Book Review

No Other Planet: Utopian Visions for a Climate-Changed World

Author: Mathias Thaler

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The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable

Author: Amitav Ghosh

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These two books exemplify supreme efforts at intellectual engagement with climate crisis and ecological grief, on the part of Thaler as a political theorist and Ghosh as a celebrated novelist, respectively.

Economics students and teachers need to read these books to check out anew on their reflexivity in relation to "an uncertain and risky future". The refreshing reward of doing so is the realization that "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" as Ghosh underlines; and that as such as Thaler insists, we need to explore "social dreaming" or "education of the desire". It is about "alternative ways of being and living" on planet earth. It "can cater to a multiplicity of goals, from the offering of consolation to the drafting of concrete plans for alternative worlds." It entails interdisciplinarity in our outlook by our acquaintance with findings from political theory, utopian studies and the environmental humanities. To put it differently, both the writers call for creative nonfiction to "provide guidance to our being in the world: the sense of

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reality and the sense of possibility"—a creative nonfiction that carefully penetrates three fault lines of utopianism: indeterminacy, wishful thinking and defeatism. Socio-economic-political theories will not suffice. Speculative fiction is also invariably and most importantly required to find light to dispel the darkness of the climate-changed world.

Amitav Ghosh is among the very best writers in the world. Reading him is a wonderful joy to be felt while conjuring alternative scenarios of hope and fear, of what is yet to come. It amounts to a weird or eerie excitement of simultaneously navigating what is to be ingested and what is to be excreted in seeking alternatives for the better, so to say. The point of departure for him is Great Acceleration in human activity since the mid-20th century resulting in acceleration of carbon emissions, and the associated derangement in terms of collective inability to set right the climate-changed world.

Part I of his book constitutes stories on living in the time of global warming or climate-changed world. Some hard-hitting realizations are as follows. The uncanny weather events of this time—flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spells of unprecedented head, sudden landslides, raging torrents pouring down from breached glacial lakes, tsunamis, storm surges and freakish tornadoes—have apparently a very high degree of improbability in that "they are not easily accommodated in the deliberately prosaic world of serious prose fiction…Poetry on the other hand, has long had an intimate relationship with (such) climatic events." Also, the weather events that occur in surrealist and magical realist novels are actually happening on this earth, at this time. They are overwhelmingly, urgently and astoundingly real. Their uncanniness "lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognize something we had turned away from: that is to say, the presence and proximity of non-human interlocutors."There is no point in still clinging to the belief that "highly improbable events belong not in the real world but in fantasy." Even if we do not hold such beliefs, there is a serious problem. Our lives are not ruled by reason. Inertia of habitual motion rules the roost: "This is indeed the condition of the vast majority of human beings, which is why very few of us will be able to adapt to global warming if it is left to us, as individuals, to make the necessary changes; those who will uproot themselves and make the right preparations are precisely those obsessed monomaniacs who appear to be on the borderline of lunacy…(also)…there exist few polities or public institutions that are capable of implementing, or even contemplating, a

managed retreat from vulnerable locations. For most governments and politicians, as for most of us as individuals, to leave the places that are linked to our memories and attachments, to abandon the homes that have given our lives roots, stability and meaning, is nothing short of unthinkable." Also to be noted is the habit of mind integral to the gradualist bourgeois life (with predilection for settlements near water bodies) that spread through imperialism and colonialism. This mindset breaks "problems into smaller and smaller puzzles until a solution presented itself. This is a way of thinking that deliberately excludes things and forces ('externalities') that lie beyond the horizon of the matter at hand: it is a perspective that renders the interconnectedness of Gaia unthinkable." So, the deathly consequences of climate change would be too much to bear despite the warnings and forebodings of the Cassandras of climate science. Furthermore, now that "global warming is in every sense a collective predicament, humanity finds itself in the thrall of a dominant culture in which the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics and literature alike."

Part II of Ghosh's book is the best reading, to me. It is the history of carbon economy that I have not fully known. The takeaways are as follows. The discourse on global warming is largely Eurocentric. Modernities engendered in Asia (e.g. in China, India and Burma) too are responsible for global warming. Of course, these modernities were scuttled by the forces of imperialism and colonialism.

In light of this, it is now apt and accurate to consider global warming as the unintended consequence of the totality of human actions everywhere on the planet—"common but differentiated responsibilities" a la Paris climate change negotiations of 2015. Having said this, there are two undisputable realisations. First, Asia's population is so large as to vastly amplify the devastation of global warming. Secondly, "the patterns of life that modernity engenders can only be practised by a small minority of the world's population. Asia's historical experience demonstrates that our planet will not allow these patterns of living to be adopted by every human being. Every family in the world cannot have two cars, a washing machine and a refrigerator—not because of technical or economic limitations but because humanity would asphyxiate in the process."

In Part III, Ghosh meditates on climate politics by bemoaning the literary mainstream's and intelligentsia's unawareness of the climate crisis on our doorstep. "Today everybody

with a computer and a web connection is an activist… (but) politicization has not translated into a wider engagement with the crisis of climate change." In South Asia, for example, climate change has not resulted in an outpouring of resisting passion. "Instead, political energy has increasingly come to be focussed on issues that relate, in one way or another, to questions of identity: religion, caste, ethnicity, language, gender rights and so on." Moreover, the scale of climate change is such that individual ethical choices will make little difference unless certain collective decisions are taken and acted upon—"Climate change is a wicked problem. One of its wickedest aspects is that it may require us to abandon some of our most treasured ideas about political virtue: for example, 'be the change you want to see'. What we need instead is to find a way out of the individualizing imaginary in which we are trapped."

Ghosh proceeds further to deal with intriguing and cunning political moves on the part of governments, corporations and military establishments and other dramatis personae in the Global North (esp. Anglo sphere led by the US) that militate in favour of the continuance of the status quo. And he arrives at this conclusion: "…we live in a world that has been profoundly shaped by empire and its disparities. Differentials of power between and within nations are probably greater today than they have ever been. These differentials are, in turn, closely related to carbon emissions. The distribution of power in the world therefore lies at the core of the climate crisis. This is indeed one of the greatest obstacles to mitigatory action, and all the more so because it remains largely unacknowledged." In the Global South, by contrast, because the poor and the disempowered and not the middle classes and political elites who will bear the brunt of the suffering, it may be able "to force rich countries to make greater concessions merely by absorbing the impacts of climate change, at no matter what cost."

International negotiations for climate adaptation are sabotaged by corporations, entrepreneurs and public officials. They are only concerned about enriching themselves. They have also become extraordinarily skilled in surveilling and thwarting environmental activists.

All this sounds very bleak and cynical. Hope lies in the growing involvement of religious groups and leaders (e.g. Pope Francis) along with popular movements in the politics of climate change, as the formal political structures of our time are incapable of confronting

the crisis on their own. Authentic hope lies in universally discarding the unending enchantment with modernity and the irrational confidence in progress and human abilities through the ever-shrinking time horizon of the climate crisis. A vision, at once new and ancient, of rediscovering human kinship with other beings is required.

It is in this backdrop, especially of political stalemate to effectively deal with climate change, that Mathias Thaler's contribution is valuable. Thaler should, therefore, be read after reading Ghosh. He reinforces the idea that it is we humans who need to be undone and remade in order to reinvent reality to be different from what the climate disaster portends it to be. Thaler's book, based on close to 1000 references, is tougher to grasp than Ghosh's.

Mathias Thaler reckons with utopianism as "the education of a desire for being and living otherwise" and argues that "anti-perfectionist utopias embody forms of social dreaming that can educate our desire for things to be otherwise." Utopias prompt us to the world anew by disrupting habitual patterns of lived experience that hold sway over our normal modes of existence. They kick-start emancipatory action by outlining viable pathways into a future freed from the limitations of the past and present but they are entailed by the risk of collapsing into wishful thinking, downplaying or neglecting the obstacles that systemic transformations always have to surpass. Dystopias, by contrast, can issue warnings about existential perils so much so as to trap us in fatalism.

All utopias are Janus-faced. Remodelling our planetary existence is accompanied by the shadow of failure. So, we need to investigate what the specific pitfalls of utopian projects are. We also need to investigate what exactly it means to fail in educating our desire for alternative ways of being and living.

Suppose we take the Gaia hypothesis of planet earth as a living agent and describe it as a raging entity that enacts brutal retaliation for the harm done to it, then it may have the unintended consequence of leaving the reader in the dark about what should concretely be done about our climate-changed world, here and now.

On the other hand, if we are attracted to eco-modernism based on the notion that science and technology can be harnessed to elevate humanity beyond the current impasse, then we celebrate actual discoveries and inventions, from carbon capture to geo-engineering,

that simply need to be optimised to overcome global warming. This is the 'decoupling' idea of emancipating humanity from its resource reliance on ecological processes. We need to investigate if this is wishful thinking.

Exploring the intricacies of social dreaming exposes us to the uncertainty, contingency and complexity of human action given that humanity is internally too diverse and too conflicted to be considered a homogeneous actor. All theories and stories of utopianism can be analysed and will have to be accepted as a mixture of hopes and wishes as also fear and despair. In the process, we become adept at "perceiving both the successes and failures of utopian projects as temporary stations on a continuous, yet rocky journey". Our endeavour is nothing but experimental full of promises and disappointments.

In this realm between fatalism and wishful thinking, the task of political theory is to fuse together a sober realism with the radical imagination and enhance understanding, evaluation and orientation. And we can judge specific expressions of social dreaming in light of their suitability to a specific moment in time.

Thus, Thaler's argumentation is based on the assumption that "utopianism is pervaded by a fundamental tension: the education of our desire for better ways of being and living is torn between the push to negate and dissolve reality and the magnetic pull of the world as we know it…only if we devote ourselves to keeping the tension between these two poles alive, will we be prepared to properly face up to the enormity of the challenges awaiting us" of reinventing reality of" thriving together with all other beings on this planet that is like no other"!

Now, the problem with Thaler's argumentation is that the experimental endeavour on the above lines may not materialise and save us during the ever-shrinking time horizon of the climate crisis. It is better for us, as Ghosh emphasises, to be with the late Pope Francis' critique of the Anthropocene era and eventually pray. Human freedom is not limitless. And culture and nature should not be separate. This is the pellucid understanding that should guide us in reinventing reality, not the 2015 Paris Agreement's absolutely useless rhetoric.

Reference

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