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Baucom's Critique: A Brief Response

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I am honored that Ian Baucom should find my modest attempt at thinking through what the so-called geological age of the Athropocene may imply for the historian, worthy of comment in his thoughtful essay, "History 4^0: Search for a Method." The role and tasks of humanists in the face of the current crisis of climate change—a problem defined primarily by climate scientists of various descriptions—are not by any means self-evident, for our tools, some of them created thousands of years ago, were honed long before the time when factors that drove the climate of the planet *as a whole* engaged the attention of scientists, not to speak of policymakers. Even the proverbial linguistic, deconstructive, and postcolonial turns in the humanities along with the development of thoughts about post-humanism and the post-human in the second half of the last century came about in relative ignorance of the "climate problem" that we now know had been in the works for a while. "Global warming" was available as a theme in the public domain from at least the early 1990s, but there is little sign that humanities and social science scholars who wrote on globalization and other global issues in the same period took much notice of it. The dissemination and subsequent discussion of the fourth report (2007) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in the popular media seemed to make climate change into a topic of general interest. Humanists will find their path in the current crisis through collective discussion and debate. Baucom's comments on my work are therefore more than welcome as are indeed his own ideas as to how we should think about human history given what we know of the climate problem. I see him and other humanists including myself as collaborating, even while arguing with one another, in what he so eloquently describes as a "new search for a method that will take as its starting point an investigation of the multi-scaled, ontologically plural, simultaneously historical, infra-historical, and supra-historical 'situation' in which we find ourselves."[1]

Because of some unfortunate extraneous pressures on my time, however, I am constrained to restrict my comments here to Baucom's critique of my statements, hoping that these would serve both as clarifications offered on my behalf and, *inter alia*, as some reflections of Baucom's project itself.

To begin with—this may sound like a quibble over words, but I hope that its significance will soon be clear—I should register a couple of small but important

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1 Ian Baucom, "History 4^0: Search for a Method," 17 (ms.).

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differences in the way Baucom and I read my essay, "The Climate of History: Four Theses." First the word *method*. In my understanding, the essay did not propose or outline "a new method of history," though that is what Baucom claims the essay does. Some of our differences may very well arise from the fact that we are trained in different disciplines—literature and history—and even though there is much overlap between our intellectual interests, it is still possible that we understand the word *method* to mean things that are somewhat different. To my mind, as its very title suggests, the essay advanced four theses, that is, formulae for thinking that were all about developing a new perspective on human history by situating humans in the "now" of the climate crisis. As a historian, I would make a distinction between a perspective and a method. A perspective would refer to the vantage point from which one looks at (human) history. Methods, on the other hand, would involve questions of identifying strategies for practical research and hence the necessary archives. I did say, for instance, that climate crisis required us to "think" our deep and recorded histories together, to conjoin, in our minds that is, the history of capitalism and our history as a species. Now, whatever one thinks of this proposal, it could not be, technically speaking, a "method." A way of thinking? Yes. But a new method? I think not. For the methods by which one researches evolutionary history of humans or other species are very different from those that allow us to research and write histories of capitalism. I do not know of any historian who is trained to do both. The archives are very different and require very different research skills and strategies. The two kinds of histories involve thinking on different scales of time, and they move on different speeds. And the two approaches are profoundly opposed to each other in their orientation to the past. For instance, when one thinks of evolution of species, one thinks of processes such as those of natural selection that are random, purposeless, and blind. Such randomness is a necessary element in evolutionary histories. When we think of capitalism or other socioeconomic organizations through social-science categories, our analytical aim is to do the opposite, that is, show that human history under capitalism is not random but is guided by something like what Marxists often call "the logic of capital." This is another reason why putting species-history and the history of capital together cannot constitute a method or strategy for research, but they can and do pose some questions about how we *think* of human pasts in an age of anthropogenic global warming.

I also have some difficulty with the expression "species[-]being" used by Baucom but attributed to me ("the new universal of 'species' being," "transformation of human being into species being," "the negative universality of species being").[2] Baucom is scrupulous in his exposition of History 1 and History 2 as I named them in my book, *Provincializing Europe*. Unfortunately, however, he seems not to have noticed that "The Climate of History" never used the expression "species-being." I used "species" but not "species-being"—though I remembered Marx's use of this expression—precisely to distinguish my use of the word *species* from its use in the Hegelian expression "species-being." (Admittedly, Baucom uses it without the hyphen.) For, as I think I make clear in the essay, I do not claim that a species can have a "being" that becomes itself over time (as the young Marx suggested in his 1844 manuscripts).

2 Baucom, "History 4^0," 28, 31.

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I used *species* as a straightforward, practical, or pragmatic biological concept, though the concept, even in biology, is not without some attendant philosophical problems.[3]

Having gotten those two points of clarification out of the way, let me return to Baucom's main critique of my essay: that instead of "expanding our sense of the ontological plurality of the human" in the age of nonhuman, natural actants such as "cyclones, heatwaves, and melting ice," I attend to "the challenges that the transformation of human being into species being puts to the question of freedom" by in some ways bringing the question of freedom within the horizon of "extinction" and by directing the analysis "to (and desperately against) a future marked by the threat of extinction."[4] He asks, legitimately, whether such an orientation to extinction "is unitary or whether it might contain within itself other orientations," the possibility of " 'some' other 'ways' of conceiving freedom."[5] Before I go on to answer his critique, let me also put on record my appreciation of the entirely civil and courteous manner of Baucom's polemic—for I have been subject to much uncivil and ugly polemic as well in my now-long academic life—and his sincere desire to be fair to my arguments, both in "The Climate of History" and in *Provincializing Europe*. I reply in the same spirit of respectful disagreement.

The horizon of extinction looms large over the human species as it does over many other life-forms, especially given all the planetary problems of our age. To have the horizon in sight does not mean that we move headlong into extinction, that there is nothing between now and extinction, that the citizen forgets all her citizenly politics and orients herself to the death of the species. But, still, all species go extinct at some point; there is no reason why humans must be an exception to that rule. Secondly, the crisis of climate change makes us even more aware of this possibility—not yet a probability—for if the warming of the planet's average surface temperature were to go above, say, 4 degrees C, life would be extremely stressed on this planet and human population would most likely crash. This does not necessarily mean extinction, but we may have to deal with a world where there are many fewer humans. A scenario of runaway global warming may indeed mean extinction, but nobody is discussing that yet as a serious possibility. The threat of extinction is something that humans have conjured up for themselves over a very long time (oftentimes through religious myths about destruction of the world) and sometimes for good rational reasons and fears as well (such as a nuclear disaster, runaway global warming, and such other factors). It was in that context that I made a remark on the "parametrical conditions of human existence" that Baucom has quoted. A recently published paper on nine "planetary boundaries" (that humans should not cross)—authored jointly by a group of climate scholars, most of them scientists—confirmed this point that I made rather intuitively.[6]

Baucom raises the question: What happens to the human pursuit of "freedom" in my discussion and asks if freedom could be reconfigured in other ways. Here I do not

3 Jody Hey, "On the Failure of Modern Species Concepts," *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 21.8 (August 2006): 447–50; Hey, *Genes, Categories and Species* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

4 Baucom, "History 4^0," 29–30.

5 Baucom, "History 4^0," 31.

6 Johan Rockström *et al*, "A safe operating space for humanity," *Nature* 461.24 (September 2009): 472–75.

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have any fundamental disagreements with Baucom, but let me make my point clearer. There are, of course, many ways of understanding freedom: as an abstract principle of deployment of reason in public life to the demand for rights and entitlements (including the development of capacities that people need to exercise genuine choice). We owe many of our basic freedoms to the availability of cheap energy that has come mainly from fossil fuel. The fact that we do not need massive slave or forced labor to build the monuments of modern societies is because energy is cheap. Peter Haff, a geologist at Duke University, has made the interesting argument that it would be difficult to sustain 7 or 9 billion humans on the planet without the availability of plentiful energy at an affordable price, for it is such energy that makes our growing global connections possible.[7] From everything I read about the prospects of energy, the age of cheap energy will be over sometime in the foreseeable future. Energy will become dearer. That is simply another way of saying that our freedoms will become more expensive, for however we define *freedom*, the exercise of it has to involve consumption of energy. Our current practices of freedom—some of which, either as ideals or as practices, come in global forms (such as Hardt and Negri's demand for global rights of passage for labor)—will need to be reconfigured for a world that may not be energy starved but where energy may well be dearer. Surely, if freedoms are going to be equitably distributed in such a world, they will need to be rethought. This does not mean we have to give up our investment and interest in justice and freedom, though. I cannot in fact imagine humans being otherwise. Hence the braiding of History1 and History2, as imagined by Baucom and myself, remains.[8]

I have a problem, however, with the suggestion that what Baucom calls "supra-historical order" can be simply "slip-knotted" into the braid of History1 and History2. Let us consider the two "supra-historical orders" that human history has (unintentionally) run into: the history of Earth system, which involves factors that drive the planet's climate (variable orbital tilts, greenhouse gases, oceanic currents, tectonic shifts, and so on) and the history of life on this planet. Both of these other histories take place on inhuman scales. We know about them cognitively; we can suffer their specific impacts and can create metaphors of various kinds to develop affect about them. Usually, in thinking human history, we do not have to think about these other histories as well. Today, however, the difference is that because of our profligate use of fossil fuel (that has no doubt contributed to human flourishing and freedoms), we are actors in these other kinds of megahistories as well. Thus, by putting out greenhouse gases to the degree that we have and over such short a period of time, "mankind," says the paleoclimatologist David Archer, "is becoming a force in climate comparable to the orbital variations that drive the glacial cycles."[9] It is in this sense that humans have become comparable to geophysical forces.

The second "supra" history in question is the history of life on this planet and how we participate in that as a species. Here, again, we are bringing about changes by

7 P. K. Haff, "Technology as a Geological Phenomenon: Implications for Human Well-Being," *Geological Society, London: Special Publications,* October 24, 2013. Thanks to Jan Zalaciewicz for sharing a copy of this essay.

8 See my essay, "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," in *New Literary History*, 43.1 (Winter 2012).

9 David Archer, *The Long Thaw: How Humans Are Changing the Next 100,000 Years of Earth's Climate* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2009), 6.

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our collective activities over scales (of both time and space) that are not immediately available to us, ontologically, though we can be cognitively aware of them through research. Climate change is adding to the acidification of the oceans that will lead to very significant changes in marine biology, and these latter developments, if unchecked, will in turn have a seriously deleterious impact on the food chain we depend on. There is no question that we are putting pressure on many other species, both knowingly and unknowingly, while climate change may also give some evolutionary advantages to viral and bacterial life-forms that go through several generations over a short period of time.[10]

Alongside these two histories is the history of industrial civilization (for many, capitalism), a history spanning a few hundred years. Anthropogenic climate change brings these three histories together. Capitalism mediates some (but not all, for the scales are so vastly different) critical aspects of the other two histories, but the three histories are gotten at through very different archives and with the help very different research methods. These archives, one could say, are presently best treated as discontinuous with regard to one another (until someone is able to come up with a holistic theory that connects capitalism to natural selection and natural selection to Earth history). Some problems caused by climate change will take the planet hundreds of thousands of years to handle—for the geophysical processes involved are of that magnitude and slow; similarly, some of the changes we are causing in marine biology are irreversible on a human scale of time. Yet the very different syntactical orders of these three very different kinds of histories suffer a kind of enjambment to constitute our present. This is why I suggested that we have to *think* them together.

Can these different histories be knotted into one complicated time-knot? I have difficulties with this suggestion, and here is one big problem I see. History1 and History2 of my earlier proposition in *Provincializing Europe* were about different ways of being, and in that sense about different ways of "worlding" the Earth. We often act as though we were living embodiments of the abstractions that capital posits (as when I speak of my rights as an abstract entity, a worker, an academic, etc.). History2 was about accepting and elaborating on Marx's comment that not all our relationships belong to the life-process of capital even when they come under the overall sway of the latter. The point here is not whether I was right about History1 and History2—many who consider themselves Marxist would be uncomfortable with my reading of Marx but that does not matter in the present context. I am grateful that Baucom sees the distinction as productive. So Baucom, then, would perhaps agree with me that both History1 and History2 are ontologically available to us, that is to say, they both are accessible to us directly through our shared (and evolved) human capacity to experience space and time. Our experience of time and space are internally differentiated. We can experience "shallow" time and "deep" time (sometimes misleadingly—even a most recently created nation can be experienced as hallowed or a historical experience of falling in love as something eternal or timeless). But the "supra-history" of the Earth system or the history of evolution posits conceptual time-

10 See, for instance, Lisa-ann Gershwin's fascinating study suggesting how we are returning the seas back to a state when they were dominated by jellyfish: *Stung! On Jellyfish Blooms and the Future of the Ocean* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

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scales that cannot be directly experienced. We speak of Paleocene-Eocene Thermal Maximum, a global warming event that took place 55 million years ago. But can we experience the divisions of geological time, the transition between the Paleocene and the Eocene, for example? Or the so-called K-T boundary event that killed off the dinosaurs? These times—as well as the category "species"—are conceptual constructs that help to analyze the deep past and put it into a narrative form. When I said, "We cannot experience ourselves as a species," some friends responded by saying, "Yes, we do. I feel human when I relate to my dog or cat." It was not a satisfactory response. True, the dog's gaze returns me to my sense of difference (a relationship) with the dog. It returns me to my experience of being human in an ontico-ontological way. But is that the same as experiencing myself as a member of a "species" called humans among whom the process of natural and kin selections are under way even as I write these words—do I have any experiential access to those slow and vast processes that we know, thanks to scientific research and analyses, are random and blind? Can I ever directly experience the randomness and blindness of the evolutionary process? I think not. That is what I meant when I said, "We cannot experience ourselves as a species." This is, however, not to say that we cannot imaginatively apprehend these categories—indeed science itself is one such form of imagination, and the arts may very well provide many others. And some of these mediations may indeed make certain imagined versions (in cinematic constructions, say) amenable to affect (as distinct from a simple geological division of time about which I have no feelings apart from finding it useful for organizing information).

Yet climate change reminds us of our place in the history of the Earth system and in the history of life on the planet, if for no other reason than the fact that the same fossil fuels whose profligate use has led us to the current crisis have also contributed very substantially to human flourishing so far (often at the expense of other species). This is why countries such as China and India that blame industrialized countries at international forums for the present problem want to use more, and not less, of fossil fuel, especially coal, for the flourishing of the humans who live there (and they have a certain kind of justice on their side). Yet coal, we know, is the most offending fuel. Climate change is a predicament for humans. The industrialized countries are too invested in capitalist economies to get off this path of development. Most policymakers, understandably, do not want to upset the economic apple cart. The rich and powerful in the emerging economies also want to get on the same path of development. There are arguments of intrahuman justice that can be made on both sides to justify existing policies and desires. But we also realize as the science comes home that the processes that warm up or cool down the planet are not inherently responsive to questions of justice between human beings, even if humans will always pursue justice between themselves. Climate change wakes us up to the rude fact of the otherness of the planet. Gayatri Spivak once wrote a sentence in a different context, but it now seems extremely prescient as I think of climate change as a predicament. She wrote: "The planet is the species of alterity, belonging to another system, and yet we inhabit it."[11] That sentence sums up for me the historical

11 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Imperative to Re-Imagine the Planet," *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 338.

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consciousness that the science of climate change gives rise to. I don't think my History1 and History2 ever contained that shock of being forced to recognize the alterity of the planet.

"Search for a Language" Response to Ian Baucom

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Bad Faith?

Ian Baucom's essay is, subtly, devastating. At first, take in his engagement with Chakrabarty, Lévi-Strauss, and Sartre, not to mention his citations of recent authoritative climate reports—perhaps already obsolete by the time of this response. You absorb the stakes first of "History 1," a history that "equates modernity with a narrative of unilinear global progress and with an abstract, analytic, and entirely *secular* epistemology" and "History 2," a critique of, but not necessarily in direct or dialectical opposition to the first. Next Baucom identifies the dawn of "History 3," a form of history (not historiography, which seems a key distinction) that cannot be experienced, that "escapes 'our' capacity *as* humans to experience what it means to breach the boundaries of human ontology, to traffic with/as the non-human, to have become humanly non-human and non-humanly human" (Baucom 139). Taken to an extreme—and why shouldn't we because it is precisely extremes that are at stake here?—"history 4 degrees" suggests that almost all of the writing "we" have engaged with—from theory to criticism; from historiography to anthropological description; from personal memoir to postcolonial fiction and, I might add, even that fiction that reflects unremittingly on identities fragmented or reconstituted by forms of migration—stands in a relation of denial or bad faith with regard to the disjointed spatiotemporality of the Anthropocene. By "we" I mean all of us who have written in the past fifteen odd years, since because "climate change" has been in wide circulation. Or perhaps earlier.

Eppur si scrive...

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