concede that . . . we are on the path toward a 4C rise as early as mid-century, with catastrophic consequences, including the loss of the world’s coral reefs; the disappearance of major mountain glaciers; the total loss of the Arctic summer sea-ice, most of the Greenland ice-sheet and the break-up of West Antarctica; acidification and overheating of the oceans; the collapse of the Amazon rainforest; and the loss of Arctic permafrost; to name just a few. Each of these ecosystem collapses could trigger an out-of-control runaway warming process. Worse, scientists. . . now project that we are actually on course to reach global temperatures of up to 8C within 90 years. – *The Guardian*

I have been asked to share with you any developments in “the West” in cultural studies—and I have good news and bad news. The first is that “cultural studies” has survived many identity crises and is internationally robust, perhaps the easiest meeting ground for, well, cultures and cultural analysis of all sorts. There is good reason to think that, when the world of academic disciplines collapses, “cultural studies” will be the last to go. So, I don’t know how much of what follows applies to the Chinese version, which seems uniquely fertile still.

Cultural Studies has a powerful genealogy—since it emerged at a moment when popular culture had become central, media studies were taking off, and a need to reclaim historical political analysis from post-structuralist thought asserted itself. The forms it took, and its political claims, testified to its power and necessity, even if no one could define it (or because of that). Its focus would traverse popular culture, media studies, multiculturalism and identity politics, image culture, the politics of representation, and so on—sometimes linked to Marxian analysis of “late capitalism.” The only things it did not want to first do were literary studies and philosophy: no textualism and no “high theory.” In time all these seeped back in, such as you find with Deleuzian analysis and a routine, opaque deconstruction (without worrying about words). It could invoke as precursor the Walter Benjamin that engaged technologies of memory, the “image,” and the import of photography, or Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critiques of “the culture industry.” Academically, it is the most successfully imperialist 20th century template ever. Whatever “culture” now means—or its role in a new era of the corporate state, globalization, financialization, digital acceleration, and mass media spells, not to mention geopolitical regressions—it continues to canonize its social and pop cultural side and its utopist or progressive work. In America, *Disabilities Studies* is very strong (practical, social), and it dotes on its own fantasy products: *Zombie Studies*, seminars on *Justine Bieber*, *Porn Studies*—what is sometimes called the “culture *machine*.”ⁱ

But here is the bad news (if you see it that way). Cultural studies may also now be *dead*—or at least, zombied (don’t worry, zombies can go on and on). It was killed, so to speak, by the non-human. In the 21st century — the era of climate change and the mutation (and possible extinction) of “life” as we know it — the non-human over-rides, invades, interrupts, cultures and cultural temporalities. If “culture” first meant *social* cultures and practices, the term remained vaguely anthropological. At first, this meant the integration of new science, hyper-technologies, ethno-biologies, and new materialities (e.g., oil); *it* also saw the return of critical philosophy (and ontology), and cross-

overs to the non-human like animal “studies,” *thing theory*, “speculative materialisms,” hyperobjects, and eco-criticisms.

Its “death” involves this other term that recently arrived, and now is, according to Disabilities Studies guru, Michael Berubé, getting all the attention:

Right now, hundreds of humanists are working on the debate about the “Anthropocene” epoch—a debate that began in the sciences, and that raises the question of whether human activity on the planet has reached the point at which we are fundamentally changing the physical conditions of the biosphere, through climate change and mass extinction (spoiler alert: we are). What does that have to do with the humanities? You could ask Dipesh Chakrabarty of the University of Chicago, whose 2009 essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses” argued that the Anthropocene deranges the nature-culture division of labor by which the sciences and humanities have organized themselves over the past three thousand years.

This, by the way, shows “cultural studies” trying to absorb the latest trend, eat it too, but there’s a problem. Berubé, who began Disabilities Studies, is trying to publicly defend the Humanities—which is being scorned and defunded broadly in Universities and discarded by corporate cultures as unprofitable. He cannot mount that defense, or see why he may have had a hand in it, so he points to something which is hot and relevant—but which, it so happens, begins with a trauma: that of putting a certain form of historicization in question (including cultural specificity, humanism, and the entire knowledge industry itself). It finds the trends that underlie it have pretended to be political while re-enforcing an over-arching trajectory of planetary death, and it calls for a shift.

I’ll outline briefly the import of Chakrabarty’s “The Climates of History,” then sketch some of the fragmented, diverse trajectories that are looming today—which leads us, for example, to the emergence of something like *Extinction Studies* (I said “like”).

Dipesh Chakrabarty is (was) a pioneering post-colonialist, invested in an utopist critique mobilized as “social justice” and embedded in the crimes of a very brutal past (which China does not need to be reminded of). But in this essay he explains his conversion—at least negatively. History is no longer about human on human power and its narratives, revisions, coups, racism, sexism, and so on. There is an abrupt disconnect, today, between scientific

projects of a collapsed global eco-system (mass extinctions, population culling, water wars, agricultural collapse, mega-droughts, marine life collapse—the usual disaster porn menu) and business as usual. In fact, the representational and critical orthodoxies of the Western universities have been, unwittingly, complicit.

Let's just say that there is nothing like the prospect of *ecocide*, or the proletarianization of the 99 % globally, to interrupt your progressivist and utopist premises. Chakrabarty, in brief, abandons post-colonialist premises, since these have been overrun by a vaster materiality that interrupts the “human” game altogether. From this perspective, market “democracy” and the Enlightenment have under-written this “crisis,” Marxist models overlooked it, “capitalism” no longer accounts fully for an arc of auto-extinction, and human history cannot be separated from geological and biomorphic events. If we have passed tipping points (as can be argued at least), we are already in the afterlife or a sort of bubble (“peak” energy, “peak” humans, “peak” food, “peak” water—and so on). It is, says Chakrabarty, now a *species question*. There is no dialectical process at work, no redemptive utopism—which depended on a human on human model of justice or a Christological model of time (via Hegel). As you noticed, “humanity” has not broken from its spell and cooperated together against a threat to their existence (Copenhagen), as some hoped, since that threat or enemy was themselves, their hyper-industrial exploitation of biomass and corporate demands of “exponential growth.” That would imperil political regimes’ of the leaders—any dramatic shift in fossil fuel use would wreck their economies short-term. Chakrabarty concludes that there is no single humanity to have emerged from historical processes (that is, there is no dialectic), what might at best define itself today through a “*negative universal history*.”

That now has a name, the “Anthropocene,” the geological era of man, though it is a double-edged sword. (Let us leave aside its hubristic focus on Western man, the Greek *anthropos*, since if any alien were to visit us and seek the oldest, most numerous, and most influential culture, it would be China: so, in justice, we should re-name this the Sin(o)-Anthropocene perhaps.) In any case, you see there is a break, but what forms does it take — since this is without a script, scraps our historical models and anthro-po-narcissism. It dis-identifies with human perspectives, does not see us as warding off (or ignoring) a future “catastrophe” but in the middle of one: or, moreover, that “we” (the species) is that catastrophe, so cannot see it (the 6th mass extinction event on Earth, caused by us). “Anthropocene” is a funny term, drawn from geology to place the present in the geological record: it is a cause for hubristic celebration (we humans master nature and life, and will soon create both: genetic engineering,

cyborgs, the “singularity”!), but it also marks our disappearance or extinction. Such a label can only be confirmed after you are gone, read by another as an archive of the past (not necessarily a “human”). So, you can see why this deranges cultural studies and zombies it, much as it does “post-colonial studies” (which will still have a long canonical afterlife in the universities). Moreover, at first it doesn’t seem fun (I promise you, though, it is). Can one look across our cultures and differences and view “us” as a species? Does that species require or define itself through extinction? A *species perspective* is not interested in whether you are Chinese or British, but we can only access such thought through cultural memes, at least at first. Does 21st century hyper-industrial civilization, with its addictions, accelerations, and hyperbolic greed, deserve to survive?ⁱⁱ

It is impossible to separate the “Anthropocene” from an emergent *politics of ecocide*, or from the *economics of extinction*.

Even utopist critics today awaken to this with a certain horror, as activist-journalist Chris Hedges does.ⁱⁱⁱ Hedges sees that the “global financial crisis” was exploited to engineer a massive wealth shift to the “.001 %”—with 86 individuals amassing the wealth of the bottom 50 % of the planet’s population. And he correlates that to deep state reports confirming the worst predictions of climate change to come (a human die-off this century). But unlike others, who assumed corporate denialism in the media has some point, Hedges concludes that “they know,” have used the period to amass resources for the few, and have designated themselves the survivor class for decades hence—a sort of species split, which also marks the newly proletarianized global humanity as disposable. No doubt we will seem that way from some distant point (not so distant in fact), since this returns to a 20th century eugenicist logic. Particularly, if this new global kleptocratic class (except in China!) consolidates and privatizes exponential advances in robotics, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, cybernetics, and so on. With this new proletariat one is not in a dialectical model: they are not even labor, since the economy to come will be job-deprived (robotics). The “breakaway civilization” or economy (Catherine Austin Fitts’s phrase) of the new financial “super-elite” will run independently of the old consumer economy. In any case, Hedges comes to this insight not only as the closure of utopist critical imaginaries—who has time for progressivism, rights, and liberation (not to mention worries about genocide) before survivalist logics, water wars, climate migration? We see this today, with nominally “democratic” regimes in crisis globally, each with a climate change and resource logic in it (Iran, Venezuela, Thailand, Ukraine, Egypt, and so on).

To Chris Hedges, the *corporations* (legal “persons” in the U.S.) expect *us* to be passive and complicit, now, in our own disappearance—a proletariat that will be of value to this elite “survivor class” mostly for harvesting stored wealth, meta-data, and occasionally organs. Hedges’ wonders why the “elite” accelerate what will catch them too? They think they will survive with the new technologies and reduced population—a bit longer. This is not Marx’s *proletariat*. It can be read only from the perspective of ecocide. And it does not seem to have an exit. If it sounds like sci-fi, or a bad movie script, it is because it is: one of the tools of proletarianization is to put this in the popular imaginary as a disaster movie one, or someone, survives—to derealize or dissociate its realities (one can list a host of these recently in popular culture: including Disney cartoons, for the kids). Nonetheless, there is a shift today from recent ecological activist rhetoric, focusing on sustainability and mitigation (that is, trying to hold off or reverse the catastrophe), to something else, a rhetoric advising that *adaptation* and geo-engineering are the thing.

I’ll quickly list some of the critical positions that are evolving. This is a big conversation and will not be over soon (and I hope Chinese critical thinkers enter it internationally soon: we need active *Chinese thinking* in this mix!). The most succinct is that which concludes that ecocide is now irreversible, that we proceed with what this means to attain a cognitive re-set—essentially, one free of “culture” as the metaphoric lens through which we narrate life. And as said, this drags back in everything that was set aside by “cultural studies” when it initialized itself as a real world, social, contemporary, non-theory based, political knowledge base for critique. It interrupts not only utopist imaginaries but also the models of time and representation that they assumed. And the model of “politics.”

There is no way to address this entirely in a few moments of course. There are cultural politics and ideologies in combat, and I am limited to caricature. What is shared is a break not just with past ways of thinking (with) the human, or defining it socially or politically, and the requirement to give up 20th century narrative legacies that brought us here—which walked along side this acceleration, and did not notice or address it (Freud, Adorno, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, etc.). Bruno Latour calls this the “modernist parenthesis,” in which we have been pre-occupied, like Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, in correcting our catastrophic pasts, replaying or redeeming them, rather than turning to the future we were building around us. You know that text, and Benjamin is one of the saints of cultural studies. For Latour, that stupid Angel—who still persists—is *the cause of the catastrophe* he beholds, and in Benjamin’s text he is in fact decimated and wiped out instantly by what is

called “a storm”—a climactic, inorganic, elemental trope. That Angel is the epitome of the West’s theological-Enlightenment-Utopist messianism.

So, at the moment, it is not enough to report back from the American provinces to the secret center of the Sin(o)-Anthropocene era, the heart of China, with news of recent trends. For example, that they are doing a lot of *Disabilities Studies* or *Zombie Studies* now. What does *that* tell us? Moreover, who is this “we”?^{iv}

Clive Hamilton re-poses the question:

Few progressives have turned around to face the future; and one can see why, for the progressive who turns around can no longer be a progressive. In the Anthropocene, in addition to the past we seek to escape, now we have a future we want to avoid; so we are squeezed from both ends. [. . .] The most striking fact about the human response to climate change is the determination *not* to reflect, to carry on blindly as if nothing is happening.

So, here is a quick list, almost randomly. What is shared is a movement away from human-centered focus (or reliance), and it traverses science, pop culture, bio-ethics, politics, technologies, media, rethinking “capitalisms,” in a new weave. Along the way, there are only errors and strategies, attempts to position outside of the trance or spells of denialisms—particularly by taking refuge in the nostalgic models of the 20th century. Among else, this would include several attempts that discretely attempt to move forward, while returning to pre-critical memes that protect the cognitive capital of one’s investments. Such a list would track or include new work from disciplines like geography and “climate change” communications.

I will just give a short list of the sort of things that now arrive from different representational discourses as *examples* (there are many, there are schisms, of course, and so on). We can discuss any of these that you are curious about or want to, for that matter, question. I published a book recently called *Telemorphosis: Theory in an Era of Climate Change* (2012) with an array of such essays by important theorists as a case study. It at first reads like an equal mix of cultural studies, literary thought, technological critique, gender critique, bio-ethics and species-invasion, the politics of memory, epistemological and institutional faces. What links them is that the catastrophic logics of the “future” (which is our way of acknowledging the present in cinematic terms) have now erased and overtaken our previous focus on re-narrating pasts. There is nothing to focus attention like the paradox of auto-extinction. This is what Jameson called the “archaeology of the future” that sci-fi imaginaries enter at one limit of “literature.” Moreover, it turns out that thinking with the

“anthropocene” as disappearance produces an affirmation that cuts through the *malaise* of contemporary cognitive regimes. In that volume, for instance, one finds literature itself disowns the metaphor of the home (or *eco*), positing life as an eco-technics (J. Hillis Miller); that today’s memory systems absorb this horizon as a Post Traumatic Stress Disorder economy (Catherine Malabou); that species bio-invasion disarticulates human histories geographically (Jason Groves); that one must battle the outsourcing of memory and the political culture of distraction that “short-circuits” care today (Bernard Stiegler); that the anthropocene causes us to read sexual difference as an episode (Claire Colebrook); that a “post-carbon” economy reads the pop cultural present in advance (Martin McQuillan); that “ethics” is not that of the otherness of the other human--projected, even, onto pet animals (“animal studies”)—but departs from “life” effects outside the human bubble including microbial life (Joanna Zylinska); that our cognitive inability to comprehend this is due to language and incompatibilities in the sheer “scale” of what is underway (Timothy Clark); and so on. I mention this volume because it is a handy example, but others now abound—or are forthcoming, as Michael Berubé notes. One is, by the way, already beyond eco-criticism (which can metaphorically work to restore the natural or “eco,” rather than see that as a construction positing human enclosure). One cannot enter this discussion without celebrating some very dark things. Welcome to what we should properly call the *late* Anthropocene (or, more truly, the late *Sin(o)-Antropocene*. Personally, I find this brings new “life” to—and alters--*everything* we discuss.

We just might not want to call it “cultural” any more. Or, for that matter, “studies.”

It may seem that “cultural studies” conforms to and confirms a public Chinese *meme* of pragmatism, of research, of descriptive reportage—and perhaps most, the exile of theoretical speculation, but the anthropocene, if it is a word, tells us these assemblages of representational control have grown cold and, as regards “life,” abstract and impractical. They have, after all, walked hand in hand as an academic ideology with the accelerating circumstances of corporate hegemonies and logics of auto-extinction. As history turns or is ruptured, these labels can switch, and the empirical can appear itself an inert abstraction, or a representational automatism. It may also be that that master theorist, Marx, requires to be reread otherwise today, without utopism, which mimes the stereotype or Hollywood film, and from the backglance of a different materiality. As someone advised, we feel our way across the river stone by stone—and one of those stones may require, pragmatically, a different

theorization. If you believe that the arctic sheets are not breaking irreversibly, or that the sushi on your plate really is tuna or salmon, you might want to continue in the human-on-human and mimetic tunnel indefinitely. Oddly enough, it is this “indefinitely” that those thinking about a post-human singularity—our transformation into prosthetic life forms—dwells on, a fantasy of immortality for the individual (a few of them). But if you do not so much seek human “otherness” as a commodity of justice, and identitarian politics as a safe refuge, one might begin by reading back from a point in the future more accelerated still—perhaps a generation or two. The transition now underway sets a different series of questions.

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Notes

ⁱBut such a report from the American provinces is itself a cultural studies-like report on cultural studies, a descriptive empirical "report," and overlooks two things. First, that in today's America everything is a symptom of the trance-like mutations of what we might not want, any longer, to call a "culture," and second, that "cultural studies" itself may have been the product of a period of economic growth and stability that—like "middle class," "democracy," and utopist progressivism—appears not only very 20th century, but complicit.

ⁱⁱ For Chakrabarty, the Enlightenment, much as market democracy (for Arundhati Roy), fuel and guarantee accelerated extinction.

ⁱⁱⁱChris Hedges: "Corporations are, theologically speaking, institutions of death. They commodify everything—the natural world, human beings—that they exploit until exhaustion or collapse. They know no limits. . . . if left unchecked, [*they*] will ensure the extinction of the human species. It may already be too late, of course. [. . .] And what they want is for us to give up. They want us to become passive. They want us to become tacitly complicit in our own destruction. . . . I think they know it's going to be toast [that is, *global warming*]. And I think they think that they're going to retreat into their, you know, gated compounds and survive it. And they may survive it longer than the rest of us, but in the end, climate change alone is going to get us. . . ." According to this, we are witnessing new inheritance dynasties being spawned from digital mafias and corporate governance, who would have a distinct title decades hence: the *living*.

^{iv}For Henry Giroux, *zombie* culture involves: "The organized culture of forgetting, with its immense disimagination machines, has ushered in a permanent revolution marked by a massive project of distributing wealth upward, the militarization of the entire social order and an ongoing depoliticization of agency and politics itself." At issue, too, is a war against the young or the unborn—stripped of resources and left with megadebt and inundated coasts when today's fat generation exits.