

On the articulation of Marxist and non-Marxist theory in Colonial Historiography. Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital*

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Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital is an important book on a topic of major importance for all of the human and social sciences. The book's implications reach far beyond Chibber's critique of subaltern studies, which is his most obvious focus. Chibber's overarching argument is twofold: capitalism *does* universalize itself to the colonial and postcolonial world, but at the same time, capitalism *does not* permeate or encompass all other aspects of social practice. As it stands, this is already an important argument for social theory generally and not just for analysts working on former colonies like India. The crisis of what used to be called western Marxism led to two main responses among Marxists. While many simply abandoned Marxism, becoming "post-Marxist,"¹ others became "neo-orthodox," refusing to acknowledge the autonomy of any social practices from capitalism.² Chibber's position is closer to the more nuanced positions of the "regulationist" school³; it is also compatible with a neo-historicist critical realism⁴ that combines an *ontology* of emergent causal powers with an anti-essentialist *epistemology* according to which historically varying conjunctures of causal mechanisms interact in contingent, often unpredictable ways to produce empirical events. The fact that Chibber's book's packaging suggests an all-out assault on anyone who would dare to deviate Marxist orthodoxy does not square with the actual content of the book.

Chibber's book is also framed as a critique of Subaltern colonial historiography. Here again, the book's framing does not provide an accurate sense of the directions in which Chibber's thinking takes him. Many of Chibber's specific arguments are broadly consistent with the path-breaking work of the founder of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha.

Chibber's argument restated

Chibber's book is presented as a critique of postcolonial theory. This is very misleading. The leading postcolonial theorists, including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and

¹ Laclau, E. & Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso, London.

² Postone, M. (1993). *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³ E.g. Bob Jessop, "Zur Relevanz von Luhmanns Staatstheorie und von Laclau und Mouffes Diskursanalyse für die Weiterentwicklung der marxistischen Staatstheorie," pp. 157-179 in Joachim Hirsch, John Kannakulam, and Jens Wissel, eds., *Der Staat der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Nomos, 2008).

⁴ On neo-historicist social epistemology see my "Charles Tilly, historicism, and the critical realist philosophy of science," *American Sociologist*, volume 41, number 4, 2010, pp. 312-336; on critical realism in this context see my "Critical Realism and Historical Sociology." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* volume 40, number 1, pp. 170-186.

Leela Gandhi, are barely mentioned here.⁵ Also missing are postcolonial theory's adopted predecessors, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire and Albert Memmi, or its philosophical antecedents, including Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. Postcolonial theory started and remains most firmly embedded in the humanities, not the social sciences or history. The two main strands of postcolonial theory have focused on questions of the colonial presence within ostensibly noncolonial cultural texts and practices, on the ambivalences of colonized subjectivity and colonial forms of rule, and on the ways colonizing ideas have prepared the ground for conquest and foreign rule. None of these themes shows up in Chibber's book.⁶ Instead the book's exclusive focus is the Subaltern School of history, which has very different origins even if there has been a subsequent rapprochement. A more accurate title for this book would be something like *The Subaltern School of History and the Spectre of Capital*.

That said, Chibber does make a highly coherent argument, one that can be restated in four main theses:

1. Capitalism universalizes itself both geospatially and within a given social formation.
2. Capitalism is entirely compatible with political despotism, labor coercion, and the production and reproduction of cultural difference and diversity.
3. Although capital may "spread[] to all corners of the world, ... this does not mean that it manages to subordinate all social relations to its particular rules of reproduction" (p. 217).⁷
4. Although "it is surely problematic to see capital lurking behind every social phenomenon," it is no less problematic "to deny its salience when it is in fact a relevant causal agent" (p. 123).

Chibber's analysis of the Subaltern School

In addition to these general theoretical arguments, Chibber shows that there are three key arenas in which the Subaltern School claims that Indian history differs from Western history: (1) First, they claim that the Indian bourgeoisie failed to become hegemonic; (2) Second, they argue for a unique form of "power relations" in India; and (3) third, they argue that India has a unique "political psychology." There are three main historians under discussion here: Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. In this section I will present these three main clusters of ideas and arguments.

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); Idem., *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Gayatri Spivak, G. "Can the Subaltern Speak?," pp. 271-316 in C Nelson and L Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988); Idem., *In Other Worlds* (NY: Routledge, 1988); Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anti-Colonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006). For an excellent overview see Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

⁶ George Steinmetz, "Decolonizing German Theory: An Introduction," *Postcolonial Studies* 9:1 (2006), pp. 3-13.

⁷ All references in the text, unless otherwise stated, to Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013)

I. Capital's mythical universalizing mission

The first argument, associated with R. Guha, is that capital abandoned its putative universalizing hegemonic mission in colonial and postcolonial India. Chibber counters that the bourgeoisie is not inherently liberal or modernizing and that capitalism is not the same thing as political and cultural modernization. Since the two key comparison cases for Guha, Britain and France, did not really have bourgeois revolutions of the idealized sort there is no reason we should expect India to have had them. Indeed, Chibber continues, cultural and political forms of modernization were in some respects more readily forthcoming after the relevant comparable revolution, decolonization, in India than in Western Europe,

This is a very familiar debate for a German historian. The thesis of the German *Sonderweg*, or special path to modernity, asked why Nazism came to power in Germany and not in other advanced industrial countries. The basic answer focused on the deviation of Germany's developmental path from its Western neighbors. German history was seen as having been pushed repeatedly in destructive and anti-democratic directions by a clash between economic modernity and political and cultural backwardness, and this structural disjuncture resulted from the fact that German bourgeois liberalism was underdeveloped in comparison with Britain and France. Like the Indian bourgeoisie, the German bourgeoisie was said to have failed repeatedly to take the lead in promoting its supposed class interest in liberal democracy, in leading other classes toward that goal. Like the Indian bourgeoisie it failed to suppress the neo-feudal landed nobility, which continued to wield undue influence in politics and culture well into the twentieth century. Another feature of this condition was the so-called "feudalization of the bourgeoisie," the spread of anti-modern cultural values such as conservative anti-capitalism, anti-urbanism, and "cultural pessimism," and a non-hegemonic tendency to resort to state violence that is extremely reminiscent of Guha's diagnosis of the Indian condition.⁸ Guha was relying on a version of Marxist political theory and German history that was demolished by the critics of the *Sonderweg* thesis. Chibber argues convincingly that real capitalism is compatible with a whole range of non-democratic political and cultural conditions, and that there is no normal set of accompaniments to the spread of capitalism. No historian of fascist Europe, Assad's Syria, or contemporary China should raise an eyebrow at this claim nowadays.

II. Labor discipline, abstract labor, and cultural homogenization

Chibber argues secondly that capitalism is compatible with physical coercion at the point of production and that that it produces and reproduces cultural heterogeneity (or "concrete identities") among its workers rather than necessarily pushing toward their homogenization. "It is rational for capitalists to dominate labor" in ways that reach far beyond the automatic, "dull

⁸ David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985). Lukács claimed that the German bourgeoisie from the sixteenth-century onward was "characterized by a servility, pettiness, baseness, and miserabilism" which distinguished it from other European bourgeoisies. Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, vol. 1 (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1973 [orig. 1954]), p. 41. See George Steinmetz, "German Exceptionalism and the Origins of Nazism: The Career of a Concept," in Ian Kershaw and Moshe Lewin, eds., *Stalinism and Nazism: Dictatorships in Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 251-284.

compulsion of economic relations,” as long as violence promises profits (112 ,123). In the West as in the East, capitalism has always relied on physical as well as symbolic domination (123).⁹

Chibber also criticizes the idea that abstract labor leads to cultural homogenization, showing how some postcolonial theorists have conflated these two ideas. “Abstract labor comes clothed in concrete identities,” Chibber concludes (p. 144). Capitalism therefore does not have to dissolve social difference. Even deskilling is not inevitable (*pace* Harry Braverman)¹⁰: new technologies continually generate new skills, even as old industries may suffer from deskilling.

III. History I and History II

My favorite section of the book is the discussion of Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* and its critique of Chakrabarty’s concepts of History 1 and History 2.¹¹ History 1 is the history of modern capital, while History 2 consists of all of the multiple, incommensurable histories that develop according to their own specific logics. Chakrabarty’s implication is that Marxism would collapse all of the multiple histories of different practices into Capital, even though this is true of only the most totalizing, reductionist forms of Marxism. As Chibber notes, “it is surely problematic to see capital lurking behind every social phenomenon” (p. 123). Chibber argues that the “continued salience of archaic power relations, the resort to traditional symbols, the resilience of caste and kin-based political relations, and so forth--all this can be shown to be consistent with the universalizing tendency” of capital (p. 125). When Chibber says a practice is “consistent” this does not mean it is entirely subordinated to or determined by capital.

Chibber summarizes his argument against Chakrabarty in four main points.

(1) The sheer existence of “History 2” does not mean that capital’s universalization (as defined here) is incomplete (p. 224).

(2) Second, History 2 is not necessarily the main barrier to History 1, and capitalism may be modified by History 2 in ways that are not “type-transforming” (p. 226).

(3) Instead, History 1 itself is the main barrier to History 1 (p. 230), or Marx’s words, the “true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself” -- due to capitalism’s logics of competition and crisis. Workers will always tend to come into conflict with the logic of capital accumulation. This opposition to capitalism within capitalism itself is “the only real source of opposition to capital’s universalization” (p. 233).

(4) Fourth, there is no necessary antagonism between History 1 and 2 (p. 233). The “ensemble of social relations in any region need not be subsumed under one set of rules,” and the various practices that comprise the whole can be governed by very dissimilar logics, even as capital universalizes (p. 239).

IV. Six Critiques of Chibber

⁹ A similar criticism can be made of Bourdieu’s state theory, which twists the stick too far in the direction of symbolic domination. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l’état. Cours au Collège de France 1989-1992* (Paris: Seuil, 2012); see George Steinmetz, “État-mort, État-fort, État-empire,” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 201, pp. 112-119.

¹⁰ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital. The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, Monthly Review Press, 1974).

¹¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

First, in what is overall an admirably clear and sharply argued book there is a key ambiguity around the question of social crisis or breakdown. If History 1 does not constitute the whole of the society, as Chibber has allowed, why can't there be instability and breakdown in the rest of society (lumped under History 2)? Some examples of instability and breakdown include the death of states, the breakdown of law and order, warfare, terrorism, dictatorship, fascism, and the demise of entire institutions and fields. Fixated as he is on History 1 and the polemic against Subaltern Studies, Chibber doesn't pursue his criticism of one of the weakest points in Chakrabarty's sociology, his lumping of everything *but* capitalism into a single residual category. Marxism already had a more sophisticated sociology than this in the early 1960s, when Althusser reframed the social totality as a loose congeries of relatively autonomous levels, or ten years later when Bourdieu reframed social space in terms of the field of power and a multiplicity of relatively autonomous fields, each one irreducible to the others.¹²

Second, contingency is not the opposite of causal determinism. The idea of conjunctural contingent causality is completely compatible with the approach Chibber has sketched out. If Marxism is construed as a set of underlying powers, tendencies, and structures, then these will combine in contingent ways with one another and with additional causal mechanisms not theorized by Marxism in producing empirical events. Indeed, Marx's own theory of economic crisis takes this form. There is nothing "fashionable" about the concept of contingency; it is an ontological fact of life in all open systems, natural and social. Repeated patterns or regularities that persist over time and generalize across space are the truly puzzling anomalies.

Third, Chibber raises the question of the limits of compatibility between History 1 and History 2, but he does not take the next step to ask which cultural and political forms might be *incompatible* with capitalism. Presumably he thinks this varies historically. But I am not sure. This topic, once a mainstay of Marxist social theory, needs to be revisited.

Fourth, the only weak part of Chibber's book concerns the topic of rationality and "political psychology." Guha claimed that the specific forms of colonial rule led to a bifurcation between cultures and repertoires of peasant mobilization and standard modern forms of politics. Chibber's main discomfort with this line of thought has mainly to do with theories of human culture and subjectivity that take seriously the idea that there are multiple forms of rationality--including irrationality--and that motivations are unconscious as well as conscious. These arguments are by no means limited to Subaltern Studies but are in fact one massive alternative pole to Chibber's rationalism in the human sciences. Indeed, sociology even in the United States has tended to lean in the opposite direction from Chibber. Marxism has made alliances with psychoanalysis for a century. There is no *inherent* connection between the idea of multiple forms of rationality or subjectivity and postcolonial theory.

I don't want to say more about this because I think this argument about rationality is not a necessary part of Chibber's arguments about the nature of capitalism. All of Chibber's arguments about the universalization of capital and its compatibility with non-modern or non-liberal forms of culture and politics are compatible with a less rigid model of culture and psychology. Chibber accuses Chatterjee of harboring a neo-Orientalist vision of the Indian peasant, but the supposed irrationalities of the Indian peasant are easily matched by comparable phenomena in Europe.

¹² Bourdieu, "Séminaires sur le concept de champ, 1972-1975," pp. 4 – 37 in *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 2013/5 (N° 200)

After all, Freud demonstrated pervasive psychic irrationality at the heart of civilized Europe, and his analysis was proven correct not by the evens of the 20th century but by current evidence in biological and neurological psychology for the existence of unconscious and irrational mental processes.¹³

In a way this argument doesn't even hinge on the existence of irrational motives but on the very existence of meaning and culture. Chibber is fighting a battle on his own terrain of sociology in the guise of a critique of postcolonial theory. But all serious versions of sociology and philosophy of social science agree that causal mechanisms or causal powers in the social sciences are inherently meaningful or invested with cultural meaning. In the social sciences we have theories of unconscious habitual action generated by something like a habitus. If we adopt instead the language of Weber we could say that there is a multiplicity of ultimate value orientations. Chibber is implicitly defending an entirely unrealistic vision of man as a rational machine.

A fifth point relates to what Chibber calls political form. Oddly, the discussion of political form focuses mainly on the labor process. There is no discussion of the political forms proper in colonial societies—states and empires. And this arena of politics in the narrower sense is one where Chatterjee's analysis has been of exemplary importance. Chibber ignores the ways in which *colonial states* preserved or created political forms such as *tribes*, Princely States, and other indirect rulers, putting limited power in the hands of colonized leaders. Mamdani argues that the system of Indirect Rule increased levels of coercion in colonial states while limiting the spread of capitalist universalism – not because of the lack of political liberalism but literally by limiting the spread of capitalist economic forms.¹⁴ The “compulsions of market dependence” were sometimes actively suppressed by colonial policies, from British Tanganyika and Cameroon South Africa to German Polynesia.¹⁵ To put it in more concrete terms: by placing local political power in the hands of chosen tribal leaders, weren't colonial governments in fact doing something quite different from what governments were doing inside Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries? It is as if European revolutions actively propped up the most backwards sectors of the non-capitalist feudal classes. In other words it is not correct that the “continued salience of archaic power relations and so on ... can be shown to be consistent with the universalizing tendency” (p. 125) of capital in *all* times and places. Some “archaic” modes of life were

¹³ Kent C. Berridge and Piotr Winkielman, “What is an Unconscious Emotion? (The Case for Unconscious Liking),” *Cognition and Emotion* 17:2 (2000), pp. 181-211; Kent C. Berridge, “Pleasure, Unconscious Affect and Irrational Desire,” In *Feelings and Emotions: The Amsterdam Symposium*. A.S.R. Manstead, N.H. Frijda, & A.H. Fischer (Eds.), (2004), pp 43-62; and Piotr Winkielman and Kent C. Berridge, “Unconscious Emotion,” *Current Directions in Psychological Sciences* 13:3 (2004), pp. 120-123. Winkielman, Piotr and Kent C. Berridge. 2004. “Unconscious Emotion.” *Current Directions in Psychological Sciences* 13(3): 120-123.

¹⁴ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ I provide evidence of efforts to limit capital's universalization in various colonial contexts in *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). The British and French colonial development policies after WWII were the result of a particular political-economic conjuncture and cannot be seen as the inevitable breakthrough of capital exerting its universalizing power. Frederick Cooper, *Decolonization and African Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

preserved in ways that were antithetical to capitalism's expansion. I am not talking about capitalists using traditional ideologies to dominate their workers, but about colonial states withdrawing potential laborers from capitalist labor markets altogether – literally limiting the spread of capitalist economic forms.

Sixth, Chibber sometimes mirrors the postcolonial terminology he is rejecting. For example, for Chibber Marx is an “Enlightenment thinker” (p. 227). But Marx is more than an Enlightenment thinker. He is also a 19th century social theorist writing in the wake of Hegelian idealism and Romanticism and preserving some aspects of that very different formation. Talcott Parsons, who had studied with Alfred Weber, recognized this, writing that “Marx considered capitalism a definite and specific system of economic organization, marked off sharply in principle from its predecessor and successor in the dialectical process.”¹⁶ Reducing Marx to an Enlightenment thinker is as much of a distortion as Chakrabarty's definition of Historicism as a universalizing teleological social theory, which mirrors Popper's misleading definition. In 19th century Germany, from Savigny to Ranke, and on to Mannheim, Troeltsch, and Meinecke in the 20th, Historicism meant almost precisely the opposite of what Popper said it did, signaling an emphasis the unique, singular, non-repeated and unprecedented—on the “historical individual,” as Rickert and Weber called it.

CONCLUSION

Postcolonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital is a highly stimulating book that not only points out some of the analytic and theoretical deficiencies in Subaltern History but also presents a lucid and refreshing take on some classic Marxist issues. Chibber shows how Marx's model of capitalism's universalization can be combined with recognition of the autonomy of many realms of social life from that relentless process. The articulation of Marxism as a regional theory of capitalism with equally autonomous theories of cultural, political, social, and psychic processes is a promising path for the historical social sciences.

¹⁶ Talcott Parsons “Sociological Elements of Economic Thought,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 49(3), p. 446.