

Book Review: The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable by Amitav Ghosh

In The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable, acclaimed novelist Amitav Ghosh offers a new non-fiction work that aims to confront this urgent issue by reflecting on our 'deranged' modes of political and socio-economic organisation via three themes: literature, history and politics. This is an admirable book that both examines and manifests the limits of human thought when it comes to the spectre of environmental catastrophe, writes Alexandre Leskanich.

The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable. Amitav Ghosh. University of Chicago Press. 2016.

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It is difficult to confront the spectre of climate change without a sense of incipient doom. At times this existential malady seems best personified in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *Huis Clos* (*No Exit*), in which three condemned characters, incarcerated in hell, face an eternity in which to contemplate their sins. Ghastly looms an infinity without purpose. Loathsome indeed are the spiteful goads and self-righteous pontifications of their fellow inmates. But no less intolerable are their self-incriminating recollections of deeds forever done, of opportunities forever lost. Their penitentiary is a space plagued by the anomie of self-disgust and the inescapable evaporation of meaning. All that is left is the anticipation of an endless absence:

GARCIN: How about you? Aren't you afraid?

INEZ: What would be the use? There was some point in being afraid before, while one still had hope.

GARCIN: There's no more hope – but it's still 'before'. We haven't yet begun to suffer.

INEZ: That's so. Well? What's going to happen?

GARCIN: I don't know. I'm waiting.

Yet this waiting for something to happen is itself symptomatic of absurdity. Ejected out of temporal schemes that provide coordinates for human existence, they are left teleologically and epistemologically bankrupt. There remains only empty and identical 'tomorrows'. Trapped in time's abyss, they are reduced to waiting for nothing.

In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, Amitav Ghosh addresses our similarly uncanny predicament under delinquent, 'deranged' modes of political and socio-economic organisation. Known as an acclaimed author whose fiction has addressed climatic rupture, Ghosh here takes up the role of analyst and storyteller. Climate change, as his title recognises, only too clearly demonstrates the systemic lunacy inherent in our present world arrangements. As in *Huis Clos*, we are compelled to become the wardens of our own prison, guardians of an empty future. Devoid of ethical purpose, the future is forfeited to the whims of the market, ceded to the nihilism of economic growth. Instead of exhibiting an unfolding sequence of delimited events that function in the service of a progressive 'universal history', the planet is the stage on which the spectacle of human incoherence is playing out.



In Part One, 'Stories', Ghosh critiques the limitations of the 'literary novel', which aims to exhibit the vagaries of 'individual moral adventure'. The turn inwards in modern fiction mirrored the turn towards commodity fetishism. As realist literary fiction has explored the complex inflections of human experience, it has assumed the existence of a stable climate and an unlimited flow of resources to fuel the bourgeois regularities inscribed in its narratives. Ghosh contends that the contemporary novel, using narrow scales of time and space that rarely exceed more than a human lifespan, is not only neglectful of climate change but is partly complicit in the dissociation of the mind from the vulnerability of its corporeal situation, since it rarely allows the climate to violently intrude upon the habitual routines and ordinary concerns it prefers to portray. He therefore calls for a heightened imaginary response to climate change, although one can question whether fiction can do much to remedy political and economic intransigence – perhaps if enough people read it?



Image Credit: Sawyer Glacier, Tracy Arm Fjord, Alaska, USA ([Ian D. Keating CC BY 2.0](#))

Part Two, 'History', unintentionally exemplifies the historicised mind caught in a world that keeps historicising itself: a situation in which history is constantly made obsolete but remains the faulty technology on which human beings depend to make things make sense. The historicised mind automatically concedes priority to history and stipulates the pre-eminence of historical knowledge and periodisation. Hence, Ghosh's ample use of terms such as 'arc', 'trajectory', 'pattern' and 'process'. His attempt to comprehend climate change by necessity aligns with every other effort to do so: one must outline a historical narrative of how we came to be where we are – without history's categories, remember, the historicised mind couldn't make sense of anything. Certainly, Ghosh tweaks the emphasis of his narrative, attributing more weight to imperialism than is usual, but the result is much the same – yet another incarcerating historicisation.

Caught in this historicised mentality, Ghosh uncritically employs the term 'Anthropocene' (the 'age of man') as a colloquialism for climatic crisis and terrestrial destruction. More precisely, this name signifies a new geo-historical epoch pending disciplinary ratification. Using it commits Ghosh to a narrative of incremental human expropriation of the planet. Unfortunately, it also means that he absurdly renders 'every human being who has ever lived' culpable in producing climate change, with an undifferentiated 'humanity' made universally responsible. More importantly, the Anthropocene is the latest historicisation that makes human existence itself a thing of the past. By definition inescapable, it is a managerial contrivance that both confirms and facilitates planetary incarceration. The horror of the gaol, of being trapped by history, pervades it. Illustrating the condition by which human agency is denied any real potency even while at the centre of planetary affairs, he claims that:

the events of today's changing climate, in that they represent the totality of human actions over time, represent also the terminus of history. For if the entirety of our past is contained within the present, then temporality itself is drained of significance...

History is terminal, ultimately, because it renders us incapable of exceeding it.

Unsurprisingly, Ghosh is waylaid by history at every turn, 'entrapped' by it. His ruminations on 'the chronology of global warming' not only evince the redundancy of historical knowledge, but induce paralysis. For, after noting the 'complexity of the history of the carbon economy', he leads us to a conclusion in complete conformity with his historicising strategy: 'our lives and our choices are enframed in a pattern of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but toward our self-annihilation'. This is precisely the dilemma of the historicised mind ensnared in a self-incriminating historical situation: history always does, in the end, leave one stranded exactly where one already is. Always it comes too late to make any difference. History now cements the antiquation of *homo sapiens* itself.

In Part Three, 'Politics', Ghosh condemns the narrow bandwidth of political concern. Riven by quarrels over identity, squabbling over the sincerity of individual moral performance, holding personal liberty in the highest regard, contemporary politics has little to no capacity to properly address 'the commonweal': to engage in collective action for the sake of survival. Bluster, denial and grandstanding obstruct the wrenching political and moral transformations required, and which continue to be delayed. Lurking behind phantasies of untrammelled individual agency, climate change is eroding conceptions of unassailable human dominion over the earth and forcing us to dispense with the possibility of universally achieving the accoutrements of bourgeois life. This conception of human flourishing into which we have been beguiled is consuming itself. Yet the 'masters of mankind' (as Adam Smith called them), following their 'vile maxim' of self-enrichment, have long abrogated their responsibility to enact real change. Human existence is set up to contribute to the fossil economy, hence to perpetuate ecological malfunction. The horizon of future possibility recedes.

In proffering a vague hope in the 'sacred', that 'religious worldviews' might inspire mass movements that transcend individualism and the nation-state, one feels that Ghosh is left beseeching a *deus absconditus* (a hidden God) to bail us out of gaol. Well perhaps, but religious theology frequently considers catastrophe a product of divine will or a sign of impending apocalypse – the latter is itself the means through which the loyalty of the faithful is vindicated. Nor do the religious appear to be much less enveloped in the consumer economy or nationalistic thinking than anyone else: these can complement doctrinal injunctions, as the so-called 'prosperity gospel' demonstrates. To his credit, however, Ghosh doesn't simply advocate a technocratic 'fix': a rebooting of the technosphere (e.g. through geoeengineering) that would avoid the need for unpleasant ideological and material sacrifice.

This admirable book is the latest testament to the limits of contemporary thought and language, to the frustration of human cognitive power over a world we thought we knew. Deranged indeed, but also incrementally dispossessed, we have become the disinherited of Rainer Maria Rilke's remark, finding that 'each blind lurch of the world leaves its disinherited, to whom no longer the past nor yet the future belong'. Yet is this contingency of meaning not our mortal fate? Is not mortality – of ideas, of people, of worlds – itself our only means of renewal? Those who seek a permanent, unchanging 'end' should remember that as it is in hell, so it is in heaven. Both outcomes are equally meaningless: not least because you can never leave.

Alexandre Leskanich read history, philosophy and political theory at the universities of Leicester, Edinburgh and the London School of Economics and Political Science. He is currently a PhD student in the department of Modern Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at Royal Holloway, University of London, researching the political and philosophical ramifications of the 'Anthropocene' as a contested categorisation in planetary history.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.