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## **The Anthropocene as a Negative Universal History**

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### **Abstract**

The Anthropocene has been promoted as a potential geological periodization but what kind of history does it imply? It chronicles cumulative social interventions into planetary forces. Its ultimate stakes may well be the parametric conditions of our species survival. In this article, I argue that the Anthropocene compels us to rethink the tradition of universal history. Enlightenment thinkers sought to discern a continuous history of humankind tending toward an upward development. Adorno writes for disappointed times. For him, fragments of history cohere not in species advancement but in catastrophe. What was catastrophic for Adorno remains so for us: modes of production that dominate nature. Despite this, I argue that we should remain wary of the politics of catastrophe. The notion that we are on a course of destruction primes us for knee-jerk policy responses, cynical political co-option or despairing resignation. Adorno navigates a form of history that undercuts the totalizing ambitions of the tradition from which it springs. Negative universal history models ways of attending to the overall forces sweeping the planet precisely in their uneven, local manifestations.

### **Keywords**

Anthropocene, environmental political theory, environmental history, Universal History, Dipesh Chakrabarty

### 1.

“The project of universal history does not come to an end. It begins again somewhere else.”<sup>1</sup> This was the conclusion of Susan Buck-Morss’ “Hegel, Haiti and Universal history.” The suggestion that universal history breaks off in one site and begins again elsewhere militates against its traditional connotations as a continuous process. Both in its formulation as Hegelian world history and in Kant’s cosmopolitan vision, a universal history of egalitarian freedom was envisaged as a red thread winding its way unbroken through the contingencies of history. Haphazard events and particular life stories were meant to flush with meaning through their connection to a larger whole. The development of the human species towards rational self-determination was the overarching story. In passages redolent of her background as an Adorno scholar, Buck-Morss retrieves but also transforms this old Enlightenment project. Universal history, she suggests, does not unfold as an assured (and Eurocentric) teleology but remains an open-ended task: discontinuous and mobile. Her groundbreaking paper and subsequent book chart the subterranean influence that the slave revolution on Saint-Domingue exerted on Hegel’s master–slave dialectic. Emancipatory aims consciously and practically seized on the island thereafter known as Haiti flow from colonial periphery to the European center. The universal is visible at the edges.

Today, Haiti finds itself in the midst of a new world-historical conjuncture: the Anthropocene. This is the name (widely contested in both scientific and humanities circles)

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 151.

given to a new geological periodization. Human industrial activity is understood to constitute a geological force akin to Milankovitch effects that influence the glacial–interglacial cycles. The intervention of humans in forms of natural history previously thought to be impervious to our actions is related to a family of interlocking problems: ocean acidification, food insecurity, water scarcity, deforestation, soil loss, habitat loss, mass extinction and changing climate patterns. Haiti has routinely topped lists of nations most exposed to the devastating consequences of climate change.<sup>2</sup> The island is directly in the path of a hurricane corridor and is historically vulnerable to floods, with its urban centers located in the alluvial plains of river systems. Once again, Haiti has been cast in the role of forerunner in a new universal story. The Anthropocene is universal insofar as it presents history on a planetary scale whose ultimate stakes are the parametric conditions of our shared species survival. Yet as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, Haiti’s predicament underscores the importance of socioeconomic contributors to climate change vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> The planetary universal plays out through local particulars and world histories that have not been marked uniformly by freedom and equality but colonialism, enslavement and material inequality.

In this essay, I explore how the Anthropocene may be understood in terms of negative universal history. I will do so by revisiting what Adorno meant when he coined this phrase.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Maplecroft’s Climate Change and Environment Risk Atlas* sourced at [https://www.maplecroft.com/about/news/ccvi\\_2012.html](https://www.maplecroft.com/about/news/ccvi_2012.html).

<sup>3</sup> Tubi, Fischhendler and Feitelson define vulnerability to climate change as being comprised of two basic elements: “impacts (expected damages due to climate change) and adaptive capacity (the ability to adjust to these damages).” Amit Tubi, Itay Fischhendler and Eran Feitelson, “The Effect of Vulnerability on Climate Change Mitigation Policies,” *Global Environmental Change* 22, no 2 (2012): 472.

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What does he retrieve and what does he banish from the enlightenment pursuit of a shared historical path? Negation is not renunciation: it preserves aspects of the thing it criticizes. I show that Adorno negates universal history because he (like many of us) is suspicious of totalizing views from nowhere yet he wants to retain the ability to speculate about the sweeping patterns that unify local problems. The situation of ten million Haitians demands that we think across two registers at once: the bio-geological history of the planet (whose periodizations span tens of millions of years) *and* the localized social histories of capital (500 years). Negative universal history promises to attend to the overall forces sweeping the planet precisely in their uneven, local manifestations. I then argue that Adorno provides a version of universal history that is negative in a further sense. For him, fragments of history cohere not only in progressive species developments but also in catastrophe. What was catastrophic for Adorno, remains so for us: modes of production that dominate nature. I conclude by examining certain implications for our political thinking that follow if we regard the Anthropocene as a new universal history composed of the routine fact of disaster and the liminal strategies that everywhere resist it.

### 2.

Universal history is synonymous with names such as Herder, Kant, Hegel, Schiller and Marx. I will take Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784) as exemplary and use it to highlight four essential features of this tradition before I explore its relevance for the Anthropocene. Firstly, these were schemes for speculative history.<sup>4</sup> The aim

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<sup>4</sup> See Simon Jarvis, "What Is Speculative Thinking?" *Revue Internationale de*

was to discern overall patterns among the data of empirical experience and assist in soothsaying about the future.<sup>5</sup> Kant hoped that by taking a larger view of history's course he might detect regularities in the "confused and irregular" play of human actions.<sup>6</sup> The speculative impulse, given its most full-throated defense by Hegel, dares to collate the ephemera of daily experience and subject history's flotsam to interpretation.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, universal history postulates a collective actor (the species, *Weltgeist*, the proletariat). Kant explains that because of the brevity of individual lives and the capriciousness of subjective motives for action, human history's larger rationality develops "completely only in the species."<sup>8</sup> Universal history refers to across-the-board trends, to populations and epochs rather than individual quirks and exceptional events. Thirdly, the tradition of universal history is positive in a quite ordinary sense. It is optimistic. It envisages a progressive time frame whose singular timeline stretches into the future, inexorably carrying us along. A course of improvement for the species provides solace for individual tribulations. Kant explains that a guiding thread may not only explain the "confused play of things human," it will also open "a consoling prospect into the future" such that "the human species is represented in the remote distance as finally working

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*Philosophie* 58, no 227 (2004): 69–83.

<sup>5</sup> For Kant, a cognition is speculative if it pertains "to an object or concept of an object to which one cannot attain in any experience." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 585.

<sup>6</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," in *Anthropology, History and Education* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108.

<sup>7</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

itself upwards” to fulfill its vocation.<sup>9</sup> Finally, with the exception of Marx, the tradition of universal history takes nature as a point of departure to be overcome. Kant initially likens his ambitions for human historiography to Kepler’s study of determinate laws within the eccentric paths of planets; he wants to find a hidden plan of nature within social affairs. Yet in the course of his argument, the purposiveness of human history will be opposed to that of nature as a realm of necessity. Unlike the natural causes that govern the universe, Kant thinks ours must be a trajectory of distinctly human self-determination. The human “discovered in himself a faculty of choosing for himself a way of living and not being bound to a single one, as other animals are.”<sup>10</sup>

On first blush, the tradition I have just outlined seems ill-suited to describe the route charted by humans in the Anthropocene, where agro-industrial practices endanger the conditions of our own species-life. Universal history is an optimistic, speculative analysis of the movement of social learning and emancipation. More than this, the tradition of universal history has largely opposed itself to those categories of natural history, with which we must now reckon. For Kant, universal history described the struggle of humans to meet their moral destiny of a perfect and just sociability. Environmental nature and animal life, by contrast, was a taken-for-granted background, a constant to be provided for by the planet. Of course, this apparent opposition between social freedom and environment underplays the extent to which the very idea of universal developments sprang out of global

projects to manage nature. The pursuit of a singular global knowledge may be traced back to early botany.<sup>11</sup> European voyages of discovery in the 15th and 16th centuries stimulated interest in the diversity of plants around the world. The folk botanies of Europe could not assimilate the cornucopia of unfamiliar plants described from Asia, Africa and the New World. This inadequacy provoked efforts to arrange botanical miscellany according to a unified system of classification based on the logic of God’s creation or, following evolutionary theory, a singular logic within nature itself. While Kant points to natural lawfulness as a model to reign in the unruly variance of social histories, it is important to observe that from the outset it was the changefulness of what was known about organic nature that compelled the search for global universals.

### 3.

The initial idea for universal social histories was kindled by studies of nature. Our present planetary conjuncture compels the reunion of these two enterprises. Scholars in the humanities have begun to ask: how can the findings of natural scientists working on climate change, ocean acidification and so on, spur us to discern overall patterns within the human–nature relation?<sup>12</sup> To draw out the stakes of this question, let us now consider the prevalent discourse around the Anthropocene in light of the above four features of the German idealist tradition. The point is not to reconcile

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” in *Anthropology, History and Education* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 166.

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<sup>11</sup> See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 90.

<sup>12</sup> See Julia Adeney Thomas, “History and Biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of Scale, Problems of Value,” *American Historical Review* 119, no 5 (2014): 1588; Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Humanities in the Anthropocene: The Crisis of an Enduring Kantian Fable,” *New Literary History* 47 no 2 (2016): 377–397.

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these projects. It is obvious from the last two features of universal history – the postulate of a progressive world course, the overcoming of natural history by social freedom – that Kant’s view of history could not account for socially-induced climate change. My goal is rather to show that even the classical formulation of universal history (prior to Adorno’s modifications) traverses a field of tensions pertinent to current debates around the Anthropocene.

First of all, speculative history is highly resonant in a warming world. Paleoclimatologists take ice core samples of ancient air up to 2.7 million years old.<sup>13</sup> The findings of such research open up a vastly expanded timescale within which the effects of social activities unfurl. Scaling up our imagination and taking a larger view of the particulars of history brings hitherto unperceived global patterns of consumption and production, of flourishing and extinction into view. Political conversations, more attuned to the rhythms of electoral cycles, must now strain to grasp a bio-geological periodization in which coal is in fact a renewable resource (but not for us).<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, there remains an understandable suspicion towards stadial theories of history. So-called universal developments have long privileged the European path as normative and have been complicit with political and epistemic imperialism. As early as the 1990s, Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain described the danger of environmental colonialism – where injunctions to act swiftly for the sake of a supposedly

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<sup>13</sup> Paul Voosen, “2.7-Million-Year-Old Ice Opens Window on Past,” *Science* 357, no. 6352 (2017): 630–631.

<sup>14</sup> Geologist Bryan Lovell, an ex-president of the Geological Society of London, who also worked as an advisor for British Petroleum, makes this point about coal. See Bryan Lovell, *Challenged by Carbon: The Oil Industry and Climate Change* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 75.

common set of interests are a means of perpetuating global inequality.<sup>15</sup> If nothing else, it is clear that a speculative story of planetary change needs to manage the conceptual traffic between earth history and world history. We ought, Dipesh Chakrabarty advises, to take advantage of natural science’s expanded field of view that disposes over one globe without losing sight of the diffuse and unequal power relations of globalization.<sup>16</sup>

Secondly, the Anthropocene has ushered in a return to species-talk.<sup>17</sup> We become geological agents only collectively, as we reach numbers and invent industrial technologies able to impact the planet itself. The very name, Anthropocene, has been dogged by controversy largely because it invokes a common humanity – the anthropos – who either unwittingly caused environmental disaster or now faces it en masse.<sup>18</sup> Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg point out that only a fifth of humanity are historically responsible for most of the emissions of greenhouse gases so far.<sup>19</sup> Advanced capitalist countries

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<sup>15</sup> Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain, *Global Warming in an Unequal World: A Case of Environmental Colonialism* (New Delhi, India: Centre for Science and Environment, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 1 (Autumn 2014): 21–22.

<sup>17</sup> For some examples see Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?” *Ambio* 36, no. 8 (2007): 614; Mark Lynas, *The God Species: How the Planet Can Survive the Age of Humans* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011); Karen Pinkus, “Thinking Diverse Futures from a Carbon Present,” *Symploke* 21 (2013): 196–199; Nigel Clark, “Rock, Life, Fire: Speculative Geophysics and the Anthropocene,” *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 259–276.

<sup>18</sup> See Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin,” *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159–165.

<sup>19</sup> Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, “The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative,” *The Anthropocene Review* 1, no. 1 (2014): 65.

composed 18.8% of world's population but emitted 72.7% of carbon since 1850. Nor do the consequences of rising sea levels fall equally hard on the shoulders of all. As the case of Haiti illustrates, the most vulnerable places are often the most impoverished, and have been historically low emitters. Malm argues that by laying the blame for environmental damage at the foot of universal species traits (for instance, fire or tool-use), scholars who enthusiastically embrace the term "Anthropocene" engage in a fatalistic mystification.<sup>20</sup> Climate change, he points out, is hardly the product of a worldwide collective agent called humankind. It emerged from and is still embroiled within the uneven distribution of energy intensive capitalist modes of production. In his *Lectures on Freedom and History*, Adorno evinces a similar suspicion: "the constitution of humanity as a species amounts to a gigantic public company for the exploitation of nature."<sup>21</sup>

Thirdly, the Anthropocene has popularized a melancholic view of history where extinction rather than abundance is the order of the day. For writers such as Alan Weisman, the horizon that looms before us does not appear the fulfillment of human-centric vocations but rather evokes the distant skies of "a world without us."<sup>22</sup> Consoling Enlightenment narratives of civilizational learning and improvement have not only lost much of their luster, they have also been implicated in the problem. Liberal conceptions of freedom – of free trade and individuals free to pursue their

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<sup>20</sup> Andreas Malm, "Who Lit This Fire? Approaching the History of the Fossil Economy," *Critical Historical Studies* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 215–248.

<sup>21</sup> T. W. Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2006), 45.

<sup>22</sup> Alan Weisman, *The World without Us* (New York: St. Martin's Thomas Dunne Books, 2007), 3–5.

(carbon-intensive) view of the good life – are far from innocent in the great acceleration of post-war emissions. The forms of progress that many 19th century philosophers venerated appears to have set the seal on 21st century environmental calamity. Conversely, we might wonder if now really is the time for a wholesale surrender of aspirational agendas. If the destruction of nature is not a *fait accompli*, an inevitable part of our species makeup, then why banish the prospect of new energies of resistance (such as those that ignited on Haiti in the 1790s)? If the agent of planetary devastation is not humankind as such but inequitable social relations, then it also seems overhasty to entirely set aside our former emancipatory scripts. Certainly, the Anthropocene dashes the old confidence that history unfolds with a plan for the better. In its stead, climate change provides us with a new dilemma: how are we to avoid swapping false consolation for bitter resignation?

Lastly, the new comprehensive planetary stories tell of tremendous environmental destruction yet human history cannot be said to overcome nature as the sphere of necessity. Social forces intrude into natural processes and nature "bites back" in dramatic, often unpredicted ways. Bio-geological patterns have been altered by unintended collective social action. This means that systems long thought governed by natural necessity are in fact changeable. To study this interpenetration of society and nature, the project of universal history will have to abandon idealist presuppositions as to how social freedom unfolds. To break free of the past, Marx advised we should pay close attention to our species' historically changing modes of producing and reproducing ourselves. In *The German Ideology*, he explained that "we know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the

history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist.”<sup>23</sup> Kant proposed global human sociability to be the result of micro-acts of competitive unsociability. Under capitalism, the human–nature dependence that Marx describes has itself proceeded through antagonism. A revived project of universal history for the Anthropocene would be the chronicle of this conflict, its conditions and consequences.

The grand schemas disclosed by climate scientists are composed of irregular and particular social histories. To do both justice requires studies attentive to universals that are revealed at the edges of global circuits, not at the center; the movement of objective social forces rather than one species actor; a trajectory of catastrophe that leaves space for the thought of progress; a speculative history that is thoroughly materialist. From this perspective, Adorno’s historiographical writings of the mid-1960s are interesting. In the course of working through the dilemmas of history in the Anthropocene, Chakrabarty makes an early reference to Adorno.<sup>24</sup> Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* famously sought to unmask how elements of Europe’s parochial histories linger in universal concepts such as the idea of the dignity of the human.<sup>25</sup> It might then be assumed that he would want to at

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 34; also cited in T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (D. Redmond, Trans.) Retrieved from <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>, 208.

<sup>24</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 197–222.

<sup>25</sup> See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

least restrain speculative efforts to map the whole. Yet Chakrabarty advances the thesis that the collective threat of climate crisis is just one such moment wherein universal history has not ended entirely but has begun again somewhere else. “Climate change,” he writes, “poses for us a question of a human collectivity, an us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. [...] It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity, for, unlike a Hegelian universal, it cannot subsume particularities. We may provisionally call it a ‘negative universal history.’” Chakrabarty senses the significance of Adorno’s efforts to retrieve universal history for disappointed times. In *Negative Dialectics* and his 1964–66 *Lectures on History and Freedom*, Adorno perseveres with a materialist philosophy of history but knows that this project cannot remain unchanged following the failure of revolution in the West and after Auschwitz. I turn now to examine the rationale and strategies of Adorno’s negation.

#### 4.

Hegel once wrote that public opinion is “to be respected and despised.”<sup>26</sup> Adorno repurposes this syntax against Hegel’s own speculative project: “universal history is to be construed and denied.”<sup>27</sup> The reasons to deny it are manifold. For Adorno, Hegel’s dialectic of particular and universal is wholly implicated in a disastrous logic that he calls identity thinking. Identity thinking names the equivalence of different things incessantly rehearsed in capitalist exchange, a forcible abstraction tried and tested in the control of natural

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<sup>26</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 355.

<sup>27</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 188.

entities. He explains that “the particular is defined as a mere object belonging to the universal without being able to affect it reciprocally.”<sup>28</sup> To this extent, he sides with positivist critiques of the notion of a continuous history of mankind. The problem with such a totalizing story is that it glances over the interruptions and is cavalier with the facts. Consider Hegel’s schema from the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* that under despotism in Asia one man was free, in the slave owning worlds of Greece and Rome few were free and in the Christian Germanic world, all are (potentially) free.<sup>29</sup> The Eurocentrism of this story is galling. Adorno argues that when one concentrates on the particulars of history it is also false.<sup>30</sup> There is no such stadial continuum. Rather than an onward march, students of history notice recursive spins as traditions once lost are rediscovered. Empirical history is punctuated by cross-cultural collaborations, migrations, and rupture.

Adorno’s criticizes the notion of a continuous history of humankind not only for its *descriptive* disregard for particulars; he contends that it is *unfeeling* towards them. He argues that the theodicean dimensions that Kant identified with the project, its “consoling prospect into the future,” ends up justifying even the most meaningless suffering in the name of the overall propulsion of history (or providence).<sup>31</sup> Adorno points out that, according to Kant, the universal should have restrictions placed on it lest it inflict harm.<sup>32</sup> In universal history, “the self-preserving reason of the individual is

converted into the self-preservation of the species,” this means that “there is an intrinsic temptation for this universality to emancipate itself from the individuals it comprises.”<sup>33</sup> The danger lies not only with the assumption of an overall continuity but the idea that the trend has a positive meaning. From this harmonizing viewpoint, any damage inflicted *en route* is defended on the basis of its inner necessity in pursuit of an ultimate good. Hegel wrote that *Weltgeschichte ist Weltgericht* (“World history is the world’s court of judgment”).<sup>34</sup> He thus stoked the ambitions of writers such as Victor Cousin whose *Introduction to the History of Philosophy* aimed to “pardon victory as necessary and useful” and to “demonstrate the morality of success.”<sup>35</sup> For Adorno, success does not vouch for the morality of an action. In *Negative Dialectics*, he argues that the essential moral demand of materialism is grounded in somatic experience.<sup>36</sup> “Ouch, stop that!” We all know the feeling of pain and, where possible, we should seek to mitigate it. He holds somatic pain to be analogous to unnecessary social ailments. The materialist moral command calls us to attenuate suffering not provide those who may well have produced it with retrospective justification.

As the story of a species, a class, an “us,” universal history invites affective investment in a central protagonist. Adorno rejects the conclusion that the collective subject for whom history barracks must be the victor of that story. Instead, he heeds Benjamin’s call in the *Theses on History* to

<sup>28</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 30.

<sup>29</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 54.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 119.

<sup>32</sup> The reference is likely Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 56.

<sup>33</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 44.

<sup>34</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 371.

<sup>35</sup> Victor Cousin, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, Little and Wilkins, 1832), 282.

<sup>36</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 214–216.



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“brush history against the grain.”<sup>37</sup> Those owed our compassion are not the successful – Leopold von Ranke’s series of emperors, kings and popes – but the legions of those who have suffered and submitted.<sup>38</sup> Theirs is a negative collective identity; they assemble reactively, as the vanquished. Against the evolutionary view of universal history as an accumulation of gains, Adorno sees it from below as a series of disasters. Like Benjamin, he advocates for “the organization of pessimism” such that it refuses contract with fatalistic resignation.<sup>39</sup> By training our historical gaze on the continuity of oppression from the standpoint of its victims, Adorno brings to the fore eruptions of discontinuity, neglected stories and missed opportunities.

The view of history as a continuous path of improvement neglects things that fail to stay the course. It may further justify the subjugation of those things and even identify the good with the victorious. Benjamin was prepared to entirely renounce the project of universal history. In thesis XVII, he wrote that “materialist historiography differs in method more clearly from universal history than from any other kind.”<sup>40</sup> However, Adorno argues that this outright rejection simply misconstrues the tradition. Leaving aside the controversial assumption that Marx’s view of class struggle is not itself a version of universal history, Benjamin’s claim that universal history “musters a mass of data to fill empty, homogenous time” is wrongheaded.<sup>41</sup> As we have seen, Adorno

thinks the danger is rather that universal history is insensitive to the particular facts. Its thinkers view time not as a neutral container for empirical data but as value-laden, the elaboration of a plan for the better. Laboring under this confusion, Benjamin misrecognizes his own project. Far from differing wholesale in method to universal history, Adorno implicates Benjamin’s famous image of a materialist angel of history within it.<sup>42</sup> In sympathy with the lost souls, the derelict particulars, Benjamin’s angel must look at them as a totality. The angel opens its eyes wide in alarm as it watches “one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.”<sup>43</sup> Propelled backward by the storm in its wings, it is able to apprehend history’s singular devastations heaped in a pile. Adorno points out that the effort to find regularities amid historical ruins is itself a work of universalizing speculation.

### 5.

Universals may be criticized as abstractions yet cannot be wholly done away with. This is simply because it is impossible to “think without identifying.”<sup>44</sup> Thought necessarily appeals to universals to locate that which – in a given historical juncture – is thinkable in the thing.<sup>45</sup> This is why Adorno recommends that universal history must be denied but also construed. Against the positivist cult of the facts, Adorno stands with the speculative. To explain patterns

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History” in *Selected Writings* Vol. 4 (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006), 392.

<sup>38</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 92.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism” in *Selected Writings* Vol. 2 (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005), 216.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 396.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

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<sup>42</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 91.

<sup>43</sup> Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 392.

<sup>44</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 90 (trans. modified). T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* Vol. 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), 159.

<sup>45</sup> For a discussion of how Adorno proposes to arrange universals in constellations see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1977), 90–110.

of events, styles of experience, moods of eras, it does not suffice to report how it “really” was.<sup>46</sup> Consider the superstorm that struck New York in 2012. Meteorologist Adam Sobel notes that the track of Hurricane Sandy, as it crashed into the east coast of the United States, was without precedent: never before had a giant hurricane veered sharply westward in the mid-Atlantic.<sup>47</sup> At first, the weather event appears as the quintessence of immediate experience. For many of those who found themselves in New York, one’s life and locality were under threat then and there. Yet the entire terror of Sandy only surfaces when the immediate “fact” of the storm is understood within a larger pattern of socially-induced climate change. Beyond its freak occurrence, Sandy can be comprehended (and the recurrence of similar events potentially resisted) when we locate it within a further “storm of history” in Benjamin’s sense. Sociogenic climate change warms the oceans. Hurricanes draw their energy from deep ocean waters and so intensify at an accelerated rate. As I write, Hurricane Florence is expected to begin its assault on the Carolinas and Super Typhoon Mangkhut is heading toward the Philippines and China. A state of natural emergency has become a new normal.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Adorno gives the poignant example of having one’s house searched in Germany in 1933. At first, the house search appears the quintessence of immediate experience: one’s life and more intimate context are under threat. Yet the true terror of the action only surface when the “fact” of the house search is understood within the greater social movements that give it meaning – changing social structures that had led to the fascist dictatorship, the abolition of legal safeguards under the emergency laws made permanent by the Nazis. Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 19–20.

<sup>47</sup> Adam Sobel, *Storm Surge: Hurricane Sandy, Our Changing Climate, and Extreme Weather of the Past and Future* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> See Kevin Reed, Alyssa Stansfield, Michael Wehner, and Colin Zarzycki, “The human influence on Hurricane Florence,” sourced at <http://www.climatesignals.org/scientific-reports/human-influence-hurricane-florence>.

Universal abstractions are not only a necessary component of thought; they must be construed because they exert real effects. Adorno underlines universal history’s “almost irresistible truth”: we do live in societies where objective structures go above our heads and determine many of the material facts of our existence.<sup>49</sup> Consider the nature/society dualism. We have seen that Marx refigures this cleft as two sides of one integral metabolic relation. Nature is nonetheless a “real abstraction”; its separation from social concerns is ontologically false yet forcefully operative in the world.<sup>50</sup> Jason W. Moore explains that “the separation of the peasant from the land and the symbolic separation of Humans and Nature were a singular process [...] [the abstract category of nature] is fundamental to the cascading symbolic-material transformations of primitive accumulation in the rise of capitalism.”<sup>51</sup> The estrangement of nature is not an ontological truth but a social fact.

A corresponding argument can be made with regard to the resurgence of species discourse in environmental literature. In the course of elaborating the relevance of negative universal history for climate change, Chakrabarty is initially ambivalent about his own venture into species-talk. Energy intensive production is not “inherent to the human species – there was much contingency in transition from wood to coal [...] [if there is a common crisis] we have stumbled into it.”<sup>52</sup> Yet in more recent work, he summons William R. Catton’s idea of humanity’s tendency to “overshoot” its parametric

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<sup>49</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 47.

<sup>50</sup> See the discussion of “real abstraction” in T. W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 31.

<sup>51</sup> Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (London: Verso, 2015), 48.

<sup>52</sup> Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 216.

ecological conditions.<sup>53</sup> The thought is that humans have always been prone to modify our environment in *techne* such that we undermine the operative conditions of our own forms of existence. The path to the fossil economy was laid down when our hominid ancestors once upon a time learned to control fire. From the viewpoint of constructing a negative universal history, this appeal to our species' original ecological sin is a misstep. Adorno was a critic of how capitalist ways of life assume the guise of second nature.<sup>54</sup> The argument that we are a species who destroys its environment shifts responsibility from historically contingent social mechanisms to inherent human traits. Notice how this slippage reifies social agency: the driver of bio-geological change is not nature but human nature.<sup>55</sup>

Yet it does not follow that in the universal stories that Adorno would have us tell, there should be no talk of the human species. Consider the aphorism that he attributes to Horkheimer: species is the name of a "gigantic public company for the exploitation of nature."<sup>56</sup> He invites us not only to reject the term but also to consider its almost irresistible truth. Let us examine the notion that unbeknownst to individual agents we act as a species. Adorno focuses on one central assumption: that "mankind preserves itself not despite all

irrationalities and conflicts, but by virtue of them."<sup>57</sup> We find this idea first in Hobbes and see it culminate in the liberal theories of Smith and Ricardo. Kant's conception of the "unsociable sociability" of humans is symptomatic.<sup>58</sup> The individual wants to get her own way. She encounters resistance to her projects in the form of environmental threats and scarcity and so becomes competitive, enlarging her talents and producing more than she herself needs. Each individual's unsociable striving contributes to social mechanisms for collective self-preservation. The mechanisms that result assume the task of managing our commerce with physical nature. In this familiar account of how we exit the state of nature only to perfect our species behavior, Adorno thinks the great bourgeois thinkers do critical theory a favor. They inadvertently hold a mirror up to the prevailing tenor of social interactions with the environment. The domination of nature is also a subjection to nature. Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* takes seriously the idea that antagonism is the motor of civilizational learning. They argue that nature is thereby dominated in its own name. The ongoing exploitation and extraction of cheap nature is paralleled by a sacrifice of the nature in the self. The subject's interests seem to be initially served by a calculating rationality. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer argue that somatic desires are repressed, sacrificed to a means-ends logic that works not only for self-preservation but to sustain overarching social structures. While Adorno denies that it is inherent to *homo sapiens* to destroy our environment, he probes "species" as a universal that still exerts a powerful force field. Rather than mobilizing antagonism in aid of collective survival (as Kant

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<sup>53</sup> Chakrabarty, "Humanities in the Anthropocene", 381; William R. Catton Jr., *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 95–96.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Malm and Hornberg, "The geology of mankind?" 65. For a discussion of the integral connection between reification and the treatment of nature in Adorno see Harriet Johnson "The Reification of Nature: Reading Adorno in a Warming World," *Constellations* (2018): 1–18.

<sup>56</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 45.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>58</sup> Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," 111.

promised), the animal energies of self-preservation are deployed to justify social antagonism and mastery of nature in perpetuity.

“After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it.”<sup>59</sup> Still, in his *Lectures on History and Freedom*, Adorno works to discern a pattern. He describes how “the domination of nature [...] welds the discontinuous, hopelessly splintered elements and phases of history together into a unity while at the same time its own pressure senselessly tears them asunder once more.”<sup>60</sup> Observe that negativity operates across particular and universal levels. Adorno attends to history’s oppressed, those particulars whose interests have not prevailed in the course of the world (Hegel’s *Weltlauf*). For these individual entities in their local contexts, species history has always been powered by negativity: Kantian unsociability, class conflict, a lack of reconciliation with nature. Yet to explain their situation and trace potential lines of resistance, Adorno cannot abide with the given facts. A negative history must also construe the prevailing universals. Rather than discern an overall trajectory for the better, Adorno describes the sweep of history itself as negative. The objective trend has been bad: a dominating relation to external nature sabotages the animal interests of its participants. Social interventions into bio-geological systems diminish the diversity and sustainability of planetary life shared by people in their difference and species in their plurality.

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<sup>59</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 188.

<sup>60</sup> Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 93.

### 6.

Let us be wary of the politics of catastrophe. The notion that we are on a course of destruction primes us for knee-jerk policy responses or despairing resignation. Calls for emergency action are open to cynical co-option by political operators who would harness fear to shore up their own power. Nonetheless, if Adorno’s chronicle of permanent catastrophe has new resonance in the Anthropocene, then it is crucial to enquire into its political implications. As an environmental problem, climate change vulnerability will initially be felt in different ways in various settings – in food insecurity on much of the African continent, in drought in Australia, in the need for shelter and potential resettlement in deltas prone to sea-level rise, and in the disruption of cultural practices for many indigenous communities. On the one hand, there is great geographical unevenness and variation of its effects. On the other hand, the atmosphere is a common pool and a coordinated global response appears urgent. Negative universal history surveys this planet-wide series of disasters but does not dispose of an Archimedean view above it all. There are real ramifications to Adorno’s insight that a global perspective comes from within the fray. He breaks with the notion that we must shift from local suffering to global responses and parry catastrophe through risk-management.

The idealist tradition of universal history vindicated the comity of nation states. In Kant, the state’s interest in commerce with other states was meant to steer conflict-prone individuals toward a cosmopolitan condition of peace.<sup>61</sup> In Hegel, nations give (limited) expression to the spirit of a

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<sup>61</sup> Kant, “Idea for a Universal History,” 114–118.

people.<sup>62</sup> One way of conceiving the political legacy of universal history in the Anthropocene would be to see the continuation of Kant's "future large state body" in the dream of a planetary sovereign.<sup>63</sup> This would be "a regulatory authority backed by democratic legitimacy, binding technical authority on scientific issues, a capacity to monitor the granular elements of our warming world: fresh water, carbon emission, climate refugees and so on."<sup>64</sup> The annual meeting of the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP) to advance the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change represents a nascent institutional manifestation of this wish. However, as Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright argue, the COP treats capitalism less as the social driver of climate change than a solution to it.<sup>65</sup> Examples of green finance include trade in emissions permits, "cap and trade," carbon capture and storage.

This regulatory apparatus not only has a global purview but also a universalizing logic. Natural particulars may be managed once they are rendered equivalent to others through the mechanisms of exchange. Quarantining natural spaces so as to barricade us from potential danger is difficult; contamination infiltrates places it is not meant to go. Nonetheless, increasingly the mitigation of environmental volatility means translating universal catastrophe into containable moments of risk. It is a principle of neo-liberal economics – the dominance of finance capital over production – that risk can be isolated, moved around, capitalized upon.

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<sup>62</sup> Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 371.

<sup>63</sup> Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," 118.

<sup>64</sup> Geoff Mann and Joel Wainwright, *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of our Planetary Future* (London: Verso, 2018), 30.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Even pollution can be outsourced. One quarter of global carbon emissions are embodied as imported goods, thus escaping attribution in the consuming country.<sup>66</sup> There is a well-established international legal and illegal trade in waste. Thirty years ago, the city of Philadelphia dumped 4,000 tons of toxic incinerator ash on a beach in Haiti. In the midst of a discourse that proclaims "we're one planet now," a regime of outsourcing fragments the global landscape along familiar colonial lines.

Adorno did not want to cede to pessimism. Like Benjamin, he wanted it to be organized. Adorno not only studies the continuity of a self-destructive social relation to nature. He asks after the prospects of jamming on the breaks. A central regulatory authority able to manage and circulate volatile environmental factors is more likely to perpetuate late capitalist "species history" than resist it. To locate discontinuities, we need to look at the politics of risk management from a different angle. Notice how the mechanisms for containing planetary volatility are modelled on a commodity chain. Pollution is subcontracted and environmental hazards are measured and outsourced. The autonomy of component enterprises is legally established even as the enterprises are disciplined within the chain as a whole. Complex global networks disperse both risk and ultimate responsibility. It is tempting to view the links in the chain – local workers in far-flung places – simply as a distracting spectacle that shields powerful interests from being held to account. Indeed, in the face of planet-wide destruction, a popular critical approach seeks to unmask those who profit

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<sup>66</sup> Ali Hasanbeigi and Cecilia Springer, "The Carbon Loophole in Climate Policy: Quantifying the Embodied Carbon in Traded Products," August 2018, sourced at <https://buyclean.org/media/2016/12/The-Carbon-Loophole-in-Climate-Policy-Final.pdf>.

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most from such arrangements, for instance, the multinationals of resource extraction. However, for Adorno, we do not undo structures of domination only by exposing the social powers that be, we attend to those most exploited within these global structures, to discover powers that might yet be.

Negative universal history reckons with the politics of risk management not by advising us to take our eyes off the networks that seek to contain catastrophe, but to take a different perspective within them. Let us take an example from the deforested slopes of the US Pacific Northwest. In the midst of the usual tactics of risk management, anthropologist Anna Tsing attends to “ordinary catastrophe.”<sup>67</sup> These are planned and unplanned modes of devastation, the “makeshift, rubble economies that form as an expectable feature of global supply chains.”<sup>68</sup> Tsing studies the social relations of those who pick, distribute, profit from and live among mushrooms. Such a story of global connections is negative. It finds the imagined timeline of progress to be inappropriate. Matsutake are wild mushrooms that grow best in human disturbed sites, flourishing in the messes we have made. People forage for them because they are a prized delicacy in the Japanese market. Rather than positing an idealized moment beyond the story of capitalist relations, Tsing focuses on particular links within it. All along the supply chain, Tsing finds “potential alliances and common projects of refusal.”<sup>69</sup> Matsutake are foraged by ex-Vietnam veterans, Hmong refugees, minorities

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<sup>67</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Ordinary Catastrophe: Outsourcing Risk in Supply-Chain Capitalism,” in *Futures of Modernity: Challenges for Cosmopolitan Thought and Practice*, edited by Michael Heinlein et al (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 53.

and indigenous peoples. In the deforested landscapes where the mushrooms grow, modern and non-modern rhythms mingle and unlikely collaborations flourish. To manage environmental catastrophe, a political approach guided by the assumptions of traditional universal history might well look to regulatory authorities meeting in the boardrooms of Paris or Cancun. By contrast, an approach guided by Adorno’s negative universal history is more likely to locate its “rowdy cosmopolitanism” among precarious workers in a ruined Oregon industrial pine forest.<sup>70</sup>

By way of conclusion, I must acknowledge an obstacle to the wider embrace of negative universal history as a guide for the new planetary stories. There is a common skepticism towards all non-trivial claims about the history of civilization. How could I, you or anyone know the movement of the totality? The whole is not an object of experience. Rather than engage in an exercise of freewheeling speculation, should we not tarry with the empirical facts as they stand? Adorno retorts that rather than a more fine-grained discrimination such skepticism promotes the even more trivial generalization that no generalization is possible. In fact, we do know there are universal patterns, because we can feel them. Overweening social structures born of globalized connections press their demands on us in the ordinary course of every day. The Anthropocene challenges us to decipher a new universal history because we encounter a set of planetary forces and temporal scales that could not be a direct object of experience in our lives yet will be a determining factor for them. Nature is integral in this unfolding story of social catastrophe. Adorno is

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 59.

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important because he looked for ways to tell such stories without, in turn, naturalizing the extant power relations of social history.

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