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A large, bold, black serif letter 'E' is positioned to the right of the text, partially overlapping it. The 'E' is a classic, slightly elongated font with a thick vertical stem and horizontal bars.

Laudatio delivered by Mr Patrice Maniglier for the presentation of the European Essay Prize to the author Dipesh Chakrabarty on 28 August 2024

Dipesh Chakrabarty, a great sage of our times

Intending not to shy away from the exercise entrusted to me tonight, I searched for an adjective that would convey the reason of my admiration for the work and the person of Dipesh Chakrabarty. One immediately stood out: wisdom.

The work of this historian is inhabited by the question of wisdom. Not that hollow wisdom, made of big words and little pieces of advice that you can gather with your nose to the wind of life - but a wisdom that imposes itself from within the body of knowledge.

But, may you ask, what is wisdom? Well, strange as it may seem, the answer is simple and everyone knows it. To be wise is to use your capacity of thinking to stand up to life's problems.

To live is actually to be immersed in problems. To live is to be overwhelmed by the anguish of not knowing how to live, to be constantly nagged by the sense of the enormity of the task compared to our means. To live is to be overwhelmed. And the name of that which overwhelms us is... *problem!*

Correlatively, to think is to be able to relate to problems not merely to solve them, but to contemplate them as such. To think is to be able to relate actively to problems, not in order to rush to their solution, but in order to explore them in greater depth, to clarify them, to take their full measure and grasp their exact contours, in sum to make them interesting in themselves, that is, in a sense, desirable.

That's exactly what Dipesh Chakrabarty does: he encounters problems, and where most of his contemporaries start running as fast as they can in the hope that these problems won't catch up with them - which never happens: life's problems run faster than we do - he stops, he turns calmly towards them, he scrutinises them, he asks himself, like Dostoyevsky's Idiot: «What on earth is the problem?» If only to understand why we're running after all!

As I said, the extraordinary thing about this wisdom is that it is not opposed to knowledge. And that's a very rare thing. Because knowledge and thought, curiously enough, don't necessarily go well together. Even the austere Immanuel Kant knew it: «To think an object and to cognize an object are not the same.» Indeed, to know is, in a way, to solve problems, while to think is to assert them as such.

For knowledge to be put at the service of thought, it has to undergo a particular torsion, which few scholars are capable of accomplishing. The object of this knowledge must call into question the theoretical frameworks that sheds light on itself.

In the field of history, Dipesh Chakrabarty's greatest predecessor is Michel Foucault. Both are not content to act as historians, that is, to reconstruct past events; they are interested in the part of this past that calls into question the very way in which we conceive what it means to 'have a past', 'make history' and 'be in the present'. Note the wonder of this operation: knowledge looks at an object (in this case, the past), but this object seems to turn its gaze towards the machinery of knowledge itself, and forces it to be astonished by its own possibility: it is the very existence of history that becomes strange, astonishing, fascinating. At this point, we are thinking.

Not only Dipesh Chakrabarty does something like this, but he did it twice! The first time with his first major book, *Provincializing Europe*, and the second time with the book you are honouring this evening, *The Climate of History*.

First, a few words about *Provincializing Europe*, as a book of wisdom. Chakrabarty's original project was to apply the categories of Marxist history to a colonial situation, but he realised that such an approach was contrary to the spirit of critical thought and social justice that animated this historical approach. Indeed, since the analytical categories of the Marxist historical method emerged from European workers' struggles, there is no reason to believe that they could apply by right and without friction to struggles in a colonial situation. More generally, to write the history of a colonial situation, like that of nineteenth-century Bengal, is to apply a theoretical apparatus derived from one context to another that happens to be already under the domination of the first - and thus to risk repeating the act of domination in knowledge itself. Paradoxically then, to write the history of the colonized is to challenge the very category of historical time. Here is what I called wisdom: a work of knowledge makes the very element in which its objects unfold become enigmatic, a matter of thought and not only of knowledge. History is not anymore that immense universal net that envelops everything, but one particular variant of something greater not yet entirely grasped. How to call this element of which the European notion of history is but one form? Is it still some form of time? Good question. Food for thought, literally. With Chakrabarty history has become wise.

It would already be a remarkable achievement to have done that once. But Chakrabarty did it twice.

For his second book, he starts with another big problem of our time. Not decolonization anymore, but global warming. Both are linked: this particular human way of living on earth that has been exported about everywhere along with colonization, takes part in the biogeochemical processes that make the planet habitable in such a way that it ends up threatening planetary habitability itself. Global warming is only one aspect. The real issue is the transformation of the conditions under which the Earth is habitable.

Faced with such a problem, it's natural to start running. You run if you pretend that the problem doesn't exist, as climate-deniers do. But you also run by rushing to technocratic solutions, you even run by getting carried away with the idea of «reconnecting with the living», without realising the enormity of the task and the countless paradoxes it is fraught with. For what is the

point of speaking of reconnecting with the living world when the urgent need is to buy an air conditioner simply to survive a heatwave?

I have nothing against running. It's natural to run. But it's also necessary to do also something else: to look back at what makes people run away and see what it's all about. This is what Dipesh Chakrabarty is proposing: instead of examining solutions to the problem of climate change, he shows that we have not taken the full measure of the problem. He shows that there is more to think here. Indeed, he observes that, with climate change and the Anthropocene, it is not just a new historical challenge that humanity is facing, but also a challenge to the very notions of history, humanity, and perhaps even of challenge!

History always presupposed a separation between human activity and the non-human environment. The discipline itself was born with such a presupposition: the armies of Thucydides were fighting each other over a territory, the Peloponnese, without changing the contour of its coasts. This separation has only been reinforced by modernity.

The paradox of the present, i.e. of our position in history, is that it changes the very idea we have of time, by mixing two previously separate temporalities, geological time and institutional time. The work of geologists and historians may seem far apart. And yet you can no longer do the geology of the Alps if you don't also do some historical sociology of contemporary China. You can't theorize about social democracy without talking about coal, oil and global warming.

As you can see, a remark like this does not help us to solve the problem of global warming or the threats to the Earth's habitability. But it does give us an idea of the scale of the problem, so that we don't end up with the wrong understanding of it. One of the most admirable passages in the book is the distinction between sustainability and habitability. So-called ecological issues are often approached in terms of sustainability: can carbon civilisation continue without destroying itself? Etc. But this is not the full extent of the problem. Many civilisations have self-destructed on this earth, as have many species and even ecosystems. What is original about the current situation is that a particular civilisation is in the process of jeopardising the habitability of the entire Earth, or at any rate of modifying it irreversibly, on timescales measured in thousands, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of years. How can we make ourselves responsible for events that unfold over 10,000, 100,000 or 1 million years, when the human species as such will no longer exist, at least not in the form we know it? This is the question posed by Dipesh Chakrabarty. And a very wise one indeed.

The real question posed by our present situation would not therefore only be "How to decarbonize our societies?", but, rather: How can we become planetary agents? What does it mean, individually and collectively, to build a planetary agency? What can a geological agent be? And can it be so without returning to the idea of humanity understood as a species, in other words with yet another version of the universal? You don't quite understand the question? It's normal: it means that you are beginning to understand that the problem is still to be elaborated.

And that's precisely why we have to be grateful to Dipesh Chakrabarty. Yes, thank you, dear Dipesh, thank you for making our lives more complicated. It's only thanks to works like yours that we might have a chance of rising to the challenge of the situation we find ourselves in. Indeed if we're not able to take a real *interest* in this situation, if we only look at it negatively, as something we need to get out of as quickly as possible, we'll never be able to face it. By showing that the problem is at least good to think about, you give us the strength to face it – and this is exactly what we need.

Therefore, you are not only wise, dear Dipesh, you show how vital it can be to be wise. Mind how wonderful this is, in a way. Today, to be wise is no longer just, as it was for the philosophers of antiquity, to take care of one's own soul and one's own salvation - it is really to take care of the cosmic adventure. As you can see, I didn't shy away from the exercise. I did praise our hero tonight, since according to me, he simply contributes to save the world!

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