



Area Studies, History and the Anthropocene



Rommel A. Curaming*

[*Abstract*]

The term Anthropocene encapsulates the idea that the human impact on earth has already reached the level of a geological force with catastrophic consequences, such as global warming or climate change. The envisioning of an apocalyptic future of the possible demise of the human race is central to this idea. This paper seeks to explore the implications of the Anthropocene on the very idea of history and area studies. Does the planetary scope of the Anthropocenic condition, and the concerted effort in the global scale in the need to address it, mean the end of area studies, which is premised on a particularity of an area? Is a posthumanist history feasible? If yes, how can it really help address the problem? Or, it will merely muddle the issues?

Keywords: Anthropocene, Area Studies, Environment, Climate Change, Humanism, Post-humanist History

* Senior Assistant Professor, History and International Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Rommel.Curaming@ubd.edu.bn

I . Introduction

That we live under a posthuman condition is a talking point that has become increasingly common, at least among scholars (Ferrando 2016; Herbrechter 2013; Pepperell 2003). This era is supposed to be characterized by, among others, the decentering or deprivileging of human beings in the scheme of things. Ostensibly it is a response to the supposed excessive arrogance of humanism, at least the European version which stands in contrast to, say, the communitarian orientation of humanism in the Confucianist tradition. This supposed arrogance is exemplified, for instance, in the declaration attributed to Protagoras that “Man is the measure of all things” (Pepperell 2003). For centuries this attitude had encouraged humans, slowly for millennia but exponentially since the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to recognize no barrier in the attempt to control, manipulate and alter the natural environment, in pursuit of progress in practically all spheres of human endeavor. The result is the “Great Acceleration” of the anthropogenic or human impact on the environment, particularly since 1945 (McNeill and Engelke 2014; Steffen, Crutzen, and McNeill 2007).

The rise to prominence in the past two decades of the idea of the Anthropocene foregrounds the gravity of the situation. The Anthropocene encapsulates the idea that the human impact has already reached the level of a geological force with catastrophic, even apocalyptic, consequences, such as climate change and the possible demise of the human race (Crutzen 2002; Steffen et al. 2007). Against this context, posthumanism has been given an extraordinary salience beyond the sphere of the philosophical. The urgency for action that the Anthropocene implies has prompted an increasing number of scholars—historians and philosophers among them—to raise alarm over this matter and in response propose various measures, including a fundamental shift in mindset or values away from anthropocentrism or human-centrism.

Humanistic and social science disciplines, including Area Studies, were initially slow in noticing and engaging with the idea of the Anthropocene and posthumanism. But once it started there has been a flurry of discussions of the implications of the

Anthropocene on practically every field or sub-field (Latour 2017; Lidskog and Waterton 2016; Menely and Taylor 2017; Polt and Wittrock 2018). In history, Dipesh Chakrabarty's article, "The Climate of History: Four Theses" (2009) raised provocative points and triggered animated discussion on the possible role of the modern, human-centric historical mindset in facilitating the process leading to the Anthropocene (Emmett and Lekan 2016; Moore 2016a). The salience of Chakrabarty's article may be glimpsed in the fact that it has been translated into several languages. In addition, it was the main subject of organized workshops. The field of Asian Studies has also pitched in with the *Journal of Asian Studies* featuring six articles in its November 2014 issue on the theme "Human Engagement with the Environment". The Association of Asian Studies (AAS) has also initiated an Emerging Field Workshop on Asia and the Anthropocene, which was held on 23-27 August 2018 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

History and area studies are two fields where the implications of the Anthropocene may be clearly unsettling and hard-hitting. The history discipline as we know it is a product of modernity and the long humanist traditions rooted in the classical Greek, Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. In Chakrabarty's view, the idea of the Anthropocene envisions the demise of the future for humankind which means disruption of the supposed linked and mutually reinforcing and mutually presupposing relationship between the past, the present and the future. In his words: "The current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility" (Chakrabarty 2009: 197). It may mean the end of history as we know it. Zoltan Simon (2017: 243) articulates a similar point in these words:

...the sudden occurrence of a novelty that is not the result of a continuous long-term development that originates in the deep past. This is what I call the prospect of unprecedented change, the prospect of a singular event expected to defy all previous human experience. It appears as the ultimate threat insofar as the future becomes incomprehensible to human cognition, due to the possibility of losing control over what originally was a human-induced change.

The possibility of reaching a point when nature takes over anthropogenic climate change is the singular event whose consequences are inaccessible not only to human cognition, but inasmuch as all previous human experience is defied, even to human imagination.

The philosophical underpinning of these claims is, understandably, not easy to grasp and I shall come back to this point later. Suffice to note here that our values and historical mindset today are largely in line with our vision of, or aspiration for the future, which at the same time influences the way we interpret the past. This interconnectedness or interdependence between our conceptions of the past, present and future—a fundamental feature of modern historical consciousness as we understand it—is bound to be sharply disrupted in the event that the vision of the future is lost or becomes murky.

In the case of Asian Studies, the rationale for existence often cited for area studies is the supposed distinctiveness of an area, however it may be defined, be it in local, national, regional, civilizational, or transnational terms. As Mark Hudson (2014: 943) observes: “the concept of the Anthropocene can be said to work against the regional and bounded ideas of Asia and Asian studies. One of the great strengths of area studies lies in its local contextualizations, yet the cumulative effects of global human activities over at least the past 200 years have resulted in changes to the basic biological, chemical, and climatic processes of the whole earth, changes that ultimately affect all humans”. In other words, the Anthropocene raises the question of what use is there for an area studies when the unit of analysis or the area that is the object of analysis, is now scaled up to the planetary level, and the notion of human agency now operates at the most encompassing collectivity, the human race? To note, a crucial element of Chakrabarty’s proposal is deep history, or species history, or a history of life (including other life forms) rather than just life history or the history of humans (Chakrabarty 2009; 2016).

This paper seeks to explore in a preliminary manner the implication of the notion of the Anthropocene and the post-humanist turn in area studies and history, with a focus on

Southeast Asian history. My arguments are two-fold. First, granting the species- or planetary-level of analysis presupposed in the Anthropocene, it does not render area studies obsolete; the contextual distinctiveness of local or regional contexts is necessary in understanding the differentiated and uneven conditions that gave rise to the lived experience of the Anthropocene. Blanket blaming of the *anthropos* or the entire humankind is counterproductive and misleading as it elides proper, moral-ecological apportioning of responsibility and, thus, muddles the question of who ought to shoulder proportionately more in designing corrective or ameliorative measures. Also, insofar as the search for alternatives—philosophical, attitudinal, cultural practices, etc.—that could help humans to address and/or adapt to the challenges of the increasingly more menacing natural environment, area studies such as Asian Studies are repositories of relevant ideas and approaches. The area studies approach is not just compatible but essential in promoting efforts along these lines.

Second, the apocalyptic implications of the Anthropocene—demise of civilizations or the human race—is disruptive of the long-held or long-settled past-present-future interconnection that characterizes modern historical consciousness. This calls for re-orientation or recalibration of historical approaches to accommodate a form of post-humanist history, where humans and their values no longer enjoy analytical priority. How I see it may play out in Southeast Asian history is what I wish to explore in this paper

II. Area Studies

The Anthropocene is a highly contested concept (Hulme 2009). At a fundamental level, a question has been raised whether indeed there is a climate change crisis and if there is whether it has been caused by humans (Powell 2012). Another is the time-frame: is the Anthropocene a post-war phenomenon, or does it go back to the last 200 years since the onset of the Industrial Revolution, or even further back since 10,000 years ago with the onset of agriculture, or

any period in between? (Smith and Zeder 2013). For the purpose of this paper I leave these aspects of the controversy aside. Rather than question or down play the “existence” of climate change and/or the role of humans in it, as so called “climate change deniers” do (a term that admittedly does not do justice to the complexity and range of ideas from people who raised questions about the cause of climate change, see Powell [2012]), I take the decisive role of humans in global warming or climate change as an acceptable claim. I also side with those who propose that the clear break, a “rupture” or a tipping point, happened in the post-war years, specifically starting from 1945 (Hamilton 2016; Zalasiewicz et al. 2015). There is no denying that before this point, humans had already affected or altered the environment, but arguably the earth as an eco-system could still absorb or accommodate human-induced impacts without risking imbalance. The point of dispute which I wish to discuss here rests on whether humanity as a generic category, as a species, is collectively responsible for climate change, or a more differentiated approach is necessary. The latter refers particularly to the highly developed nations whose economic activities in the past 200 years, and particularly in the last seven decades, had imposed enormous strain and destructive impacts on the environment. In a situation where only about 7% of the world population consumes about 50% of energy, and about half of the world population have a combined use of only about 7% of world energy resources, it seems utterly unfair to hold the whole humanity, the *anthropos*, accountable for climate change. There must be a way to distribute accountability proportionate to the weight of each group’s use of the earth’s resources (Malm and Hornborg 2014). The proposal to adopt other terminologies to highlight the decisive role of more specific forces such as capitalism (thus Capitalocene) (Moore, 2015, 2016a) or the plantation system (Plantationocene) (Haraway et al. 2016) is precisely in response to the overly aggregated causal attribution. The detailed and contextualized approaches in Area Studies are not just compatible but essential in this undertaking. It must be emphasized, however, that the methodological nationalism or regionalism (Thompson 2013) for which conventional Area Studies has been guilty of, cannot do the job. Access to and use of resources is also disproportionate

and badly skewed in developing societies towards certain groups such as the upper classes, not all the people. The more local and cross-boundary network approaches to area studies seem more suitable.

One argument against the idea of disaggregated humanity as causal agents is the danger of inaction or political paralysis that ambivalent or nuanced explanations can give rise to (see (Rudiak-Gould 2015). After all, there is only one earth and the task is to reverse, or at least slow down the spiral to catastrophe, thus benefiting the entire humankind. What good is it to put a blame on capitalism or capitalists, for instance, if the entire earth is doomed, so this line of argument goes? As Chakrabarty (2009: 221) opines, “the whole crisis cannot be reduced to a story of capitalism. Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged...” The point is to save the earth, not to score analytic point. The problem here is that the analytic point raised by the call for “differentiated responsibility” may be necessary in crafting a workable response to the crisis. Those who are most resistant to the apocalyptic climate change narrative seem to be also the ones who have reaped the most benefit from, and are most attuned to, the mindset and practices that gave rise to climate change. Being also the most powerful and having control over or access to resources, they are at the same time the most well-positioned to do something about the problems. Without them self-realizing or being forced to realize and be held accountable for the destructive consequences of their values, mindset and practices, there is a danger the problems will be ignored or downplayed, at worst, and at best the adopted measures to address the crisis may be no more than stop-gap, superficial and oblivious to the deep and real roots of the problems.

At first glance, this concern appears irrelevant to or is beyond the scope of Area Studies. Admittedly, the conventional nation-state-focused type of Area Studies can hardly be helpful. However, the penchant for details, the sensitivity to contexts and the presumption of distinctiveness of an area that characterize the logic of the Area Studies approach are in line with efforts to “provincialize” Anthropocene (Morrison 2015). It also coincides with

Mark Hudson's (2014: 954) observation:

If... the goal of Asian and other area studies is to 'document the existence, internal logic, and theoretical implications of the distinctive social and cultural values, expressions, structures, and dynamics that shape the societies and nations beyond Europe and the United States' (Szanton 2004: 2), then the study of Asia can certainly contribute to our understanding of the local contextualization of systems of adaptive learning, providing us with case studies of long-term strategies for sustaining diversity, memory, and crisis response within Anthropocene social-ecological systems.

By helping to map out the debates around climate change along the fault lines of class, geography, economic interests, gender and ideology, area studies could be a valuable tool for deepening the understanding of the local roots and environmental manifestations of the Anthropocene. More importantly, effective adaptive mechanisms to deal with climate change may better be forged by factoring into the equation distinctive socio-economic, political and cultural factors as well as available resources in the local contexts, such as traditional knowledge and cultural practices. While it is true that traditional societies are among the most vulnerable to the hazards of climate change, it is also true that their resilience in the face of environmental challenges as a repository of adaptive practices and traditional knowledge may prove useful. In the era of rising sea levels, for instance, people of the seas (Orang Suku Laut) that are scattered in littoral regions of Southeast Asia may have much to offer. Studies that used to be marginal or those which tended to be viewed as esoteric about these people are bound to assume a new level of significance, perhaps even become central (e.g. Boomgaard 2007; Chou, 2010 2016)

Area Studies also stands as an antidote to the "false" universalisms that enabled, justified or naturalized the human conquest and destruction of nature. It offers a stark reminder that the modern mindset or value-system or lifestyle that forms part of the factors that push us to the Anthropocene, were just one of the possibilities. The existence of ancient civilizations with their own philosophical and religious traditions in Asia or Southeast Asia that had their histories and cultures rooted in the past that was as old

or even older than those of Europe drives home this observation. At some points in the past, choices were made among possible options by certain groups of humans that eventually led us to the Anthropocene. In short, the European-type modernity was by no means an inevitable trajectory. As a choice was made, we also have a choice to embrace an alternative mindset and cultural practices that are more nurturing of the environment.

III. History and the (im)possibility of post-humanism

Along with literature, history is the most humanistic of all disciplines. However, along with the development of the historical profession since the 19th century as represented most starkly by Leopold von Ranke, history as a discipline has shed much of its literary and humanistic properties as it assumed more scientific and objectivist posturing. This rather dichotomous formulation ought not to be exaggerated; humanistic elements remain in constant and creative tension with scientific aspirations of the modern historical methodology. Despite scientific aspirations, history remains human-centric if not humanistic at its core. In understanding the engine of historical process, it allocates a central position to human agency and the forces understandable in human terms. It is easy to see in conventional narrative histories the centrality of humans; it is much more challenging to see it in structural approaches and even more in macro-structural histories, like the Annales School. Marxist approaches, for instance, de-emphasize individuals, even more so does the French Annalist approach, where time-scale is not limited to humans (events and conjunctures) but also to the *longue durée* (including geological time). In Marxist history, the end-goal of equality is for the well-being of humans. On the other hand, humans hardly matter in a geological time-scale, but the role of humans remain central at the very least as the knower or perceiver or adjudicator of what is acceptable as historical evidence. Also, the end-goal of the Annalist approach in emphasizing the multiple time-scale and the underlying mentalities redound to what is beneficial to human society. In other words, notwithstanding its variety, history remains fundamentally humanist. And if humanist

hubris is among the key reasons for the Anthropocene, and some scholars mull over post-humanism as a potential source of inspiration and ideas that may be useful in dealing with it, it is pertinent to ask what implications the Anthropocene holds for history in general and Southeast Asian history, in particular.

The critiques (postmodern, feminist, postcolonial, decolonial) of the linear view of history that underpins the idea of modernity and progress are long-standing. Despite that, it seems they hardly made a visible dent on the mentality of most people across the globe who have long taken for granted modern progress as a natural trajectory of human and societal development. There has long been a feeling of disenchantment with a dark side of modernity among increasing though still a limited number of people particularly in the developed world (e.g. Mignolo 2011), but the fantasy of “the modern” persists among many, particularly in the developing countries. The narrative of catch-up with the West is one of the outstanding features of the postcolonial histories in much of the developing world. I must add, though, that this observation ought to be tempered by the possibility that this may be an elitist or vanguardist view, propagated as supposedly reflective of the aspirations of the whole or the majority of people in a nation-state. Perhaps it is merely a projection of the views of the most powerful, the most well-educated and the well-positioned in particular countries.

Confusions surrounding history often arise from the tendency to ignore its multi-faceted nature. That history as past could be different to different people in different temporal and socio-cultural settings—in essence the application of the fundamentally historicist assumption to history itself—is a truism. However, the tendency among many professionally-trained historians to privilege academic history as the only right or legitimate form of history limits the application of this assumption within the parameter that privileges academic history and professional historians, and sidelines or ignores history’s other facets. Perhaps as an indication of the high-level of respect or esteem academic historians enjoy among the socio-politically influential groups in society (e.g. economic, political and intellectual elites) as well as common people, the historians’

position elicits a broad if not universal concurrence among them. Other peoples' understanding of the past which do not conform closely to the requirements of scholarly history are often referred to in derogatory or dismissive terms, such as legend, myth, folklore, gossip, hearsay, popular history, or "mere" memory or recollection. By doing this, academic historians, with tacit support from other influential members of society, arrogates upon academic history the sole legitimate right to represent what happened in the past. No wonder then the common tendency to conflate what happened in the past with what can be read in history books written or sanctioned by professional or academic historians. It does not mean, of course, that academic historians go unopposed. The roots of tensions between popular and academic historians as well as among academic historians themselves are ancient, similarly between historians and non-historians particularly in the era of fake news. So far, any attempt to adjudicate between competing sides resorts to measures or procedures authorized by, and which also favor the scholarly class.

Understanding the differentiated implications of the Anthropocene and post-humanism for history requires disaggregating history's various facets and pinning down exactly which one or two in fact we refer to. It is important to do this because their implications for history depends on different facets. I can identify at least five of these. First, history as knowledge about the past; it is written by trained historians as well as untrained "others" who are interested in the past. History as an authoritative knowledge about the past is the most common understanding of what history is. It corresponds to Michael Oakshott's (1983) idea of the historical past, which may be distinguished from the practical past. The historical past or written history is the product of historians' attempts to re-construct what happened based on the available evidences. As the pool of evidence is likely to be incomplete with many past events not leaving traces that are usable in full form as evidence, or these traces having been destroyed either by natural or man-made means, or they simply remain hidden and are awaiting discovery, written academic history is tentative. It could change depending on the latest acceptable interpretation among scholars of the existing body

of evidence.

The second facet of history is, for lack of a better term, “actual history”. Referring to the totality of everything—processes, events, big and small, significant or not from the human standpoint—that happened in the past, the idea of actual history is intuitively simple or common sensical, but due to the triumph of the “scientific”, evidence-based history since the 19th century, invoking this idea might raise eyebrows among historians. By definition, this history is fixed (as opposed to tentative), complete, accurate, from the omniscient standpoint, and it is not based on available evidence. It is simply the past as it actually happened in all its details. Admittedly, it is a metaphysical conception of the past. It is a past that only an absolute all-knowing supreme being such as God (granting there is such a being) or the Spirit in Hegelian sense “knows” in its entirety. Invoking an absolute, metaphysical, extra-human standpoint is of course out of the purview of the currently accepted legitimate historical procedures, but I believe this conceptualization is necessary to, among other things, underscore the discrepancy between the representation (history as knowledge) and what historians attempt or purport to represent (actual history). Historians know very well about this discrepancy, but many tend to be coy about it, playing it down before the public. This tendency helps nurture the widespread perception that equates or conflates the authoritative written academic history with actual history. By highlighting the potentially discrepancy between actual and written history, I foreground the limits of any historical representation. Doing so opens up pathways to re-examining the rupture between the accepted and the range of possibly acceptable parameters of historical practice (White 2014). More importantly, the very idea of actual history, a form of history beyond humans—beyond what humans imagine, know and write about—may prove to be a defining element of post-humanist history that is in the process of re-emergence or being re-acknowledged. What Chakrabarty (2009) calls deep history is an example of this post-humanist history. I highlight “re-emergence” as post-humanist history is not really a new type of history. Before modern historical practices started to dominate during the 19th century as exemplified by von Ranke,

much of historical practice was essentially post-humanist in that it gave room for the affective, fantastic and metaphysical—those that were not based on documentary and other concrete evidences.

Thirdly, history as profession; the community of professional historians embodies the set of ideas, procedures and practices relevant to understanding and representing the past. It also includes the logic or particular ways of conceiving the past, the so-called historical sensibility or consciousness that governs historians' analytical approaches, and which history education seeks to promote among students. As a profession, it acts as the gate-keeper of acceptable ontological, epistemological, methodological and ethical standards or procedures among historians and history enthusiasts.

Fourthly, history as a subjective experience of/in the past by individuals and groups of people; the idea of history as experience is rather tricky because all experiences are by strict definition happening in the present. Also, it is not only the conscious apprehension of such experience, but also the affective and aesthetic elements, that solely define it. The moment the present passes on and moves in the domain of the past, or history as we commonly know it, what is left is only what is remembered of it, the memory or consciousness of this experience and no longer the experience itself. Thus, one can argue that the idea of history as experience is an oxymoron. However, from an existential standpoint, humans do experience things and such experience unfolds like time; as time passes, so does experience. The time-bound character of experience raises the critical question of whether experience can ever be considered history (in the sense of something that happened in the past) or, more crucially, whether history needs to be redefined to include the present in its conceptual domain. Perhaps Heidegger's idea of *worlding* may be the best reference point to conceive of history as experience. To simplify an exceedingly complex philosophical idea, *worlding* refers to the perpetual process of how being (everyone's or everything's thingness) gets constituted (Polt 1999).

Another reason why this notion is tricky is that what is remembered of this experience could be significantly different from

the experience itself. This is precisely the reason for making memory as the fifth important facet of history. Often dismissed or even denigrated by some professional historians as “mere” memory, as opposed, implicitly, to “real” history, owing to its well-known attributes of being changeable, unreliable or inaccurate, memory is in fact very important because what one remembers, regardless of whether it is true or false, affects how individuals and groups think and behave at any particular point in time. Most people’s intimate link to the past takes the form of memory. Insofar as they are concerned, what they remember is the right history. Referring back to Oakeshott’s classification, history as memory falls under the notion of the practical past, which incidentally was the object of Hayden White’s (2014) lengthy meditation.

The different facets of history noted above seem to have a differential relationship with post-humanism as it relates to the Anthropocene. At first glance the notion of the Anthropocene appears to have no analytical implication concerning the ideas of actual history and history as experience, as by definition they have already happened. Regardless of the shift in mindset, such as that prompted by the notion of the Anthropocene, and which Chakrabarty (2015) believes entails a change in “epochal consciousness”, nothing can be done anymore with actual history and individual or group experience as they are already in the past. Among facets of history, they are ones that accommodate bodily performance—by acting out “in the flow” of the unfolding of time—as opposed to what is simply in the mind, as part of the notion of history. They are free from interpretation that depends on, or is influenced by, the present circumstances and visions of the future. But as a continuous process of unfolding in time, actual and experiential histories are not exclusively confined to the past, but they also accommodate the present and will continue to flow into the future. Herein lies the opportunity for humans to do something to alleviate, if not reverse, the impact of the Anthropocene.

The implications of the notion of actual history on the apocalyptic character of the Anthropocene seem to be more consequential, radical and disturbing. The notion of actual history, the kind of history that “merely flows” and is unmindful of the

anthropocentric cognitive and moral preconceptions, implies that as the Anthropocene wreaks havoc on Earth what happens is a “mere” transformation of the Earth to a different kind of Earth, or of life to a kind of life that humans today are not used to, but in due time they will be, as they adapt to the planetary and biological changes that accompany the Anthropocene. In Heideggerian term, this is yet another way of worlding, a different experience, by no means necessarily better or worse, just different in its own being. The amorality of this implication is disturbing particularly to those who believe in the need to conserve nature or keep the earth alive and nurturing of all forms of life as it is.

Theoretically, the third facet of history—individual and collective memory—may be affected by change in the vision of the future, which is implicit in the notion of the Anthropocene. Memory is functionally similar to the written or academic facet of history in that they are dependent on interpretation, which takes place in the present, which in turn may be affected by the vision of the future. When the vision of the future is suddenly disrupted, by, say, “the prospect of unprecedented change” (Simon 2017), it also affects how the past may be interpreted. Suppose, for instance, NASA or other similar agencies have found out that a huge asteroid is on track to hit the Earth in a few months’ time, and it could possibly cause extinction of species similar to what happened, or so is claimed, to the dinosaurs millions of years ago. This news can possibly induce a massive shift in individual and group interpretation of their past and present life. Without a future to envision, things that the forward-looking and hyper-modern hegemonic value system takes for granted now—say, human relations, love, simple life, faith—in favor of the grand aspiration (say, to be technologically sophisticated, rich, powerful or famous) in the future, are likely to assume much greater importance. And things they did or did not do in the past (say, the pursuit of modernity) in line with the future vision may also assume a different meaning. A sense of loss or regret may replace the sense of achievement, or vice versa.

But this point is hardly consequential from the post-humanist standpoint. As humans are endowed with a mind, memory is quintessentially human-centric, and thus just like the two previous

facets, actual and experiential history, the post-human turn may not have an appreciable impact on the facet of history as personal memory. But the notion of collective or social memory is different. As the idea of the Anthropocene permeates social or collective consciousness, it will simultaneously affect individual thinking and behavior, as in fact has been happening in a still limited and uneven but quickly expanding scale across the world.

For threats in the future not as shockingly immediate as the hypothetical case noted above, such as, for instance, the Anthropocene and climate change, it seems unlikely to generate the same effects among many people. It is doubtful whether people will drastically re-order their priorities or invert the hierarchy of the values they uphold. Global warning or climate change is extremely important, but the demise of the human race and all life on earth which could result from it appears to lie in still a distant future, at least in human or generational timescale. People tend to ignore things if they are not truly imminent, and they go on with their lives as usual. This is one of the many reasons why many people are skeptical about climate change and the Anthropocene (Hulme 2009). The awareness of this human tendency is perhaps the reason why Chakrabarty (2009) exaggerated the immediacy of the supposedly dire consequence of the Anthropocene, as if the worst scenario is already upon us. He made it a pretext for calling for a drastic shift in historical sensibility away from the human-centric to life-centric. He supports the idea of deep history and species history and doubts the allegedly deterministic role of capitalism (as encapsulated, for instance, in the concept of Capitalocene [eg. Moore, 2015, 2016a, 2016b]) in reaching the tipping point that is the Anthropocene. As far as he is concerned, the gravity and immediacy of the problem requires a drastic and collective measures from all of us, such that the urge to blame capitalism or globalization or any other factors ought to be subsumed under the need to protect all of us from the impending catastrophe, as if the two are mutually exclusive.

The facets of history that Chakrabarty is concerned about are the written history and the modern historical consciousness or rationality that undergirds the practice of the historical profession. His critique also implies adjustment in historical methodology,

which entails non-human-centric historical narrative and analysis. As Chakrabarty's ideas represent perhaps the most forceful articulation of the centrality of history in causing and averting the Anthropocene crisis, and I believe such ideas are both ethico-politically questionable and analytically problematic, I shall scrutinize his ideas in some detail.

Is there really a need for a fundamental change in the way history is written, as argued by Chakrabarty? So far it is unclear to me what the deep history or species history that he favors as an alternative looks like, but what is clear is that he supports a non-human-centric history as supposedly the type of history that can help address the Anthropocene crisis. The assumption here is that the ascribed centrality of humans in historical processes nurtures and justifies the excessive self-serving pursuit of human interest at the expense of nature to the point that the Anthropocene is reached. A cursory glance at the development of knowledge about the past across various cultures (not only the modern Euro-American historical traditions) reveals that a non-human-centric history is very much alive in spheres outside of, beyond, or even before, modern, historical scholarship. Religious and spiritual traditions or the worldview that used to dominate before the eighteenth or nineteenth century and which up to now billions of people, mainly in the developing world subscribe to, all teach a non-human-centric ethos and ideas of the past and the future. Francesca Ferrando (2016) appears to be on point when she argued that "(h)umans have always been post-human" as evident in spiritual traditions that developed from the dawn of humanity, earlier than the start of civilization, and which persist up to now. Does it mean that post-humanism is, at least partly, a revival of old ideas and practices which were suppressed, supplanted or marginalized by the rise of science and humanism to a hegemonic position during the past two centuries?

Ferrando's point draws attention to the importance of distinguishing various facets of history. For most people among whom the facet of history that matters most in their life is their personal memory of what happened in the past—hardly the history produced and espoused by academic historians—their conception

and understanding of the past may indeed be far from the human-centric history that Chakrabarty blames and seeks to replace. This may be particularly true among people of poorer and middle-class backgrounds who struggle on a daily basis living in developing countries; and perhaps due to their constant life-struggles their religiosity or spirituality is high. They thus tend to attribute to God's will whatever happened in their past and whatever will happen in their future. In other words, the modern notion of historical consciousness that assumes agency for humans to design historical trajectories as they envision the future is a luxury for many people even in the current era of unprecedented wealth. Such a kind of historical sensibility seems to be a preserve of those endowed with enough intellectual, economic and political resources. Perhaps that only a few truly proletarian revolutions succeeded in history (China and Vietnam among them) is a living testament of the persistence of non-human-centric historical sensibility. The category "human" in the notion of human-centric historical consciousness is simply too large or too generalized to encapsulate the complexity of real people on the ground, which is why the context-sensitive orientations of Area Studies and History are essential.

Even in Euro-American modern historical traditions, history is also not singularly viewed as human-centric, as exemplified, say, by the Braudellian approach or the French Annales School. Long before the recent explosion of interests in environmental and planetary history, they have pioneered the broad-sweeping, non-event focused, *longue durée* and the multi-time-scale (including geological time) approaches to historical analysis. Humans hardly occupy a privileged position there. But even in non-human-centric approaches, the fact that historians are humans and members of an academic or professional community with its own interests to pursue and promote, and they write with a human audience in mind, then it raises the question of the extent to which history, as is written, can avoid or negate its human-centricity. Perhaps the idea is not to avoid or negate but to come to terms with it, and do something to alleviate the its potential harms.

The long-established approaches to, or conceptions of, history

—both modern scholarly history and those which may fall under the facet of memory—are varied or wide-ranging. The possible alternatives to human-centric history may be found not necessarily in the supposedly new post-humanistic approaches but among existing ideas or approaches that have long been sidelined or obscured by the rise of hegemonic human-centric history since centuries ago.

One area is which post-humanism may have a profound implication is in the logic of historical consciousness. What has long been taken for granted in historical analysis is the human-centric yardstick in determining what is historically relevant or important; in other words, what is useful for and rationally defensible from the standpoint of humans. The destruction of the environment, for instance, has been justified in terms of the needs of the ever-expanding human population. Jason Moore (2016) argued that human-made ideas and practice of capitalism has rendered nature cheap for human exploitation. By locating humans as equal to other living creatures, the calculation of importance will have to be correspondingly re-calibrated. The human-centric attribution of causality in historical explanation will also have to be adjusted, along with the admission that understanding should not be conceived in exclusively human terms. Consciousness is hardly exclusive to the human mind, as Pepperell (2003) argues.

IV. Conclusion

The epoch-making condition captured by the term the Anthropocene is viewed by some scholars as foregrounding the post-human age. The catastrophic future envisioned in this concept prompted philosophers and historians, among other scholars, to offer dire warnings and proposals to address this serious problem. Dipesh Chakrabarty's forceful articulation of the serious implications of the Anthropocene exemplifies this effort. While the notion of the Anthropocene foregrounds the central role of humans in this predicament, Chakrabarty's proposed solution of de-centering or de-privileging humans in historical narrative or analysis appears too

far removed from the baseline of the problem. The unsavory implications of his suggestion include the collectivization of responsibility for the problem for which certain groups, small in number but which have considerable political and economic power (the rich nations, voracious capitalists and industrialists) had greater responsibility. With their responsibility inadvertently absolved by the “entire humankind”, there is a danger that those who have the most political and economic resources to make things happen would not move decisively enough to address the problem simply because it is everyone’s responsibility. Worse if they deny that there is a crisis at all, which is what Donald Trump and many Republicans have done.

Despite doubts raised about Chakrabarty’s analysis, and that the Anthropocene may not be the best case to illustrate the need to rethink history, the post-human condition that the Anthropocene helped to highlight does carry important implications for Area Studies and History. As for Area Studies, despite the global scope of the challenges, local and regional contexts remain important in understanding the local roots, manifestations and possible adaptive mechanisms to address climate change. It may not reverse or slowdown the Anthropocenic conditions, but it could assist in preparing people to meet the challenges by drawing on the repository of cultural and ecological adaptive practices in relevant local areas.

As for History, the implications operate unevenly depending on different facets of history, which is why the multi-faceted nature of history needs to be underscored. It is misleading to assume that the kind of history or form of historical sensibility favored by academic historians are the same as those of common people for whom their “practical past” is more resonant—personal, affective, perhaps inaccurate but useful for their purpose. Serious research needs to be undertaken on how common people, particularly those who are at the margins (politically, economically, socially, culturally) practice historical mindfulness. Do the disempowered or marginalized think historically in the same way as is encapsulated in human-centric, human-driven modern historical consciousness? Aware of the possible differentiation, we shall be in a better position to tailor to their characteristics whatever program or initiative we intend to

pursue.

The adjustments that need to be carried out to realize a post-humanist history may not at all be new. We can draw from the pool of historiographic knowledge, both from ancient and modern times, which have been sidelined, ignored, or obscured by the preference for scientific, evidence-based history by the hegemonic groups of historians. What needs to be worked out, possibly from scratch, is how historians would undertake historical interpretations by employing a value-system or value-assessment that does not privilege humans but which allots equal value to the interests of other life-forms. This is a challenging task as it entails the re-examination of many fundamental presuppositions that we have held since time immemorial. It will also mean the re-formulation of the rules on assessing historical evidence and what qualifies as acceptable historical sources. At an even more fundamental level, the singular rationality that we have taken for granted for so long may have to give way to multiple rationalities. One may say that all these suggest the end of history as we know it. Alternatively, one can say that this is reclaiming histories that we have abandoned in the past in our pursuit of “modernity”. Alternatively, it may be simply acknowledging openly the existence of plural histories that exist side-by-side on an everyday basis, then as now.

References

- Boomgaard, Peter. 2007. *A World of Water: Rain, Rivers and Seas in Southeast Asian Histories*. Brill.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 2009. The Climate of History: Four Theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2):197–222.
- . 2015. The Human Condition in the Anthropocene: Tanner Lecture on Human Values. <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/Chakrabarty%20manuscript.pdf> (Accessed March 12, 2019)
- Chou, Cynthia. 2010. *The Orang Suku Laut of Riau, Indonesia: The Inalienable Gift of Territory*. London; New York: Routledge.
- . 2016. The Water World of the Orang Suku Laut in Southeast Asia. *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National*

- Studies of Southeast Asia*, 4(2):265 – 282.
- Crutzen, Paul J. 2002. Geology of Mankind. *Nature* 415(6867):23.
- Emmett, Robert and Thomas Lekan. 2016. Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Four Theses.' *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* (2). http://www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/2016_i2_final.pdf (Accessed April 1, 2019)
- Ferrando, Francesca. 2016. Humans Have Always Been Posthuman: A Spiritual Genealogy of Posthumanism. *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*. Debashish Banerji and Makarand Paranjape, eds. 243–256. New Delhi: Springer India.
- Hamilton, Clive. 2016. The Anthropocene as Rupture. *The Anthropocene Review*, 3(2): 93–106.
- Haraway, Donna. 2015. Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin. *Environmental Humanities*, 6:159–165.
- Haraway, Donna, Noboru Ishikawa, Scott F. Gilbert, Kenneth Olwig, Anna L. Tsing, and Nils Bubandt. 2016. Anthropologists Are Talking – About the Anthropocene. *Ethnos*, 81(3): 535 –564.
- Herbrechter, Stefan. 2013. *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hudson, Mark J. 2014. Placing Asia in the Anthropocene: Histories, Vulnerabilities, Responses. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 73(4): 941–962.
- Hulme, Mike. 2009. *Why We Disagree About Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, Bruno. 2017. Anthropology at the Time of the Anthropocene: A Personal View of What Is to Be Studied. *The Anthropology of Sustainability*. Marc Brightman and Jerome Lewis, eds. 35–49. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.
- Lidskog, Rolf and Claire Waterton. 2016. Anthropocene – A Cautious Welcome from Environmental Sociology? *Environmental Sociology*, 2(4): 395–406.
- Malm, Andreas and Alf Hornborg. 2014. The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative. *The*

- Anthropocene Review*, 1(1): 62–69.
- McNeill, John Robert and Peter Engelke. 2014. *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Menely, Tobias and Jesse Oak Taylor, eds. 2017. *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Mignolo, Walter. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Moore, Jason W. 2015. *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. New York: Verso.
- . ed. 2016a. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: Kairos PM Press.
- . 2016b. Introduction: Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Jason W. Moore, ed. 1-13. Oakland, CA: Kairos PM Press.
- Morrison, Kathleen. 2015. Provincializing the Anthropocene. *Seminar Web Edition*. http://www.india-seminar.com/2015/673/673_kathleen_morrison.htm. (Accessed April 15, 2019).
- Oakeshott, Michael. 1983. *On History and Other Essays*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Pepperell, Robert. 2003. *The Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Polt, Richard F. H. 1999. *Heidegger: An Introduction*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press.
- Polt, Richard F. H. and Jon Wittrock, eds. 2018. *The Task of Philosophy in the Anthropocene: Axial Echoes in Global Space*. London New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Powell, James Lawrence. 2012. *The Inquisition of Climate Science*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rudiak-Gould, Peter. 2015. The Social Life of Blame in the Anthropocene. *Environment and Society* 6(1): 48-65.
- Simon, Zoltán Boldizsár. 2017. Why the Anthropocene Has No History: Facing the Unprecedented. *The Anthropocene Review* 4(3):239–245.

- Smith, Bruce D. and Melinda A. Zeder. 2013. The Onset of the Anthropocene. *Anthropocene*, 4:8–13.
- Steffen, Will, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill. 2007. The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature? *Ambio* 36(8):614–621.
- Szanton, David L. 2004. Introduction: The Origin, Nature, and Challenges of Area Studies in the United States. Pp. 1–33. *Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. D. L. Szanton, ed. 1-33. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thompson, Eric C. 2013. In Defence of Southeast Asia: A Case for Methodological Regionalism. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 1(2):281–302.
- White, Hayden V. 2014. *The Practical Past*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Zalasiewicz, Jan, Colin N. Waters, Mark Williams, Anthony D. Barnosky, Alejandro Cearreta, Paul Crutzen, Erle Ellis, Michael A. Ellis, Ian J. Fairchild, Jacques Grinevald, Peter K. Haff, Irka Hajdas, Reinhold Leinfelder, John McNeill, Eric O. Odada, Clément Poirier, Daniel Richter, Will Steffen, Colin Summerhayes, James P. M. Syvitski, Davor Vidas, Michael Wagreich, Scott L. Wing, Alexander P. Wolfe, Zhisheng An, and Naomi Oreskes. 2015. When Did the Anthropocene Begin? A Mid-Twentieth Century Boundary Level Is Stratigraphically Optimal. *Quaternary International*, 383:196–203.

Received: Jan. 30, 2020; Reviewed: June 16, 2020; Accepted: July 7, 2020