

Marxism and “Subaltern Studies”: Vivek Chibber’s Postcolonial Theory and The Specter of Capital

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Ours is a time of welcome political ferment, but the long hollowing out of the institutions of the Left has meant that, among radicals, Marxism is far from being considered commonsense

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Introduction

Several years ago in a seminar on social theory packed with left-wing graduate students from around NYU, I read Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe*. The professor had assigned it in an ecumenical gesture that’s often the hallmark of lazy teaching. We were meant to learn that every theorist has his virtues, and that this book—which harangues Marxism for its Eurocentrism—was a store of ideas that would temper our brash convictions. Our task was to be more delicate, more ‘dialectical’—to wield our universalizing categories (class, mode of production, abstract labour, etc.), maybe, but to do so with a keen eye for the differences to which they were insensitive.

The whole game bothered me dreadfully. As an undergraduate, Marxism won my mind because it had given clarity to exactly the opposite intuitions: that societies everywhere were rent by class divisions, that these schisms structured the production and appropriation of the social product, that they bred similar antagonisms and patterns of struggle, and that this shared architecture was the basis for a common politics. It was, for me, the analytical analogue to the moral universalism that animates any radical. Today, societies everywhere exhibit similarly revolting forms of dominance and exploitation; our task is to make sure that tomorrow they all look different, for the same reasons and in the same way.

My dismay deepened over the course of the class discussion. The argument Chakrabarty developed had struck me as rooted in a profoundly misguided, even poisonous set of assertions. At its worst, it impugned not only Marxism’s incorrigible European-ness, but also the very possibility of abstraction

(in this case, of making arguments that traveled the East-West divide). Yet he seemed to have hit a chord with much of my cohorts. To the charge that Marxism's categories made hay of difference, too many students offered knowing nods. A friend who was later very active in Occupy NYU met my criticisms of the argument by asking, in all seriousness, whether I could name even one thing that people across borders had in common (That they have to eat, I answered). I left the classroom in crisis—not because my convictions had been shaken, but because we Marxist few had been incapable of convincing the majority who had seen sense in Chakrabarty's book.

It is only in light of that challenge that the significance of Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* can be understood. Ours is a time of welcome political ferment, but the long hollowing out of the institutions of the Left has meant that, among radicals, Marxism is far from being considered commonsense. Few would disagree that one of our important tasks, today, is to clear away the detritus that years of academic exile have heaped on the flag of radicalism, and to win today's activists back to our camp. Here, Chibber comes to the rescue. And I don't mean this hyperbolically. In my several years of reading Marx and Marxists, I cannot think of a book that is as clear in its explication of the analytical foundations of our project.

The stakes are not just academic. A movement staffed by people who think that different cultures construct human beings of irreconcilably different constitutions, that power resides in what you and I say just as much as it resides in the State and in Capital, that class is just one of several ways in which society can be sliced, that 'rights' and 'interests' are swear words and the Enlightenment one long war crime, will be a movement incapable of mounting even the slightest challenge to today's ruling-classes. After all, even if the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach indicts academics for having only 'interpreted the world,' there's a reason it doesn't enjoin those of us committed to changing it to stop understanding it, first.

The Challenge of Subaltern Studies

Of course, before being a book about Marxism, this is a book about postcolonial theory—and more specifically, Subaltern Studies. The central animus of the Subaltern Studies project was, in its own way, a radical one. The flagship journal was founded in the context of political turmoil in India which seemed to illustrate the violent and all-round illiberal character of the world's largest bourgeois democracy. Its progenitors were Marxist, but the approach came to be identified by their shared conviction that European Marxism hadn't quite gotten India right. India, it seemed, wasn't on a path towards the stable forms of political contestation that characterized Europe, nor was it enjoying self-sustaining capitalist development of the sort that had made the rich countries rich.

Chibber's book suggests that the substance of Subaltern Studies' differences with Marxism lies in six interrelated arguments. For our purposes, two of these are more pivotal than the rest.

First, Subaltern Studies originally attributed the peculiarly undemocratic trajectory of Indian (and/or non-European) politics to the timidity of its national bourgeoisie. Whereas in England and France, the great bourgeois revolutions toppled feudal forms of domination and ushered in political liberalism, if not democracy, their Indian counterparts hesitated to lead subalterns in a similar assault on pre-capitalist institutions. The result has been a distinctive polity, in India. Unlike in Europe, the bourgeoisie was happy to leave its historic mission unfinished. As a consequence, pre-capitalist and non-liberal forms of power have persisted. In Ramchandra Guha's famous phrase, the Indian bourgeoisie enjoy 'dominance without hegemony.'

Second, Subaltern Studies argued that the political culture of India has evolved differently from the West's. Not only in the sense that the bourgeoisie has ruled in this more openly illiberal way, but

also because the failure of this bourgeoisie's historic mission had implications for subaltern politics, too. The bourgeois revolutions in the West weaseled their way into the consciousness of Western subalterns. The language of liberalism constituted Western subjects as individuals with rights. In India, however, the bourgeoisie's unwillingness to see their mission to fruition left Indian subalterns analogously untransformed. As a result, they don't think about their interests or their needs in quite the same way. Instead, Indian subalterns draw on a pre-bourgeois, often community-oriented culture—when they mobilize, they don't do so as individuals, or in defense of their individual interests.

The Challenge Met

If this last claim sounds like your Uncle Calhoun's dinner table disquisition on 'Eastern culture' with a sprinkling of academese, you're only being slightly ungenerous. But it's one thing to sense that something is amiss, here, and another to demonstrate what's wrong, and what should take its place. The standout virtue of Chibber's book is that it does both of these things extremely well: not only does he demonstrate the follies of his three chief antagonists, but in the process he outlines an alternative account of India's 'difference' that should do for a Marxist what, say, Seamless.com has done for the underfed and self-centered yuppie.

To the orienting charge—that Marxism as once formulated needs tweaking in the Indian case because of the Indian bourgeoisie's diffidence—Chibber responds with a crisp overview of the recent historiography of the bourgeois revolutions. He shows that Subaltern Studies has ignored a flood of scholarship demonstrating that bourgeois timidity was normal, even in the Western experience. Neither in England nor in France were capitalists doing any of the three things Subaltern Studies attributes to them.

First, they weren't heroically antifeudal. In England, this is because feudalism had disintegrated by the mid-17th century; in France, it was attacked, but only because mass peasant rebellion made compromise impossible. Second, capitalists never led cross-class coalitions. Capitalists were arrayed on either side of the English Civil War, both of which were uniformly indifferent to, if not hostile towards, subaltern demands. In the French case, there were no capitalists. The depiction of Jacobins as bourgeois radicals trades on an ambiguity in the term 'bourgeois'—in fact, they were middle-class professionals who were little different in political outlook from the middle-class radicals that comprised the left-wing of the Indian nationalist movement. And third, the political order these revolutions produced was oligarchic and prone to violence—no liberal, democratic peace prevailed. England had a narrower franchise in 1832 than in 1630, and 19th century France was racked by revolution. To the extent that there were democratic gains, either in the course of or after the 'Great Bourgeois Revolutions', Chibber stresses that these were the dividends of subaltern struggle of which Subaltern Studies seems—not a little ironically—entirely unaware.

It is a little surprising that all this should have to be said. One could forgive a novice the sin of historiographical nearsightedness—there's enough talk of bourgeois heroism in pre-1848 Marx and Engels to warrant confusion. Indeed, the aforementioned facts, well-established as they are, might seem unfamiliar to many readers of this piece. But the doyens of Subaltern Studies are professional academics, many of them historians, yet even they seem to have missed the revisionist memo that the concept of a courageous bourgeoisie is about as passé as smallpox and the Atkins Diet.

Significantly, Chibber's refutation blows open the question of why India looks different from the West. If it is the case that nothing about the Indian bourgeoisie's behaviour was particularly pathological, we need a new explanation of whether and how India's path has diverged.

Chibber supplies this, in the subsequent chapters of the book. But—and this can be taken as a criticism, if you like—he does so through an argument about capitalism’s universalizing drive that understates, to my mind, the extent of his contribution to a ‘universalizing’ social science (more on this later).

Recall the second of Subaltern Studies’ arguments about the bourgeois revolutions. What these were understood to have transformed, in Europe, was not just property arrangements and the political order, but agents’ world-view. Because the bourgeoisie abandoned its tasks in India, the individualism that is the hallmark of bourgeois ideology never seeped into Indian culture. Put differently, bourgeois heroism in the West explained why Westerners are individuals before they’re anything else; bourgeois timidity in India explained why brown people are community-oriented, first and foremost. On the terms of their argument, showing the bourgeoisie were never heroic invites confusion.

This is where Chibber’s book is at its most important. Against the thesis that Western subalterns are made of different stuff, Chibber argues that human beings are, at their core, not that different across contexts. The winds of history and culture may change many things, but human constitutions do not. His defense of this argument sets the stage for what, in my opinion, is the most deliberate, careful explication of the key tenets of historical materialism that I have read.

This argument is that humans, everywhere, take an interest in defending their well-being and their dignity. Chibber offers three reasons to believe this (though he doesn’t say this explicitly). First, it’s an entirely reasonable assertion about (gasp) human nature. Second, it seems inductively true—everywhere we look, people seem to act accordingly, when they’re able. In one of the most gratifying parts of the book, Chibber shows that the evidence Partha Chatterjee advances to prove Indian peasants’ non-bourgeois socialization actually illustrates the tenacity of individual interest. And third, it can be derived from another postulate about humans in society: namely, that individuals have to secure a basket of necessities if they’re to survive, one day to the next. So, while it’s undoubtedly true that individuals can assimilate all sorts of norms and injunctions, to the extent that this socialization interferes with the task of surviving to fight another day, it will have to be resisted. If it isn’t, the agent who bears these norms (and thus these norms themselves) won’t live on. All cultures have to accommodate themselves to this constraint.

In the debates that have followed this book’s release, I’ve been struck by how much this argument seems to have bothered Chibber’s antagonists. I can only interpret the anxiety as an index of the left’s confusion. That claims about human behavior across time and space can trigger mass palpitation in a tradition that brought us ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle’ is a sad sign. A Marxist without transhistorical commitments is a bit like the Pope in a world without God—feel free to go through the motions, but forgive the rest of us if we can’t take you very seriously.

Some have perhaps confused Chibber’s argument with the flagship postulate of neoclassical economics—that humans, everywhere and always, are utility-maximizers. But whatever we think of that argument (and I agree it’s a stretch, though it’s hardly the most unconscionable thing they’ve ever said), it is not Chibber’s. To argue that individuals seek to maintain a basic level of well-being and defend it against attacks is a much weaker wager.

Nonetheless, what follows from this claim about human nature is actually quite profound. For if it’s the case that individuals everywhere can be expected to behave in ways broadly consonant with a defense of their well-being, important aspects of their behaviour become explicable. Not everything, let me stress—historical materialism doesn’t explain the sex appeal of skinny jeans. But the Marxist argument is that it explains much of what strikes us as politically and morally relevant, as

revolutionaries: the pace of productivity improvements, the distribution of resources, the allocation of capacities with which to fight that distribution, the broad patterns of political contestation, the sorts of ideas that will circulate and thrive (more on this soon), etc. An excellent example of this approach is Robert Brenner's work on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, to which Chibber's debt is clear. Distinct social relations yield distinct 'rules of reproduction' for individuals, Brenner argues, which aggregate to explain distinct developmental trajectories.

This, then, is Marxism: an approach which is unabashed in its use of universalizing categories, which grounds this universalism in transhistorical expectations about individual agents, and which does it all for a good reason. It might well be possible that others have mounted as explicit and watertight a defense of its orienting propositions as Chibber has, in this book. My only claim is that, in several years of amateur Marxism and four years of graduate school, I have yet to come across them.

The Problem of Difference

If it were left at this, though, Chibber's rendering of historical materialism invites an immediate objection. India is, after all, very different from the West. How is the fact of deep difference intelligible, if we're deploying categories that are universal? Don't these imply homogeneity? Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* amounts to a winding, prolix defense of the verdict that yes, in an important sense, they do. There will always be residual, meaningful differences which can't be explained. These, presumably, demand indigenous categories. Operating otherwise is an index of the hubris of the European academic. And since arrogance towards the subaltern ranks highest among the Seven Deadly Sins of guilt-ridden grad student radicalism, this line sells.

Chibber's retort is careful, but decisive. India is of course different from the West, he agrees, but these differences are of two types.

First, there are those differences between India and the West that are beyond the pale of historical materialist explanation: the fact that certain forms of bodily exclamation are profane in India but not in the West, say, or that Indians eat with their hands and Westerners with their forks. There is a class of phenomena with which universalizing categories will not concern themselves. This contains those habits and beliefs that don't interfere with individuals as they set about the task of feeding themselves and their loved ones. The fact that rickshaw drivers in Delhi steal cricket breaks between trips but MTA conductors play baseball on their lunch hour is intriguing, sure, but it's not amenable to or an obstacle to our kind of explanation. Marxists need not fret that ours isn't a Theory of Everything.

But this, of course, hardly exhausts the differences between India and the West. There is a second class of differences which contains the kinds of things with which we, as socialists, are preoccupied and thus the kinds of things that we, as Marxists, want to explain. Here I depart from the language Chibber uses in the book, though, on my reading, his argument is the same. Defined most broadly, this set includes social facts, habits, and beliefs which in some meaningful way structure the production and distribution of the social product.

The signal 'difference' in this domain discussed in the book is one to which I've already referred: the more democratic character of political contestation in the Western world, and the greater rights granted to Western subalterns. One can dispute the specifics of this difference—it's not clear, after all, that the chasm has been nearly as great as Chibber's antagonists think—but, as a general fact, there's little question that bourgeois democracy has been better 'civilized' in the West than in the non-West. Better to be a retired Swedish lorry driver than grow BT cotton in Maharashtra, certainly. Chibber grants this, but offers an explanation rooted in a universal: it's the relative success of

subaltern agitation in the West, he argues, that explains this divergence. The relatively democratic (or, social democratic) character of Western Europe reflects the enduring contributions of mass, left-wing parties, a phenomenon which has no real analogue in India or even the rest of the non-West.

This, though, immediately invites a further question: why have Western subalterns been more successful at forming these organizations and winning these gains than their non-Western counterparts? Culturalists might well be chomping at the bit to answer this—any diversity counselor honest to their closeted stereotypes would happily admit brown people have such trouble getting along. Chibber, perhaps mistakenly, doesn't address this question in his book, but there's really no reason for it to sow confusion amongst well-heeled Marxists. Generally, the relative sanity of the societies forged by Western subalterns reflect both the greater class capacities and larger social product associated with a longer and more successful history of development.

And as for explanations of this fact that the West is wealthier, few would hesitate to turn to arguments of a militantly universalizing sort. After all, even your graduate seminar's resident Deleuzian knows better than to attribute the underdevelopment of the non-West to anything but structures and their evolution. Over the few centuries that comprise the 'great divergence,' the particular ways in which agents have been arrayed with productive resources and opportunities in the West has differed systematically from the non-West—whether due to endogenous structural facts about these societies, or through one or another variety of imperial intervention. At their core, theories of development and underdevelopment reduce to accounts of how these different permutations arise, and why they've persisted in some places but not in others.

All this has been so pivotal a part of Marxism's intellectual legacy that it's a bit dismaying to have to repeat it. As Chibber argues in his Jacobin interview, Marxism is a particularly odd defendant for Subaltern Studies to have indicted on these charges. There probably isn't a body of thought around that has been more committed to understanding the unevenness of social progress. And even if we concede, as Chakrabarty argues, that prevailing theories proved insufficient for the differences Subaltern Studies wanted to explain, forfeiting (rather than working with) Marxism's categories makes about as much sense as eschewing blueprints because the last architect you consulted had conjunctivitis. (As it happens, I have trouble accepting even this. There's little about India's developmental trajectory or its patterns of political contestation that seems conceptually vexing for actually-existing Marxism.)

Difference, Redux

So, differences between social formations pose no problems for universalizing explanations. But what about arguably more well-worn claims about differences within social formations, between agents? Chibber takes a detour through this territory, temporarily broadening his antagonists to include Lisa Lowe and David Roediger. The debate is still basically derivative of what's above: do Marxism's categories illicitly erase difference? In this case, the concern is that Marxism founders because its commitment to trading in abstractions (here, abstract labour) leads it to theorize away the racial divisions that split the working-class. If any one worker's labor is equivalent to any other's, doesn't it follow that workers who are otherwise meaningfully unequal are being rendered indistinguishable?

In a particularly lucid chapter on 'abstract labour,' Chibber shows that this is a non-problem. These objections confuse what's intended as an accounting category (the amount of socially-necessary work performed by any given worker) with thick description. It's not unlike arguing that one can't compare free throw percentages because, well, Steve Nash is from British Columbia. But Chibber

directs the discussion to a fruitful end. Not only does the existence of differences within the working-class pose no obstacle to quantifying the work extracted from individual members, he argues, but it's actually these same universalizing categories that can best explain the genesis and persistence of racial difference. Under capitalism, specifically, cleavages within the working-class are typically enlisted in one of two universal pursuits. Sometimes, they prove functional for capitalists—it's easier to exploit (i.e., extract abstract labor from) a divided workforce than a united one. And sometimes, these identities aid workers looking for a leg up in the unceasing competition for employment. Either way, Chibber shows that the rules of reproduction of capitalism, stated abstractly, are not only compatible with but often also productive of the sorts of differences with which his antagonists are preoccupied.

For Subaltern Studies, all this is fatal. Chakrabarty, in particular, insists that the tenacity of traditional hierarchies and identities in India demonstrates its dissimilarity from the bourgeois West. It can't, it follows, be understood through categories developed for that West. But not only does he grossly oversimplify Western history (where, as Lowe and Roedgier would remind him, reliance on these identities is hardly uncommon), he's also deploying a mistaken metric. These purported differences are always compatible with and frequently explicable via universalizing categories.

An Objection and a Half

Attentive readers of Chibber's book will notice that my rendering of his argument differs from the presentation in the book. As I suggested already, this is because the structure of *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*—while suited optimally to the task of slaying his antagonists—understates the scope of his own contributions (and, thus, of Marxism). We're now in a position to see why.

Chibber constructs his defense of Marxism around what he calls 'the two universalisms': first, the universalizing drive of capital; and, second, the universal interest of social agents to defend their well-being (often, in response). These together, he suggests, enable a universal history of East and West. As he writes in his conclusion, "both parts of the globe are subject to the same basic forces [these two universalisms] and are therefore part of the same basic history" (291).

But this can be misleading. This way of defending universalizing categories suggests that it's only once the universalizing drive of capital snaked its way around the globe that this shared history began. But Chibber's own book has given us reason to argue something more expansive. The defense of a universalizing analysis actually rests on a single argument about human nature. As already argued, it's this claim that licenses stable expectations about human behaviour, which in turn ground all derivative claims about transhistorical patterns produced by particular permutations of humans, resources, and opportunities—the substance of historical materialism.

This isn't novel, but does bear restating. Marxists have never shied from writing intelligent, universalizing histories of pre-capitalist societies, and nor should we, in the future. GEM de Ste. Croix's masterful *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* is but one example. The first of Chibber's two universalisms, then, is just a specific instance of a larger wager. Put differently, he's correct to emphasize that capitalism universalizes certain rules of reproduction, whether its agents are from Tahiti or Uruguay. But this was no less true of the history that preceded it.

An auxiliary issue concerns the mechanism at the heart of Chibber's rendering of materialism. Over the years, Marxists have spilt considerable ink addressing the relationship between ideas and material life. Most often, the mechanism adduced is functional—we've commonly sought to explain the salience of particular ideologies by tracing how they help their bearers navigate their social world. The trouble has been that these are often just-so stories—agents can always find many

different ways of making sense of practically identical social situations. If Bob the Builder has his construction crew sprinkle rosewater on their jackhammers at lunchtime, it's not nonsensical to attribute this to the vagaries of the housing market; but why does his competitor three avenues over instead have them sing *The Internationale*? Perhaps it's a contingent consequence of the class struggle—but the more work the class struggle does in explaining why individuals gravitate towards certain ideas and not others, the more ad hoc our materialism.

Chibber's argument sidesteps this quagmire. His account of materialism is, instead, a selectional and thus weaker one—ideas incompatible with agents' defense of their well-being are discarded, but beliefs not immediately connected to agents' reproductive life can vary widely. This is terribly powerful at doing much of what materialism should do; it is remarkable how much we can explain, I think, solely on its basis. But I wonder if this doesn't forfeit too much terrain to contingency. It's a sociological truism that individuals are in large part the products of the environments in which they're raised. Caveats aside, it seems unambitious not to give this a Marxist inflection. Given that this environment is meaningfully patterned by any given agent's structural location, surely we should endeavour to say something about the content of the ideas from which similarly positioned agents are likely to select, and thus about, among other things, the sorts of religious belief or cultural forms that are likely to flourish? Admittedly, this carries the danger of encouraging explanations of phenomena that are really beyond the pale—even if *The Fast and The Furious* movies are obviously late capitalist pornography, there will never be an explanation for why Hollywood produced six. But, once again, the fact that we needn't explain everything shouldn't be an invitation to say less than we can.

Conclusion

Neither of these issues, it must be stressed, have come up in the course of the book's critical reception. Instead of these discussions, Chibber and the book's defenders have been stuck rehearsing Marxism's ABC's. This review has largely been an exercise in that spirit. What's most worrying, again, is that these challenges have come from self-styled radicals and Marxists. Their alarm has can be interpreted in two ways.

Less charitably, it reflects a bad faith loyalty to the doyens of this tradition. Subaltern Studies and similar schools of thought have fashioned quite a niche for themselves in the academy. Given that the university is typically impermeable to the real world, this has generated an incentive structure skewed towards reproducing fashionable rather than accurate ways of thinking. Your dissertation on the Lacanian interpretation of atomic fission might lead nuclear physicists astray, but if your discipline rewards you (and no scientists read you) it matters not a jot.

More charitably, it's a consequence of a good faith confusion—which is the interpretation I prefer. There's no hiding the fact that the institutions of the Marxist left—organizations, journals, conferences, etc.—are very weak. Occupy reflected the consequences of this marginality: many of the ideas that proliferated were an embarrassment. We shouldn't be surprised, for instance, that *Tidal Magazine* is positively unreadable—and where readable, as empowering as (and not dissimilar in its effects from) a billyclub to the head. As we seek to rebuild our institutions, one of our important tasks will be to combat this type of miseducation. It's here that *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* will prove invaluable. Marxists will leave it, justifiably, with renewed confidence in our tradition, armed with all they need to defend themselves against their voguish detractors. Read it, and you won't be able to help believing that the arc of our theoretical universe, at least, bends towards truth.

P.S.

* From Against the Current n° 165, July/August 2013:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3937>

* Viewpoint Online, Thursday, 04 July 2013 21:3:

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/vivek-chibbers-postcolonial-theory-and-the-specter-of-capital.html>

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