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The Great Derangement: climate change and the unthinkable

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another and across the world. But as Trevor-Roper understood, in his 1957 essay on the general crisis, 'a healthy or inoculated body does not catch even a prevailing disease'.

Another no less important point is that rebellions tend to start at the fringes of a composite state against an attempt to impose uniformity in laws where culture and language are different. Is there not a lesson here for those who seek to establish western democracy in Islamic countries? Will that ever be successful in a tribal Afghanistan? India is confronting insurgency in most of its tribal areas of the North East for the past 70 years after independence in spite of the self-governance given to them through autonomous tribal councils with constitutional protection. The division of India into linguistic states in 1957 was itself born out of the need to accommodate language-specific needs of the people.

The author has not adequately dealt with the return of peace in the last decade of the seventeenth century. The weather did not improve dramatically as there were cold spells in the last two decades of the century. One significant observation of the author is that

> the major revolts almost all broke out in a period of unparalleled climatic adversity, notably when a blocked climate produced either prolonged precipitation and cool weather or prolonged drought. (1618–1623, 1629–1632, 1639–1643, 1647–1650, 1657–1658 and 1694–1696)

Yet relative peace returned to Europe. This may have been through the exhaustion of decades of conflicts resulting in mass casualties, deaths from starvation and disease that reduced the population in all these countries. The states were also more responsive to the needs of the people. Taxation was reduced. Governments increased public health measures and help for the poor. These steps were taken in all countries including China and India. It is interesting to note that Emeric Cruce proposed as early as 1623 to have an international assembly of ambassadors to whom sovereigns could present their differences for resolution, a kind of forerunner of the United Nations (p. 444).

Parker sees for our world parallels about past climate change and its effects. There is, firstly, a need to have reserves, improve communications, provide support to all the needy and avoid conflicts. Secondly, the state has to reconcile its role with the right to individual freedom, as that is what will get affected in emergencies when it acts with full vigour. This is a fascinating book that every politician and bureaucrat should read to see in past mistakes things that must be avoided. As world buffer stocks of food grains are under pressure, we cannot be sanguine.

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The Great Derangement: climate change and the unthinkable, by Amitav Ghosh, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 2016, 196 pp., $22 (cloth), ISBN 9780226323039

Like most literature about climate change and its implications, this book is a distressing reminder that without urgent, sustained, universal and drastic changes in human behaviour, luckless survivors will face almost unfathomable horrors. Amitav Ghosh is a celebrated writer and climate change activist. He has a unique focus and in *Part I: Stories*, his longest chapter, he strikes out by indicting the literary community, himself included, for its collective failure to claim climate change as the 'principal preoccupation' of serious novels.

Why is this, he demands? Are we deranged?

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In a substantially altered world, when sea-level rise has swallowed the Sundarbans and made cities like Kolkata, New York, and Bangkok uninhabitable, when readers and museum-goers turn to the art and literature of our time, will they not look, first and most urgently, for traces and portents of the altered world of their inheritance? And when they fail to find them, what should they – what can they – do other than conclude that ours was a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight? (p. 11)

What else can these survivors do, he argues, but recast our era as The Great Derangement?

This plea astonished me because it suggested a faint hope I'd long ago abandoned, and it also prompted my only criticism of Ghosh's essays. To me, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, a standout of post-apocalyptic fiction, is the likeliest future for survivors of monstrous natural events triggered by climate change perhaps accompanied by nuclear interference in the natural order. So no matter how hard I tried, I could not believe Ghosh's vision of these folks as 'readers and museum-goers' seeking to understand how today's writers concealed the realities that inevitably led to their descendants' terrifyingly bleak world.

Despite this, *Stories* is a fascinating literary meditation about the nature and tenets of fiction and science fiction including western classics as well as less familiar masterpieces from around the world. In this context, Ghosh examines the 'customary frames that literature has applied to "Nature"' (p. 32) and concludes, with sadness, that climate change events are too powerful, grotesque, dangerous and accusatory to be wrestled into the fine and refined language of literary fiction. Even essential vocabulary is unlovely. Words like naphtha, bitumen, petroleum, tar, fossil fuels evoke repellent sensations. Ghosh's tentative conclusion is that new hybrid literary forms will emerge, that alter the very act of reading.

Ghosh also deplores his failure to tackle climate change in his own novels, and recounts a personal incident involving his mother, his personal epiphany that like 'the vast majority of human beings,' (p. 54) his life is guided not by reason but 'the inertia of habitual motion (p. 54).' The only exceptions are tiny numbers of monomaniacal fanatics 'who appear to be on the borderline of lunacy' (p. 54) yet seem able and willing to take desperately needed action and to make necessary changes.

Part II: History begins by identifying capitalism as a principal driver of climate change. But Ghosh broadens and deepens the discussion away from the usual Eurocentricism with this caution: 'the continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it (p. 87).' This leads to staggeringly stark scenarios including these: in Pakistan, salt water has already swallowed up over a million acres of agricultural land, because the Indus has been so exploited that it no longer reaches the sea. In India, rising sea levels could inundate six thousand square kilometers¸ much of it the country`s most fertile and may force the migration of 50 million people and, in Bangladesh, 75 million. One quarter of India's arable land is desertifying; in China, home to seven percent of the world's arable land, desertification already causes direct annual losses of $65 billion (p. 89).

Ghosh emphasizes Asia's accelerating water crisis because 47% of the world's population live there, and so the crucial difference between the drying up of the US's Ogallala Aquifer and those of north China is that only 2 million people depend on the Ogallala, but 214 million people depend on China's. Ghosh does not mention the South to North Water Diversion scheme, intended to change dependence on groundwater in the North and to reduce its aridity. He cites these figures (p. 90) only to emphasize the relative impacts of the two dams on dependent populations.

These sheer numbers are only one part of the global warming crisis. Ghosh underscores how, beginning in the 1980s, Asia's expanding industrialization actually 'brought the climate crisis

to a head (p. 91) [as] the only continent where the magnitudes of population are such that they can literally move the planet (p. 92).' Asia's reality makes it plain that

> every family in the world cannot have two cars, a washing machine, and a refrigerator … because humanity would asphyxiate in the process. Asia has also laid bare, through its own silence, the silences that are now ever more plainly evident at the heart of global systems of governance. (p. 92f)

Back in 1928, Gandhi anticipated this and warned that if India's 300 millions industrialized as the West had, 'it would strip the world bare like locusts (p. 111).' Nearly fifty years later, Burmese statesman U Thant lamented the 'smog across our poisoned waters' because we 'ran out of foresight and air and food and water and ideas [and] went on playing politics' until the world collapsed (p. 113).

It seems extraordinary that the publishers state: 'Not for sale in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Maldive Islands, Bangladesh, Burma/Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.' Is this to prevent these vulnerable countries from being horrified? Surely it cannot be that the publishers intend to arouse such interest that people smuggle the book into South Asia in order to subvert complacent governments!

Ghosh is distraught and perplexed about the cultural world's inertia or inability to focus on climate change, but he knows whom to blame for its occurrence. Every human being who ever lived has contributed to climate change which is also 'the terminus of history,' (p. 115) he writes. Climate change events – floods, hurricanes, desertification – are 'the distillations of all of human history: they express the entirety of our being over time (p. 115).'

Part III: Politics returns to Ghosh's earlier ruminations about the astonishing failure of the creative community to own and tackle climate change i.e. the earth and its atmosphere as a compelling (not to say urgent and crucial) subject. Only a tiny, noble group of writers (including J.G. Ballard, Margaret Atwood, Kurt Vonnegut, Barbara Kingsolver, Doris Lessing, Cormac McCarthy, Ian McEwan and T. Coraghessan Boyle) has confronted or at least evoked something of the changing world. Ghosh includes himself among artists who, up till now, conveyed a pervasive uneasiness and sense of apocalyptic doom without incorporating the particulars such as surging carbon emissions.

He observes with regret that climate change has made few inroads as a political issue in South Asia, compared to questions of identity such as religion, caste and gender rights. Is this because the purpose of politics, like fiction, is conceived of as individual rather than collective moral adventure? Are we inhabitants of the Great Derangement mired – Ghosh uses the word 'trapped' (p. 135) – in an individualizing imaginary?

Rather than ignore climate change, Ghosh describes how in the Anglosphere, especially the United States, determined deniers and vigorous activists bat the issue back and forth between them. Here, the overriding importance of self-definition leads many politicians to link strategies to restrain or battle climate change as attacks on 'our way of life' (p. 137). This is the common default argument against doing anything that might affect it, such as reducing oil, etc. And so the mad carrousel continues – oil-fuelled, endlessly consuming – making the debate more political than practical, as it is in Europe, or desperate, as in Maldives and Bangladesh. (Spokespeople for the Caribbean nations felled by recent hurricanes are now imploring the outside world for help in taking action to restrain climate change in that same language of desperation.)

Ironically, Ghosh notes, amidst American climate change deniers that include the White House, the Pentagon is the major holdout and funder of scientific studies, because American military strategists know that climate change is the US Pacific Region's biggest security threat and what is likeliest to 'cripple the security environment,' (p. 139.) in the words of Admiral Samuel J. Jocklear III, then head of the US Pacific Command. In testimony to the Senate in 2013, James Clapper, then director of US intelligence, was more specific: 'extreme weather events (floods, droughts, heave waves) will increasingly disrupt food and energy markets, exacerbating state

weakness, forcing human migrations, and triggering riots, civil disobedience, and vandalism (p. 140).'

Its military, America's single biggest consumer of fossil fuels, now actively seeks and invests in alternative energy sources. Ought we not to applaud this? Perhaps, with one-handed clapping, because Ghosh points out how that military has studied all aspects of climate change activism and appropriated its language and tactics, uniting neo-securities with the neo-liberal economics that drive relentless consumerism.

Which is why the seemingly unthinkable – billions of people in Asia, Africa and elsewhere doomed by the inexorable effects of climate change aka the 'politics of the armed lifeboat' (p. 144) – may be deemed acceptable in the context of free market ideology. When (non-western) human life is weighed against that ideology – for example, Canada, the US and Australia needing to cut their emissions by at least 90% – almost certainly ideology will prevail.

Yet even in this catastrophic scenario, Ghosh finds a ray of light and, surprisingly, it is Pope Francis' encyclical letter, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home,* which he contrasts favourably with the Paris Agreement on climate change. Both are published in 2015 and are rooted in an acceptance of the science of climate change. But the Agreement's eighteen page Proposal consists of two torturously-constructed sentences with 140 numbered clauses and six sections, 'thousands of words separated by innumerable colons, semicolons, and commas and only a single, lonely pair of full stops … a work of extraordinary compositional virtuosity (p. 152).' On the same page he also refers to 'the giddy virtuosity of the text'.

Unsurprisingly, the Agreement's goals, notably limiting the rise in global mean temperatures to 1.5 C, are impossible, and its pledges non-committal, as evidenced by its wishy-washy reference to climate change as 'a common concern for humankind,' the best authors comfortably positioned far from the poor and unfamiliar with their problems could come up with.

Poverty and justice, however, are Pope Francis' main concerns, and he reiterates 'how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.' His *Laudato Si* is 'fiercely critical' of neo-liberalism's economic credo of perpetual growth, and attacks the social implications of that credo: 'Francis [of Assisi] helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology and take us to the heart of what it is to be human (p. 155).'

The Great Derangement is a scalding analysis of the cataclysmic future that surely awaits us but it concludes with no real answer to Ghosh's query: Are we deranged? Or are we just paralysed by either impotence or inertia or horror or terror? Because surely we do understand what lies ahead for the billions of people who share this contaminated, depleted, and destroyed planet. Perhaps that horror and terror are so overwhelming that they are the answers to Ghosh's pleas as to why the creative community has failed to wrestle it into their art.

During the recent Hurricane Irma, embattled scientists tweeted their concerns about climate change and its impact on hurricane. Michael E. Mann tweeted: '#Irma's rapid intensification to a cat 5 monster benefited from unusually warm tropical Atlantic ocean temperatures, favored by climate change.' Peter Gleick was openly defiant 'Some don't like scientists talking re #climate change during disasters, so before #Irma strikes: Caribbean water temps are abnormally high.' To me, these tweets could be plotlines for the as yet unwritten short stories or novels Ghosh's bruising and brilliant book so powerfully mourns.

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