
The Posthuman Turn: Implications on Historical Theory and Methodology

Rommel A. Curaming
University of Brunei Darussalam, Brunei

That we live under a posthuman condition is a talking point that has become increasingly common, at least among scholars. This era is supposed to be characterized, among others, by the de-centering or de-privileging of human beings in the scheme of things. Ostensibly it is a response to the excessive arrogance of humanism (Western version, that is), as exemplified for instance in declaration attributed to Protagoras that “Man is the measure of all things” (Pepperell, 2003). For centuries this attitude had encouraged, gradually initially but exponentially over the past hundred years, humans to recognize no barrier in pursuit of control or manipulation of nature and of progress in all spheres.¹ It licensed humans to do whatever they want in the process of which nature was altered or destroyed and many problems were created. The rise to prominence in the past decade of the idea of the Anthropocene foregrounds the gravity of the situation. Anthropocene encapsulates the idea that the human impact on earth has already reached the level of a geological force with catastrophic impacts, such as global warming. It has lent posthumanism an extraordinary salience beyond the sphere of the philosophical. The urgency for action it entails has prompted an increasing number of scholars—historians and philosophers among them—to raise alarm over this matter and in response proposed various measures, including a fundamental shift in mindset of values away from human-centrism.

In other disciplines such as philosophy, literature and social studies of science, Anthropocene and/or posthumanism had begun to be talked about earlier on. In history, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s article, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”(2009) raised provocative points and triggered animated discussion, among others, on the possible role of the modern, human-centric historical mindset in facilitating the process leading to Anthropocene (Emmett & Lekan, 2016; Moore, 2016a). The salience of this article may be glimpsed in the fact that it was translated into several languages and has become the main subject of organized workshops. The complexity of Chakrabarty’s argument requires a lengthy explication. For the purpose of this conference paper, however, I shall focus only on aspects that are germane to the arguments being developed

1. The notion of “Great Acceleration” coined by Geological Society drives home this point.

here. According to Chakrabarty, the idea of 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). Zoltan Simon (2017) articulates similar point in these words:

“(T)he sudden occurrence of a novelty that is not the result of a continuous long-term development that originates in the deep past... 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.”

Chakarabarty’s proposal is complex and thus I cannot cover it adequately here, but a crucial element in it is his call for a form of deep history, or species history, a history of life (including other life forms) rather than just life history or history of humans (Chakrabarty 2009; 2016). So far it is not yet clear to me how this kind of history might look like, and how the notion of human subjectivity, which was hitherto central or paramount in conventional humanist history, would play out in the proposed scheme, but the impression I’ve got was that the kind of history that is relevant in Anthropocenic age entails a rethinking of the nature of history as such. My argument is two-fold: Anthropocene does indeed have implications on history though Chakrabarty may have exaggerated such implications and that the implications are uneven depending on which facet of history we are we talking about.

Facets of History

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 to history itself within the parameter that privileges the academic history and professional historians and sidelines or downplays history’s other facets. Perhaps as indication of the high-level of respect or esteem academic historians enjoy among the socio-politically influential groups in society (political and intellectual elites) as well as common people, the historians’

position elicit a broad if not universal concurrence among them. Other people's idea of the past which do not conform closely to the requirements of scholarly history is often called by various derogatory or dismissive names such as legend, folklore, gossip, hearsay, popular history, "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 why the common tendency to conflate what happened in the past with what can be read in history books written 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, in addition between historians and non-historians particularly in the era fake news, but so far, any attempt to adjudicate between competing sides resorts to measures or procedures sanctioned by, and also favor, the scholarly class.

Understanding the differentiated implications of posthumanism on history requires disaggregating history's various facets and pin down exactly which one or two in fact we refer to. It is important to do this because, as I argue in this paper, the implications of posthumanism on history depends on different facets. I can identify at least five facets of history. First, history as knowledge about the past. It is produced (usually in written form) by trained historians as well as 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 historical past, which may be distinguished from practical past (more on this idea below). It is the product of historians' and other peoples' attempt to re-construct what happened based on available evidences. As the pool of evidence is likely to be incomplete with past events not leaving traces that are usable as evidence, or these traces were destroyed either by natural or man-made means, or they simply remain hidden and are waiting for discovery, written academic history is tentative. It could change depending on the latest acceptable interpretation of existing body of evidences.

The second facet of history is, for lack of better term, I'd call actual history. Referring to the totality of everything—big and small, significant or not from human standpoint—that happened in the past, the idea of actual idea is intuitively simple or common sensical, but due to the triumph of the "scientific", evidence-based history since the 19th century, invoking this idea could raise eyebrows among historians. By definition, this history is fixed (as opposed to tentative), complete and accurate. As a past that is forever gone, it cannot be changed anymore. Admittedly, it is a metaphysical conception of the past. It is a past that only an absolute all-knowing being (granting there is such a being) knows in its entirety. Invoking an absolute, metaphysical, extra-human standpoint is admittedly out of the purview of the legitimate historical procedures, but I believe this conceptual decision is necessary to flag the discrepancy between the representation (history as knowledge) and the represented (actual history). Historians know very well about this discrepancy, but they tend to be coy about it, playing it down before the public, which results in the widespread perception that equates or conflates written academic history to actual history. By highlighting

the potential discrepancy between the actual and written history, I underscore the limits of any historical representation and thus opens up a pathway to re-examining the rupture between the accepted and the acceptable parameters of historical practice. 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 the posthumanist history that is in the making. In other words, accommodating the idea of actual history is in itself an important implication of the posthuman condition.

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' analytic 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. This is rather tricky because all experience are by strict definition happening in the present. The moment it passes and moves in the domain of the past, or history, what is left is only what is remembered of it, the memory of this experience. And what is remember of this experience could be significantly different from the experience itself. This is precisely the reason for making memory as the fifth, and last to be covered here, important facet of history. Often dismissed or even denigrated by some professional historians as “mere” memory, as opposed, implicitly, to ‘real’ history, owing to well-known attribute of being unreliable or inaccurate, memory is in fact very important because what one remembers, regardless of whether it is true or false, are ones that affect 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 are they are concerned, this is their history. Referring back to Oakeshott's classification, history as memory false under notion of practical past, which was revisited by Hayden White (2011) more recently.

Implications

The different facets of history noted above seem to have a differential relationship with posthumanism as it relates to anthropocene. The notion of Anthropocene appears to have no analytic impact on the ideas of actual history and history as experience as by definition they already happened. Regardless of the shift in mindset, such as what was prompted by the notion of Anthropocene, 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 already happened. 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 just 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.

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 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 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 individuals and groups interpretation of their past and present life. Without a future to envision, things that people normally take for granted or value less now in favor of an aspiration for something in the future, are likely to assume much greater importance. And things they did or did not do in the past in line with the future vision may also assume a different meaning, a sense of loss or regret rather than achievement, or vice versa. But this point is hardly consequential from posthumanism. As humans are endowed with mind, memory is quintessentially human-centric, and thus just like the two previous facets, actual and experiential history, the posthuman turn may not have an appreciable impact on history a personal memory. But the notion of collective or social memory is different. As the idea of Anthropocene permeates social or collective consciousness, it will simultaneously affect individual thinking and behavior, as in fact has been happening in still limited and uneven but expanding scale across the world.

For threats in the future not as shockingly immediate as the hypothetical case noted above, such as, for instance, Anthropocene and climate change, it seems not likely to generate the same effects among many people. I doubt people will drastically re-order their priorities or invert the hierarchy of their values they upheld. 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 very distant future, if at all. People tend to ignore things if they are not truly imminent, and they go on with their lives as usual. The awareness of this human tendency is perhaps the reason why Chakrabarty (2009) exaggerated the immediacy of the supposedly dire consequence of 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, e.g. Moore (2015, 2016)) in reaching the tipping point that is Anthropocene. Insofar 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 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 spend some time to scrutinize his ideas in some detail.

Is there really a need for a fundamental change in the way history is written, as averred by Chakrabarty? So far it remains unclear to me how deep history or species history that he favors as alternative look like, but what is clear is that he bats for 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 process nurtures and justifies the excessive self-serving pursuit of human interest at the expense of nature to the point Anthropocene is reached. A cursory glance at development of knowledge about the past across various cultures—not just the modern Euro-American historical tradition we are accustomed to—reveals that a non-human centric history is very much alive in spheres outside of, beyond, or even before, the modern, historical scholarship. Religious and spiritual traditions or 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 non-human centric ethos and ideas of the past and the future. Francesca Ferrando (2016) appears spot on 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 posthumanism 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 since the past two centuries?

Ferrando's point flags 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 background who struggle on daily basis living in developing countries and perhaps due to 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 trajectory as they envision the future is a luxury for many people even in an era of unprecedented wealth such now. Such kind of historical sensibility seems to be a preserve of those endowed with 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 up to now. The category “human” in the notion of human-centric historical consciousness is simply too big or too generalized to encapsulate the complexity of real people on the ground.

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, long *durée* and the multi-time scale (including geological time) approaches to historical analysis. Human hardly occupy a privileged position there. But it ought to be noted that even in non-human centric approaches, the fact that historians are humans and members of academic or professional community with own interests to pursue and promote, and they write with human audience in mind, 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.

The long-existing 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, and 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 were sidelined or obscured by the rise of the hegemonic homocentric history.

One area in which posthumanism 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, which has always been 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 need of the ever expanding human population. Jason Moore argued that human-made ideas and practice of capitalism has rendered nature cheap for human exploitation. By locating humans as equal to other living creature, the calculation of importance will have to be corresponding re-calibrated. The human-centric attribution of causality in historical explanation will also have to be adjusted, along with the admission that understanding does not mean exclusively in human terms. Consciousness is hardly exclusive to human mind, as Pepperell (2003) argues.

Conclusion

The epoch-making condition captured by the term Anthropocene is viewed by some scholars as foregrounding the posthuman 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’ forceful articulation of the serious implications of Anthropocene exemplifies this effort. While the notion of 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 to make dent on it. The unsavory implications of his suggestion include the collectivization of responsibility for the problem that certain groups which are small in number but have so much political and economic power—the rich nations, greedy capitalists and industrialist—had greater responsibility for. With their responsibility inadvertently absolved by the “entire humankind”, there is a danger they—who have the most political and economic resources to make things happen--would not move decisively enough to address the problem simply because it’s everyone’s responsibility. Worse if they deny that there is a crisis at all, as what Trump and many Republicans have actually done.

Despite doubts raised on Chakrabarty’s analysis, and Anthropocene may not be the best case to illustrate the need to rethink history, the posthuman condition that Anthropocene helped to highlight does carry important implications for history. These implications operate unevenly depending on different facets of history, which is why the multi-faceted nature of history needs to be underscored. It misleads to assume that the kind of history or form of historical sensibility favored by academic historians are the same as those of common people to whom it is the “practical past”—personal, affective, may be inaccurate but useful for their purpose—that matters. Serious research needs to be undertaken on how common people, particularly those who are at the margin (politically, economically, socially, culturally, etc.) actually practice historical mindfulness. Do disempowered or marginalized think historically in the same way as encapsulated in human-centric, human-driven modern historical consciousness? Aware of the possible differentiation, we shall be in better position to tailor to their characteristics whatever program or initiative we intend to pursue. As suggested by a professor from Thailand who was one of plenary speakers, what we need is a “streetwise humanities”.

The adjustments that need to be carried out to realize a posthumanist history are not all new. We can draw from the pool of historiographic knowledge both from the 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 possibly from scratch is how historians would undertake historical interpretations by employing value-system or value-assessment that does not privilege humans and allot equal value for the interests of other life forms. This is going to be a challenging task as it entails re-examination of many fundamental presuppositions that we have held from time immemorial. It will also mean re-formulation of the rules on assessing historical evidence and what qualifies as acceptable historical sources. At 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 that end of history as we know it. Alternatively, one can say that this is reclaiming history that we have abandoned in the past, or it is merely acknowledging openly the existence of plural histories that exist side-by-side on daily basis.

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