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## Perspectives

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Laura A. Watt

## Politics of Anthropocene Consumption: Dipesh Chakrabarty and Three College Courses

When I teach my US Environmental History course, we spend two weeks analyzing and discussing the history of changing consumption patterns, including a marvelous *New Yorker* piece by Elizabeth Kolbert comparing Henry David Thoreau's 1845 retreat to Walden Pond to a score of modern-day books by those attempting to step back from twenty-first century consumerism; for example, a couple in British Columbia who for a year ate only products from within a 160-kilometer radius, and a Manhattanite and his family attempting to live for a year with zero environmental impact.<sup>1</sup> Kolbert wisely draws parallels between this "No Impact Man," for instance—who still relied on waste heat in his apartment building to stay warm and free Wi-Fi at the local Starbucks for his blog postings—and Thoreau, who built his cabin on land owned by Ralph Waldo Emerson and often dined at the Emerson home. Both wrote books about their experiences before diving right back into the capitalist, consumerist world from which they had withdrawn.

Recently, my students got all fired up about conducting a similar experiment in giving up some form of consumption; the instigator suggested they do so as a class, for a week, and then discuss their experiences. I agreed, but asked: What are you going to do without? The first suggestion was feeble: "Eat only locally grown foods"—here in Sonoma County, producer of everything from organic vegetables to artisanal cheese to world-class wines, this is almost a license to gluttony rather than a restriction. The next offering could be seen as a major sacrifice only by college students: "Cook all meals at home." I suggested they try something a bit more ambitious. They disliked my idea of no shoes, and we decided that "no petroleum products" or "no products made in China" would be almost impossible to implement. When I suggested no credit cards, someone immediately qualified, "but debit cards are okay, right?" Hmm.

Recognizing one of the true hallmarks of civilization to be readily-available hot water—something I learned from a two-week sailing trip from Hawaii to San Francisco one summer—I suggested giving that up. The class was intrigued. I clarified that they could *make*

1 Elizabeth Kolbert, "Green Like Me," *The New Yorker*, 31 August 2009, accessed 20 November 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/08/31/green-like-me>

all the hot water they wanted, on the stove or in the microwave; they just couldn't use the hot water tap. Heads nodded—but then some students started to think about their weekend plans. One complained: “I don't know, I have a soccer game Saturday, and it's forecast to rain; how can I *not* have a hot shower afterwards?” More dubious looks. Finally, they agreed on their experiment: in the five days between class on Wednesday and the following on Monday, each student would give up hot water from the tap for two of those five days, and they could choose which days individually.

When we reconvened, roughly half the students sheepishly admitted that they hadn't even tried. Those who braved the experiment offered observations: “It's much harder to get dishes clean without hot water”; “People would save a lot of water without hot water, since you take way shorter showers!” My comment to them, and my reason for telling this story here, was that the lesson was less in the experience of doing without than in the elaborate negotiation over what was an acceptable sacrifice, even for such a short time. And this was a class full of junior and senior-level college students, almost all of whom were majoring in Environmental Studies, brimming with passion and commitment to saving the planet. Yet even a temporary step back from one of the joys of modern plumbing, made at their own convenience, was more than many of them could muster.

It is this lesson from teaching—my students' unwillingness to even try reducing their consumption levels for a brief time—that remains foremost in my mind whenever I consider the prospect of politically addressing climate change. In “Climate and Capital,” Dipesh Chakrabarty discusses how much of modern life is ruled by probabilistic thinking, and how poorly economists and policymakers confront the uncertainties associated with climate change, which he accurately describes as “inherently unknowable.”<sup>2</sup> He also observes that the greatest lurch forward into climate change, the “Great Acceleration” starting in 1945 and continuing today—a period of truly exponential growth of numerous measures of human domination of the planet—has also been a period of expanding social justice around the globe. I would add that the same period has been one of a spread of (at least somewhat) democratic government systems, which are *not* particularly well suited to solving uncertain and temporally long-range problems.

2 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories,” *Critical Inquiry* 41 (2014): 6.

Chakrabarty notes that, although we seem to need reason more than ever in the Anthropocene, this is qualified by “the most common shape that freedom takes in human societies: politics. Politics has never been based on reason alone. And politics in the age of the masses and in a world already complicated by sharp inequalities between and inside nations is something no one can control.”<sup>3</sup> In this sense politics reflects climate change itself, tending to extend beyond much deliberate control into the realm of the “inherently unknowable.” This is why my thoughts returned to my students’ reluctance to give up hot water: taking climate change seriously at economic and policy levels will necessarily require a huge change in consumption patterns from developed societies—changes that, while eminently reasonable, the voters in those societies (even those studying environmental issues!) seem hesitant or disinclined to change.

The combination of capitalism plus democracy seems almost guaranteed to lock in this dynamic. For instance, there have recently been mentions in the US of a gas tax—yet even with gas prices currently at a ten-year low (except for a brief dip in 2008), this has almost zero chance of becoming law. In our electoral system, almost any representative who might champion such a policy would risk being voted out of office; too many voters’ daily lives are dependent on cheap gas to make this a winning proposition. The 2008 economic crash represented a possible chance to fundamentally shift something about our system—but it only paused, briefly, then roared on. When asked to make a choice between the comfort and convenience of modern consumption patterns and the specter of uncertain yet potentially irreversible climate change that could threaten our existence as a species, I fear that most people end up choosing the former.

The freedom that comes with democracy to participate directly in politics has expanded globally at the same time that our reliance on fossil fuels has become ever more absolute, or as Chakrabarty puts in his “Four Theses”: “The mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use.”<sup>4</sup> The question of whether this relationship can be decoupled troubles my students in a second course, Environmental Policy; they always seem to conclude, after a semester of studying political processes at both the national and international level, that what is needed, at least temporarily, is an environmental dictator—someone or something to *compel* actions (or, perhaps more specifically, limits) rather than give us all free rein. Chakrabarty

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 211.

4 *Ibid.*, 208.

cites several authors who appear to agree: Tim Flannery suggests a “carbon dictatorship,” and Mark Maslin concludes that “it is unlikely global politics will solve global warming.”<sup>5</sup> This raises an interesting, if somewhat depressing, thought: Might our political evolution toward greater participation and transparency in governance be our environmental Achilles’ heel?

Furthermore, there is a striking contrast between today’s environmental politics and those of the 1970s, which were wildly ambitious and optimistic about our ability to clean up anything, *tomorrow*; all we needed was the political will. Back then, there was a deeper faith in the rational nature of the discussion. This is ultimately the premise of Earth Day, originally conceived of as a nationwide teach-in: people just needed to be educated about environmental harms, and they would get in line and support environmental change.<sup>6</sup> By comparison, Anthropocene politics seem pessimistic but also more realistic—perhaps with a bit more humility, acknowledging that there are some things we cannot fix or turn around, and perhaps a bit less faith in the existence of rationality.

A major difference between then and now can be found in the changing science of ecology. As far back as George Perkins Marsh (1864) and Frederic Clements (1916), much ecological science involved a presumption that the natural world is somehow self-regulating and tends toward equilibrium. Ecological restoration practitioners now recognize the role of chaos in shaping the natural world: in my home region of the San Francisco Bay Area, efforts to restore salt marsh habitat around the bay are taking place on former salt ponds, located not in some far-off wilderness but in the heart of a major metropolis, on tidelands utilized for industrial-scale salt production for more than a century.<sup>7</sup> Among other goals, the project aims to bolster local populations of endangered snowy plovers, despite being outside of their historic range, because they have lost so much of their habitat elsewhere. Yet the plovers are increasingly crowded out by California gulls competing for space and raiding their nests for eggs.<sup>8</sup> The gulls in turn only began nesting in the Bay Area after Los Angeles’ diversion of water from Mono Lake in the Eastern Sierra opened up their island breeding ground to predators. Sea-level rise over the next century could put this entire

5 Ibid., 211.

6 Adam Rome, *The Genius of Earth Day: How a 1970 Teach-In Unexpectedly Made the First Green Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014).

7 Laura A. Watt and Ellen Joslin Johnck, “The Bay Area’s Solar Salt Industry: An Unintended Conservationist,” *California History* 91, no. 2 (2014): 40–57.

8 Nick Neely, “The Salt Pond Puzzle: Restoring South San Francisco Bay,” *High Country News* 44, no. 13 (2012): 10–16.

restored landscape back under water. Layers of ecological change mean these birds and their habitats cannot simply “go back” to some prior state of perfect balance.

This brings me to a third observation from the intersection of my classes and Chakrabarty’s work, stemming from his discussion of human versus planetary survival, following Feng Han and James Lovelock.<sup>9</sup> When I teach my Restoration class, one of the first readings I assign is chapter 10 of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, which focuses on extinction.<sup>10</sup> As a context for modern-day restoration efforts, my students need to understand that all of nature is constantly changing and evolving, and that many species and habitats disappear in the process. As climate change shifts things in new and unpredictable ways, I have no doubt that planet Earth will survive, and that various aspects of the biological world will adapt and evolve accordingly. Change will happen, as it always does, and those changes are not necessarily “good” or “bad” in a nonhuman sense; is it better or worse to have a predominance of mammals versus dinosaurs? Neither—these are just different outcomes. What gives climate change its most terrifying charge is the very real possibility that we will not survive it—although again, better or worse to have people around? From our perspective, better, but otherwise it’s just another possible outcome on an ever-shifting planet.

This all sounds rather bleak. There are two bright spots for me, however. First, ecological evidence seems increasingly to suggest that many (although not all) species are far more adaptive than initially understood. Chakrabarty laments that many of the species threatened by climate change might not be able to migrate to more hospitable habitats because “we’re standing in their way.”<sup>11</sup> Yet in an excellent essay entitled “What Darwin Got Wrong,” Jonathan Losos chronicles the unexpectedly brisk pace at which natural selection can operate.<sup>12</sup> Though these rapid changes often have negative consequences, there are also positive adaptations. I am reminded of a colleague’s comment at a recent conference, of automatic cameras at intersections in Chicago—intended to catch red-light runners—revealing urban coyotes waiting for the light to change, as they have learned that it is easier to cross on the green. While I am not so naïve as to think that all species will be able to adapt to new conditions, I also have no doubts that the natural

9 Chakrabarty, “Four Theses,” 19.

10 Charles Darwin, “On the Geological Succession of Organic Beings,” chap. 10 in *On the Origin of Species* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964).

11 Chakrabarty, “Four Theses,” 13.

12 Jonathan Losos, “What Darwin Got Wrong,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 20 January 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/What-Darwin-Got-Wrong/144021/>.

world will respond to climatic shifts in new and innovative ways, and many species will find ways to either carry on or to change accordingly. We are not destroying the planet; we are simply destroying the planet *as we know it*.

The second bright spot is that even though, as Chakrabarty quotes from Feng Han, “human values will always be from a human (or anthropocentric) point of view,”<sup>13</sup> an undeniable characteristic of human values is that they change over time. And as Charles Mann has written in his excellent essay “State of the Species,”<sup>14</sup> Western societies have managed to make some “staggeringly implausible” changes in values over the past two hundred years or so, including turning away from the institution of slavery, granting voting rights to women, and increasing recognition of essential civil rights shared throughout society. Chakrabarty echoes this observation in his discussion of the increase in social justice through the “Great Acceleration.” None of these changes made economic sense at the time, yet they made moral sense, and often occurred over a surprisingly short time frame. Human values *can* evolve, which suggests that societies might increasingly recognize the trade-offs needed to address climate change, and respond accordingly.

Indeed, there are *some* signs that this might be happening in certain sectors of the global economy; for instance, in their business forecasts for decades into the future, energy companies often presume a far higher price for carbon than it currently commands—they seem to be anticipating tighter controls on carbon emissions than those that our political systems have produced thus far. It seems ironic that long-range planning for profitability might be more responsive to scientific models and projections than short-range politics. Yet the goal of these corporate responses is to continue to grow, to expand, and to sell more products—in other words, they require that consumption patterns continue apace. In contrast, consumptive habits and preferences *must* change if societies are ever to come close to living within the limits of global resources. The increasing popularity of the “tiny house” movement, extolling the virtues of living with less “stuff,” is perhaps a more hopeful sign.

My Environmental History students therefore represent an important barometer, indicating a discontinuity on the broader political stage. They are mostly from fairly left-

13 Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital,” 19.

14 Charles Mann, “State of the Species,” *Orion Magazine*, 29 October 2012, accessed 2 December 2015, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/state-of-the-species/>.

leaning communities, attending college in liberal Northern California, studying environmental issues—they are impassioned by the idea of improving the world around them, and full of indignity when reading about the late-nineteenth-century destruction of the bison or the passenger pigeon—so they *ought* to be prime candidates for making committed changes to their lifestyles. Yet they were somewhere between reluctant and unwilling to try going without hot water from the tap for a weekend (and don't even suggest doing without one's cell phone! Unthinkable!). What will it take to convince them that scaling back their consumption patterns is not just a dubious exercise over a weekend, but a badly needed lifelong commitment? The challenge of giving up a measure of comfort and privilege may be the greatest hurdle for any political movement addressing climate change to overcome.

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