

Agitation/politics: A response to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *One Planet, Many Worlds*¹

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The monkey isn't stupid; he blocks his sight for good reason — to protect himself. We get through each day through countless acts of will made possible by an equilibrium of cognitive dissonance we've worked hard to maintain, enabling us to carry on — care for our families, do our jobs, find pleasure in small things. Willed ignorance is a fool's errand, but we need enough of it to sleep through the night.

Like each participant in this conversation, I've long harbored deep visceral concerns about the future of humanity and our planet.² Meanwhile, like all of us, I've learned to manage these concerns, and keep the dread under wraps.

I know the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has come out with a new report. I have the link and I plan to read it soon.

I woke up at 3am, agitated, after I finished reading Dipesh Chakrabarty's *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax*.³ I'm grateful to Chakrabarty for disturbing my equilibrium, inspiring reflections about agitation and politics in this urgent hour.

The main problem

Chakrabarty's *One Planet* frames the idea of "the global" (a human creation of the past 500 years of "empires, capitalism and technology," characterized by *multiplicity*) in opposition to and tension with "the planetary" (evolving over 4.5 billion years of geological "deep" time, characterized by *unified systemic integration*). Global history

¹ The author wishes to thank Dipesh Chakrabarty, Tanu Sankalia, Talia Knowles, and Marjolein Oele. This essay is dedicated to Sheldon S. Wolin, in blessed memory.

² Of all of the writers warning us of climate and ecological catastrophe, James Lovelock's voice has shaken me the most, book by book, for 18 years. First reading Lovelock's *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis & the Fate of Humanity* (Basic, 2006) I contemplated whether I should organize my life to move my family to northern Canada ("Even if we stopped immediately all further seizing of Gaia's land and water for food and fuel production, and stopped poisoning the air" Lovelock wrote, "it would take the Earth more than a thousand years to recover from the damage we have already done, and it may be too late even for this drastic step to save us." *Ibid*, at p.6).

³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* (Brandeis, 2023)

following the subsistence economies of indigenous and feudal societies has been a story of economic expansion based on resource extraction across increasingly large areas of land and sea, increasing consumption in home territories, and increasing social and political agitation within and across national boundaries.⁴ This expansion intensified in the European “age of exploration,” and further escalated during the Industrial Revolution and modern imperialism and colonialism. Chakrabarty argues that the tension between “the global” and “the planetary” has reached a critical juncture for human beings, and for the Earth, as a result of “the expansion – or, more aptly, ‘the explosion’ – of the human realm” since the mid-20th century.⁵ The key to this “Great Acceleration” has been the cheap and plentiful energy extracted from fossil fuels, first predominantly from coal and then from oil and gas.⁶

This period of massive acceleration offers humanity the best of times and the worst of times. It has generated the greatest economic uplift of human populations in history, enhanced life expectancies, and connected the world as never before. At the same time it has escalated anthropogenic climate change, threatens planetary sustainability, including mass species extinction, and generates inexorable pressures driving intensified resource conflicts, mass human migration, and harsh reactionary backlash against democratic systems and values.

Chakrabarty illuminates the contradictory reality of our era by framing it in political terms. “The main problem that haunts the calendar of (in)action of climate politics,” he writes, is that “humans are politically not-one, while Earth system scientists see the planet – the Earth system, that is – as one.” There is a single planet, “but no corresponding single ‘humanity’ that is either responsible for the warming or can act as one in combating it.”⁷

⁴ “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* (Brandeis, 2023), p.19.

⁶ J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke, *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945* (Harvard, 2014). I highly recommend this excellent book.

⁷ Ibid, p.x, 15.

“Humanity” refers to a category of physical anthropology (*Homo sapiens*, our species, a category we used to call “the human race”), a category of social imagination (all people living on the earth, an idea we used call “mankind”), and a moral category (evoking values of compassion and care for all fellow human beings). Still “humanity” is not a *political* category: however deep and widespread human beings might be concerned about the climate emergency and the other planetary and global crises the planet faces in the Anthropocene (e.g. evisceration of ecosystem diversity, deforestation, desertification, ocean acidification, soil depletion), human beings cannot act politically “as one” to combat them. For Chakrabarty, the contradiction “between the oneness of the Earth system as imagined by the science of climate change and the pluriversal quality of human politics” is “structural and unresolvable.”

Chakrabarty’s formulation agitates because it cuts to the core of the problem we face, and because there is no escape.

Politics

For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, *The Iliad* could appear as a historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very centre of human history, *The Iliad* is the purest and loveliest of mirrors.

Simone Weill, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, December 1940-January 1941⁸

Is it possible, in another thousand years or so, that our species would evolve to enable political affiliation based on human rather than national identity, and to build institutions that somehow protect the human collective through citizen engagement? The history of international relations suggests that 1000 years would not be enough.

Thucydides’s *Peloponnesian War* offers an illustrative, tragically relevant case study. It recounts and explains how competition and conflict between dominant and rising powers, intensified by imperial ambition, led to a catastrophic regional war, of extreme brutality, between 431 and 404 BCE. Charismatic political and military leaders

⁸ Simone Weill, “The Iliad, or The Poem of Force,” December 1940-January 1941, in Sian Miles, ed., *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), pp. 162-195.

deluded by hubris, the adulation of crowds, and the hunger for power, wealth and acclaim – doubled down with one calamitous decision after another, all the while proclaiming noble intentions and aspirations to greatness.



Late Corinthian Black-Figure Hydria, ca 575-550 BCE depicting the fight between Achilles and Memnon, [Wikimedia Commons](#), Walters Art Museum

Politics at the time of Plato and Aristotle is associated with decision-making in the polis. Across two millennia between the Athenian empire and the Thirty Years War in the first half of the 17th century, an international system of ancient city states and empires evolved into a mixed system of states, nation-states and empires following the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia. Political scientists and international relations theorists emphasize that states remain the “unit of analysis” for international relations and international law. Today, as in the late 17th century, each state possesses radically divergent economic and political endowments, consumption patterns and related

interests, and policy formation processes. Within national borders, each state harbors bitter internal partisan and class divisions, warring domestic agendas and struggles to secure and maintain domestic power; across borders, each engages in fierce competition and bitter conflict with other powers in the system.

Hobbes, who translated Thucydides into English two thousand years after the Peloponnesian War, argued that *by its very nature* the “pluriversal nature of human politics” threatens human security and cooperation: “In all times, Kings, and Persons of Sovereigne authority, because of their Independency, are in continuall jealousies, and in the state and posture of Gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their Forts, Garrisons, and Guns upon the Frontiers of their Kingdomes.... which is a posture of War.”⁹



⁹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, 1651, ch. 13.

From the Frontispiece of *Leviathan* by Abraham Bosse, April 1651, [Wikisource](#)

Nearly three centuries later, states that emerged as victors from each of the two world wars of the 20th century tried to fashion international relations to enable greater transnational cooperation. The League of Nations failed, but the United Nations continues to function. Still, the architecture of global governance in this time of planetary crisis is very thin; the reality of an international community is extremely weak; and the commitment of member states to reduce sovereignty in exchange for greater regional and global cooperation is under great and increasing stress.

The massive, radical transformation of global economic and social structures necessary to save our planet and species within the increasingly urgent time-frame demands far more robust coordinated action and global political commitment than anything accomplished in human history thus far.

The United Nations has facilitated impressive diplomatic efforts pursuant to the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992-1994). While these efforts have generated path-breaking agreements (especially the 1977 Kyoto Protocol in 1997, and the 2015 Paris Agreement), the UNFCCC process has failed to reduce global carbon emissions to manageable levels. Without a system to enforce national commitments and hold competing states accountable, it is difficult to envision how humanity will mobilize political will on a global scale to secure the emissions reductions identified by IPCC scientists as necessary to protect the biosphere and humanity.

Perhaps a Leviathan could emerge, as Hobbes had envisioned, at a global level. But even in that unlikely event, it is far more unlikely that it would enable humanity to achieve political identity in the form of global citizenship rather than the submission of subjects. Nor can one realistically envision that any system powerful enough to act “as one” on a global scale would wield such power toward benevolent, ecologically sustainable ends. As Simone Weil observed, force – power, violence, repression, “force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away” – remains at the very

center of human history.¹⁰ But this reality does not permit us to escape Tolstoy's question: *What then must we do?*¹¹

Agitation

Mental health diagnosticians identify "agitation" as a neuropsychological state involving physical as well as emotional elements, none of them pleasant. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), for example, defines agitation as "excessive motor activity associated with a feeling of inner mental tension."¹² This analysis suggests that one would be well advised to avoid such inner mental tension and its physical effects, or to find ways to reduce any such agitation one might be experiencing.

Agitation signifies a larger problem – *maladjustment*. The therapy professions offer various treatment interventions, and opportunities for behavioral change, to those who suffer accordingly.

Many of us need help, myself included. Agitation and related forms of maladjustment can be debilitating. We need to function effectively if we are to respond to the challenges before us. When we lose our focus, we can lose our balance, our footing on this earth. We lose our way, we trip and fall.

But then we get right back up again, and roll up our sleeves.

"Certainly we all want to live the well adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities," Martin Luther King, Jr. observed. "But I must honestly say to you tonight my friends that there are some things in our world, there are some things in our nation to which I'm proud to be maladjusted, to which I call upon all men

¹⁰ Simone Weill, "The Iliad, or The Poem of Force," December 1940-January 1941, in Sian Miles, ed., *Simone Weil: An Anthology* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986), p. 163.

¹¹ Leo Tolstoy, *What Then Must We Do?*, 1886.

¹² American Psychiatric Association, [Diagnostic And Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition](#). From a psychiatric perspective, examples of such "excessive motor activity" include pacing, fidgeting, leg shaking while sitting, inability to keep still.

of goodwill to be maladjusted until the good society is realized.”¹³ Dr. King named some of these things: I will never adjust to segregation and discrimination, he said. “I will never become adjusted to religious bigotry. I never intend to adjust myself to economic conditions that will take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism and the self defeating effects of physical violence.”¹⁴

We must become maladjusted, Dr. King told us. *We must become agitated*. Only then can we generate the actions (highly engaged motor activity) necessary to change the world as it must be changed.

In a 2005 essay (“Agitated Times”), the political theorist Sheldon S. Wolin highlights two meanings of the verb “to agitate” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “to perturb, excite, or stir up” – i.e. to upset the equilibrium of cognitive dissonance – and “to discuss.” The first meaning evokes the politics of civil resistance; the second meaning suggests “the deliberative politics of representative legislatures.” Meanwhile, the OED definition of the noun “agitation” suggests a dynamic middle ground between these poles.” Agitation” refers to “the keeping of an object before public attention by appeals” – i.e. public demands for collective action on an issue deemed urgent by the advocate.¹⁵

Political action requires the exercise of power. In democratic states this cannot happen without legislative deliberation, the political process Max Weber compared to “the slow boring of hard boards.”¹⁶ But we can’t wait. If we extract and burn even half of the oil and gas in underground and undersea deposits that have already been discovered and claimed by private or state owned companies, our planetary ecosystems and human civilization will be devastated by catastrophic levels of global

¹³ Martin Luther King, Jr., [Sermon delivered at Temple Israel of Hollywood](#), 26 February 1965.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sheldon S. Wolin, “Agitated Times,” 2005, reprinted in Wolin, *Fugitive Democracy and Other Essays*, ed. By Nicholas Xenos (Princeton, 2016), pp. 438-448.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 444, citing Max Weber, [“Politics as a Vocation,”](#) 1919.

warming.¹⁷ The urgency to decarbonize infrastructures on a global scale suggests the need to mobilize the politics of civil resistance on an equally mass scale.

Human beings have an enormous challenge before us: to achieve political action not to stabilize or even calm the “Great Acceleration”—because it cannot be stabilized or calmed—but to keep fossil fuel assets in the ground so that we have a fighting chance to sustain life on this planet.¹⁸ In turn, this requires preventing the owners of these assets from converting them into private wealth (through oil and gas extraction and production by private petroleum corporations, e.g. Chevron, Exxon/Mobil, Shell) or national wealth/political corruption (by state-owned oil and gas enterprises, e.g. Saudi Aramco, Petronas, Gazprom).

Can mass political agitation achieve such a seemingly-impossible goal? We have models to emulate: the global movement to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the global movement of resistance to colonization in the 20th century .

In *Bury the Chains*, Adam Hochschild tells the story of how this global movement began – in the afternoon of May 22, 1787, when a small group of citizens, led by a 25 year old named Thomas Clarkson, met in a printing shop at 2 George Yard in London to begin organizing what became the most effective civil resistance campaign in human history.¹⁹

Nobody thought it could be done. After all, servitude was embedded in human history for many centuries, blessed or at least accepted by most religious traditions. Moreover, as Hochschild recalls, “[a]t the end of the eighteenth century, well over three quarters of all people alive were in bondage of one kind or another... [in] various systems of slavery or serfdom.”²⁰ The statesman and political theorist Edmond Burke,

¹⁷ See Bill McKibben, “[Global Warming’s Terrifying New Math](#),” *Rolling Stone*, July 19, 2012, and “[This Simple Math Problem Could Be the Key to Solving Our Climate Crisis](#),” *Rolling Stone*, April 2, 2023.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire’s Slaves* (Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

²⁰ Ibid, p. 2.

for example, opposed slavery, but he believed that unfortunately abolition was a “chimerical project” with zero chance of success.²¹

But in May 1787 Clarkson and his fellow agitators initiated a disciplined campaign of nonviolent direct action to keep the issue of slavery before public attention by persistent, creative appeals. Within just a few years, “[t]here was an abolition committee in every major city or town,” each connected to the central committee in London. As a result, “[m]ore than 300,000 Britons were refusing to eat slave-grown sugar.” The “slow boring of hard boards” in parliamentary debate was radically accelerated by MPs inundated with citizen petitions. In 1792, just five years after the initial George Yard meeting, the House of Commons passed initial legislation banning the slave trade.²²

Jan Jansen and Jurgen Osterhammel suggest that “‘decolonization’ is a technical and rather undramatic term for one of the most dramatic processes in modern history: the disappearance of empire as a political form, and the end of racial hierarchy as a widely accepted political ideology and structuring principle of world order.”²³

In most cases (e.g. Algeria, Indochina, Indonesia) these processes were extremely violent. But the Gandhian movement in India, the end of British rule in the Gold Coast, and the overthrow of South African apartheid suggest the kind of nonviolent mass movement that, like that of the citizen campaigns to end the global slave trade, human beings must pursue, with fierce urgency, across political boundaries, in a global movement—interfaith, intergenerational, international—to keep fossil fuel assets in the ground.²⁴

²¹ Parvathi Menon, “Edmund Burke and the Ambivalence of Protection for Slaves: Between Humanity and Control,” *Journal of the History of International Law*, October 2020.

²² Hochchild, p. 7.

²³ Jan Jansen and Jurgen Osterhammel, *Decolonization: A Short History* (Princeton, 2017), p. 1. See also Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (Columbia, 2011).

²⁴ See Chris Hayes, “The New Abolitionism,” *The Nation*, May 12, 2014,

Only by means of such disciplined, mass agitation do we have a square chance to overcome the structural contradictions Chakrabarty identifies, protect all beings on our fragile planet, and survive as a human species.