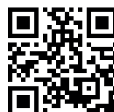
Prix Européen de l'Essai 2024



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Acceptance speech by Dipesh Chakrabarty at the European Essay Prize ceremony on 28 August 2024

Ladies and Gentlemen,,

Exordium

I really do not need to say this, but sometimes the obvious can be deeply personal as well. I am, as anyone would expect, greatly honored by the award of this prize and humbled by the generous reading that the jury had of my 2023 book, *Après changement climatique, penser l'histoire*, the French edition of my 2021 book, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. I am honored not only because this is a very prestigious prize as you can see from the list of my predecessors - and I am honored to be counted among them though I do not claim to be their equal. I am also thrilled, as an academic in the global humanities, to be associated with what the prize and its very name - the European essay prize - stand for and celebrate: the vital tradition of the essay in an age when, perhaps more in the Anglophone countries than elsewhere, the over-professionalized, narrowly discipline-based, academic article - formidably researched and complete with an industrial-scale, database-enabled reproduction of references - has almost choked the vibrant spirit of exploration and experimentation in thinking that the essay form represents. Commentators on this form - whether you think of Lukács or Adorno or their more recent counterparts - have always emphasized the creative, experimental, and explorative nature of the essay. In Adorno's memorable words: "Even in its manner of delivery the essay refuses to behave as though it had deduced its object and exhausted the topic. … It thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by moving over them. … The essay must let the totality light up in one of its chosen or haphazard features but without asserting that the whole is present." (Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," *New German Critique*, no. 32, Spring-Summer, 1984, p. 164).

The marginality of the essay-form in the Anglosphere became obvious to me through a few comic instances of misunderstanding related to the announcement of this prize. Several of my colleagues in India, US, and elsewhere asked me if I would not mind sending them, for their perusal, a copy of the "essay" that got this prize. What they had in mind was the typical 30-page academic article! It was interesting to see that the familiar word "essay" did not resonate in their minds with any other meanings. Once reminded, however, of history of the word "essay" - going back to the time of Montaigne and Bacon and to the French word for "attempt" or "endeavor," which is also what the word "essay" once meant in English prose - my colleagues immediately recognized the word. After all, there have all grown up reading essayists in English, from Charles Lamb to Chesterton, or Locke's *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* (1689) or the American founding fathers who were often essayists, not to speak of reading in translation Andre Bazin and Roland Barthes. But the experience did tell me of the gradual marginalization of the essayist in the Anglo-American academia. There is a probably a story to tell here. If Walter Benjamin once wrote of the demise of the storyteller in

the age of mechanical reproduction, someone in future may want to write about how over-professionalization of the disciplines in the humanities may have stymied the spirit of the essay.

Yet the essay-form has lost none of its uses. My book that this prize bestows recognition on is in fact a collection of inter-related essays. That the essay-form became important for this book was not a coincidence or accident. Let me describe in brief where this book comes from, and, hopefully, you will see why the essay-form was essential for this book and for the times it represents.

Antecedents to the book

Born and raised in India, where "we" became modern under the aegis of European colonial rule, I have for all my time as a historian been interested the question, "What does it mean to be become 'modern'?" Does it mean becoming urban? Being freer than our ancestors? But what did freedom mean?

I engaged these and related other questions in a book called, *Provincializing Europe*, published originally in 2000. By the time this book was published, the world had become already "global" for people like me. Did it make sense to engage Europe in such a post-imperial world?, friends would often ask. "Why did you provincialize Europe in 2000, and not the United States, the dominant power today?" My answer would go along the following lines. If you think of the history of the world, from Columbus's time to decolonization of the 1950s and 60s as a Shakespearean play, you will possibly find that the most impressively dominant and ineradicably self-contradictory character in that play is Europe. Look at these 500 years: European powers begin to expand beyond Europe; they take over other peoples' land; they make slaves of some other peoples; they oppress many others; they kill; they dominate the oceans; they fight among themselves and fight two world wars. Yet, at the same time, they invent humanism, undergo the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, debate from the beginning whether they have the right to colonize others or take seize their lands, bodies, and labor. In the end they do what serves their interest; I'm not denying that. But at the same time, it's almost like Europe also develops a conscience, a faint sense of guilt, about what they are doing. That conscience - translated into liberal and Marxist political doctrines - becomes part of our modernity. Interrogating modernity was a matter of coming to terms with this imperial and expansive Europe. The US came to dominate a world that European empires had made after all.

European empires had two kinds of impact of on the making of the modern world. A very clear example of the first are the settler colonial countries, where colonial impact destroyed the cultures and lifestyles of the natives. For instance, in the Americas, between 1492 and 1650, 50 million people died from diseases brought by Europeans. The Australian Aboriginal population in the 19th Century was literally decimated - becoming one tenth of what it was. On the other hand, in places like India, Malaysia, to some degree Egypt or Vietnam, and other places where people already had what Europeans regarded as civilization - cities, built space, formal traditions of education and knowledge, etc., they created Western-educated middle classes. I am a descendent of such a colonial middle class the British created in India.

Colonial rule was thus not the same everywhere, but there were enough similarities in the experience of colonial oppression and racism for one's person's experience of colonial rule in one part of the world to resonate with that of another person from somewhere else. Franz Fanon, for instance, came from Martinique, but wrote eventually out of a mélange of life-experiences gathered in Martinique, France, and the Algerian war - all very distinctively particular experiences. But his texts find resonances across the world. There is something in his poetry of anticolonialism that captures some truth about colonial violence. Fanon said something that deeply resonated with me when I was working on *Provincializing Europe*. His acknowledged, quite remarkably, that European thought had all the ingredients necessary for the emancipation of humans from their self-inflicted burdens but the task of implementing them had passed on to the colonized, as Europeans had not been able to resist the temptation to dominate others in their own narrow interests. The Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, meant something similar when he said that while Europe came to India bearing many gifts (such as the notion of equality before law), these were not gifts they willingly parted with. We had to wrest them away from their hands.

One such fundamental gift was idea of political and social freedom, the idea of rights. A central question of all colonial peoples who were ushered into modernity by European colonial rule was the question of freedom. This was deeply, though not exclusively, a European question that became colonized people all over the world passionately embraced and made their own over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The idea that human history was the story of the human search for freedom may find its roots going back to Hegel's philosophy of history, but it really came into its own in the second half of the 19th century, especially in the idea of progress, Marxism and liberalism being two important variants of it. It re-appeared in different shapes and sizes in the 20th century under a variety of names such as Industrialization, Modernization, Development, and so on, all riffs on the idea of freedom. Just think of the title of the philosopher and economist Amartya Sen's book, *Development as Freedom*.

The German historian Jürgen Osterhammel has pointed out that many of the roots of the increasingly popular idea of emancipation and its cognates "freedom" and "liberty" go back to the 19th century, at least to the time when we hear of the emancipation of slaves. This was the time, he says, when the word "emancipation," derived from roman law and emphatically European, came to be applied to the world as the 19th century wore on. In the 20th century, the word "freedom" was taken up by all nations opposed to colonial rule. In one of her posthumously published lectures called "The Freedom to be Free," Hannah Arendt reflected on popular ideas of "freedom" in the late twentieth century. Referring to the late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century revolutions, Arendt argued how the word "freedom" in a variety of national contexts connoted two kinds of freedom: freedom from fear and freedom from want, what we today might call "freedom from poverty." It was this dual engine of a composite desire for freedom from having to fear the white man and for freedom from hunger and poverty, that drove the anti-colonial and revolutionary movements in Asia and Africa in the mid-20th century.

If you look at the writings of anti-colonial nationalists who wanted to modernize their nations, you will see that, barring an exception like Gandhi, they wanted, to a person, to continue the work of modernization that European colonial rule had begun. Some kind of Europeanization of the world or the earth - to use a Heideggerian expression - but without European domination. A very good case in point is the famous Martinique politician, thinker, and the Negritude poet Aimé Césaire. Césaire argued in his book *Discourse on Colonialism* that colonial rule was a matter of Europeans promising modernity, but not delivering on that promise. The proof, he said, was that it was the indigenous peoples of Africa and Asia who were demanding schools, hospitals, and factories that colonialist Europe had refused them. It was the colonized person who wanted to move forward and the colonizer who held things back. I would say that this has been a basic assumption in writing history into the late 20th century. It informed my book as well.

Imaginations of freedom in this sense began a new non-western life in the newly decolonized nations of the 1950s and 60s. Remember that when consumer gadgets like washing machines and refrigerators appeared on the scene in the 1950s and the '60s, they were all advertised as machines that would emancipate women from the drudgery of household work. Western economists, many of them from the MIT, wrote paeans to the idea of limitless economic growth. True, from the 1970s on, there have been important other movements: the environmentalist movement, indigenous people's movements, civil liberties movement, the feminist movement, and so on. Some environmentalists sought, with varying degrees of success, to make us aware of what technology and modernization were doing to the environment, but humans were also demanding more rights and more freedoms. We usually connected these two developments by arguing the environmental degradation followed from problems of inequalities and the lack of social justice and rights, i.e. from the lack of freedom. Questions of freedom reigned – and perhaps still do reign – supreme.

It is this political urge for freedom that eventually locked all nations, big and small, colonizer and colonized, into economic models that assumed both infinite growth and unending consumption of cheap and plentiful energy, supplied, for a long time, by the burning of fossil fuel (coal, oil, natural gas). And this assumption remained tinged with a moral earnestness that is still visible. Since the time of Deng Xiaoping in China, when he announced the four modernization programs in the late 1970s, and in Manmohan Singh's tenure as India's finance minister in 1991 when India liberalized its economy, this has been the rhetoric of appeal - we need fossil fuels to move millions out of poverty. This is still the ground on which China or India would justify the use of coal or Australia would defend their export of coal to these countries. All this, I would argue, is a continuation of that idea of freedom. *Provincializing Europe* was very much a part of this conversation.

This story of human pursuit of modernity-as-freedom was rudely interrupted, however, in the twenty-first century that brought the news of human-induced global warming into our lives in an unprecedented way. Global warming or climate change made us realize that there was a price to be paid for this pursuit of modernization and freedom. The same fossil fuels that

provided us with sources for cheap and plentiful energy and thus helped increasing numbers of human beings to live better and for longer in the late twentieth century, were also causing greenhouse gas emissions that warmed up the surface of the planet and interfered with the ecological services of the planet, threatening to upset the balance of life on it. Scientists began to warn of global warming from the late-1950s, while the Cold War was on, and confirmed it in the 1980s, its first acknowledged sign being a hole in the Ozone layer diagnosed in the early 1980s. It was in 1988 that the UN set up the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).

Thanks to the work of climate and earth scientists along with some environmental historians, it has now become clear that the intensification of extractive capitalist globalization - particularly over the last fifty or sixty years - has made this planet move from being an object of specialist scientific knowledge to being an item of everyday news and a matter of everyday concern. All indicators of human numbers and activities have grown exponentially since the 1950s and even more steeply since 1970s: population, real GDP, foreign direct investment, urban population, primary energy use, fertilizer consumption, large dams, water use, paper production, almost everything that humans use and consume. That is indeed the story of human flourishing, and if that were the only story, it would very much belong to the story of freedom and development. But there was also, scientists discovered, corresponding exponential increases in the same period in the emission of greenhouse gases (carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, methane), erosion of stratospheric ozone, rise in surface temperature of the planet, ocean acidification, marine fish capture, shrimp aquaculture, and so on. These indicators measured the impact that human action was having on the planet and its eco-service processes. It is not surprising that earth system scientists, speaking like and along with some historians, named this period, c. 1950-present, a period of Great Acceleration in human and planetary histories, after the title of historian Karl Polanyi's classic book *The Great Transformation*.

Some of the facts provided by researchers are staggering. In 1985 there were 1 billion consumers of gadgets (out of nearly 6 billion humans who were around 1.6 billion in 1900). One may say that it took homo sapiens almost all the 300,000 years for which they have existed to get to this point in their history. Twenty-one years later, in 2006, the number of consumers had doubled to 2 billion; in 2015, in 9 more years, we had 3 billion consumers; the next billion consumers are expected to join the club in the next 4-6 years. Every single billion, you will see, has been added faster than the previous one. Consumers of the OECD countries were 75 % of the total number of consumers in 2000 and are 30 % now. Most of the consumers now come from China, India, Latin America, the new middle classes of Africa. New consumers are numerous, they need more protein, more vegetables, and their lifestyles are changing. We therefore industrialize the lives of animals, plants, and the birds we eat. This has an impact on the biosphere. The most populous "bird" on the planet today is the broiler chicken: 23 billion broiler chickens; the next most populous bird that we don't eat, the red-billed quelea, numbers 1.5 billion.

It was as if human beings had gone ahead with the project of improving their lives without much concern for the planet, ignoring the fact that the planet was not simply a collection of rocks, it works as a system made up of interactions between different forms of life. Biodiversity, in one word. And life in turn changed the nature of what we regard as nonliving on this planet. The loss of biodiversity that our activities have caused has been a matter of serious discussion in recent years with some debating if we are already seeing the beginnings of a Sixth Great Extinction of life on the planet as a consequence of the Great Acceleration. A most important thing about such an extinction, were it to happen, would be that it would be the first time in the history of the planet that a biological species will have caused a great extinction of life. All the previous extinctions were caused by volcanic eruptions, asteroid strike, and such like phenomena. Humans are, in other words, a geophysical force on the planet today. This is a mode of collective existence that's not available to us through our instruments of perception, but that we cognitively become aware of it through what the scientists are telling us. Thanks to our technology, economies, and levels of consumption, the wealthier or privileged humans - a growing class - have become a planetary force changing the climate of the whole planet, and causing biodiversity decline that could be catastrophic.

Our history at this point, then, is not just a story of freedom. It is also a story of how entangled humans are with natural processes that sustain life and how much we are damaging those processes at our own risk. The most urgent and obvious question is, what should we do? There are, as you know, many suggested solutions on the drawing board, ranging from proposals about transition to renewable energy, de-growth i.e. shrinking our economies, learning from the wisdom of indigenous peoples whose lifestyles have sustained biodiversity hotspots over thousands of years, to more contested schemes of humans taking charge of the climate of the whole planet by geoengineering it, by becoming even more planetary than we already are. The simple story of freedom has gotten complicated as the distinction between human and natural histories has collapsed.

Immanuel Kant once famously suggested that when you have a huge crisis on your hands, three questions follow: What is the problem? What should I do about it? What should I expect? I realized that, with the climate crisis, the first question is answered best by climate scientists who "discovered" and defined the problem in the first place. The second question - what should we do about it? - is being answered by activists, economists, policymakers, political leaders, technologists, and engineers. The third question about what to expect is answered by art - films, climate fiction, painting, performance art, and so on - and by theology (think of the apocalyptic thinking that returns in this crisis). What could I have to say about our times as a humanist historian?

Immanuel Kant was immensely helpful again, for he also said, with regard to the three questions above - what is the problem, what can I do, and what to expect - that they all fold themselves into a fourth and a big question: What is the human being, today? That is the question from where my book began and where it ended. Something has changed about the human condition since Hannah Arendt published her famous book by that name in 1958. She wrote during the

Cold War and under the shadow of the Soviet Sputnik, the first man-made object flung into space. I realized, writing in a post-Cold War world and in an age of human-induced climate change, that the human condition had changed since Arendt's time. We now have two reigning visions of the human. We have the human whose history is separate from natural history, the human who pursues freedom assuming that natural history was part of the givenness of the world, a passive background against human action unfolds. And we have this other understanding of the human, a species that, thanks to its technological capability, numbers, the number of animals whose lives have been industrialized, now act as a geophysical force and is changing the ecology of the whole planet. In this vision, humans are a part of natural history, and the earth is no longer a passive background. We interact with it.

My question was: How do we tell - or even think or hold together these two images of the human being, and their two histories?

That is the question my book ponders and wrestles with.

To return to the question of the essay-form, in conclusion.

This book is a collection of essays (in the more modern sense of the word). The essay-form has been central to it. I am struck by the fact that the essay-form has been critical to my colleagues in the field of postcolonial studies as well. The works of the postcolonial critics, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, two of the founders, along with the late Edward Said, of the field of postcolonial studies, are collections of essays as well. As was my book, *Provincializing Europe*.

Why? I do not have the space or time to go into a long discussion. But in concluding this talk, let me leave you with two thoughts.

It does seem to me that work in both postcolonial studies and the environmental or planetary humanities requires us to confront the fact that the academic disciplines, Western or European in origin but now dominant in universities across the world, are a two-edged sword: they undoubtedly give us valuable insights and methods, but they also carry some blind spots born of the fact that their global provenance arises from the facts of the global dominance of Europe. They are, in that sense, irremediably the descendants of colonial knowledge - the way the West went about knowing the world while also wanting to subordinate it to its hegemony.

Another entity that the West initially, and now most humans, wanted to dominate was what we often call "nature." The academic disciplines we work within were also part of the intellectual and institutional apparatus through which we have carried out this project of dominating nature until we began to question it. And much of this questioning came from the same disciplines as they were forced to come together - in creative multi-disciplinary fields like "earth system science" - to recognize how the planet, much like a living system though not quite, actually works. The need of the hour was to work at the interface of various disciplines,

blending insights from the natural sciences into the concerns of the humanities.

This is where the essay-form - or I should say more accurately, a hybrid form that I might call the "academic essay" to distinguish from literary ones - allowed us, the postcolonials and the humanists and post-humanists in environmental studies, to occupy several in-between places, to work in the interstices of multiple disciplines, and speak - and the essay-form lets you do - in experimental, exploratory, and unfinished ways.

Here was a European resource, the essay-form, one could use again to conduct a critical dialogue with the once-imperial Europe that is also a part of our global inheritance.

Thank you!

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 46th laureate of the Prix Européen de l'Essai
Lausanne, 28 August 2024

Speeches delivered at the presentation of the European Essay Prize
to the author Dipesh Chakrabarty at the
Lausanne Palace on 28 August 2024

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