

# Marxism and post-colonial theory - An overview

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**Prominent writers in postcolonial theory have considerable influence in progressive circles within academia. They address issues of colonialism, racism, and differences in culture and politics between the former colonies and the former colonisers. They have devised new frameworks and categories to study postcolonial societies, after arguing the inadequacy of both liberal and Marxist social theory. In this article I will present the distinctive claims made by influential postcolonial theorists in order to bring out their disagreements with Marxism. I argue that we can more successfully study the culture and politics of colonialism and postcolonial societies if we retain a Marxist framework.**

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Postcolonial theory emerged as the confluence of two currents in the period from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s: “colonial discourse theory” in literary studies and “subaltern studies” in history. Each current involves contrasts with Marxism, and I will address them in turn. Part One begins with the theoretical context within which colonial discourse theory was developed: namely, structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism. After sketching Edward Said’s approach to colonial discourse theory, I contrast how a Marxist framework would address the same literary and cultural phenomena by placing them within a context of class relations. In Part Two I examine core subalternist arguments that the trajectory of postcolonial societies has falsified Marxist historiography and predictions. I argue that what subalternist writers have criticised as the Marxist theory of historical development is more accurately described as the Stalinist theory, and I contrast better theories of development from the Trotskyist tradition.

## PART ONE

## **Theoretical origins**

It is difficult to address an intellectual tradition as broad as postcolonial theory, given the specificity of each writer's analysis and perspective. However in general, postcolonial theorists argue that ideology, discourse and culture are in some sense primary. They constitute both the identity of the subject, and her "way of knowing" objects in the world around her. This is contrary to the Marxist approach that treats material processes - including social relations - as primary, and then explains the development of ideas and culture on that basis. To understand why postcolonial theorists place such emphasis on discourse, we must appreciate the intellectual outlook from which they developed: structuralism, poststructuralism and postmodernism. There are theoretical differences among these three positions and postcolonial theorists may draw more heavily on one rather than another of them. Poststructuralism is a reaction against the perceived inadequacies of structuralism, for instance, and theorists may reject postmodernism but retain poststructuralism. However, because of some shared views it is useful to group the three positions as part of a broad tradition on which postcolonial theorists draw.

The roots of structuralism lie in early twentieth century linguists like Ferdinand de Saussure. They focused on understanding words through their interrelations with other words in the structure of a language. By the 1950s and 60s structuralism had been applied to anthropology by writers like Claude Lévi-Strauss, studying culture itself as a structure of symbolic communication. The emphasis was on understanding an unfamiliar society within its own system of symbols and meanings - which might differ a lot from our system of symbols. We need some way to navigate an unfamiliar culture, and to do this he emphasised mapping pairs of binary opposites that seemed central to it: say, between friend and enemy.

This approach diverged from a more materialist alternative that understood both language and culture more generally not purely in terms of its own symbols and practices but rather as arising from, and interacting with, the material context. The context includes the environment inhabited by the society; the techniques of labor and forces of production designed to cope with that environment; the resulting forms of cooperation and antagonism within the social division of labour; the agency through which groups within society pursue their antagonistic interests against other groups; and the distinctive history of a society that is shaped by the accretion of such factors. The materialist view held that, as different as cultures are, they have been shaped by the same underlying processes of confronting problems of producing and reproducing society within its environment, albeit mediated in unique ways depending on a myriad of particular factors. Ideas and discourse are not some passive or mechanistic reflection of material reality. They involve human agency, and when we act on the basis of our ideas, we in turn change material reality. Thus the materialist commitment does not imply reductionism or determinism about the relation between culture and the material situation in which we develop culture. There is an interplay between ideas and material reality. Nonetheless, understanding the material context is the guiding thread for understanding the development of ideas. The significance of severing discourse from the material processes that underlie it will become increasingly apparent in the evolution of poststructuralism and postmodernism.

Aspects of structuralism were also taken up by some Marxists, like Louis Althusser in the 1960s. He separated ideological structures from political and economic structures, arguing that each has distinct rules and laws, more or less independent of one another. He argued that ideology was present in all societies throughout history, and in some sense "constitutes" the individual subject. For him the separation of the study of ideology from the study of political economy was tied up with his rejection of the dialectical methodology of Marxism. In Marx's dialectical approach social science is conceived as a totality, where the study of human nature (categories like alienation, freedom, the

individual) is connected up with history (the development of new modes of production from older ones), with politics (the development of classes and the state), with economics (the accumulation of capital), and so on. Marxists allow no artificial and rigid separation between the various categories of the social totality, even though one or other factor may be more or less dominant at a particular moment.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, “poststructuralism” developed, with Foucault, Derrida and Lacan among its prominent figures. It retains both the emphasis on discourse being fundamental, and the orientation that we can study discourse without connecting it with other parts of the social totality. It adds the view that “power” is more diffuse than is claimed by theorists who identify a specific institution like the state as the locus of power. To theorise power they turn instead to a variety of existential, psychological or discourse-theoretic approaches: the clashing perspectives and interests of rival “wills to power”; philosophical prejudices about the world dividing into neat binaries; and unconscious neuroses about how we define our own identity in relation to others who are different.

Finally, there is some crossover between poststructuralism and postmodernism. The scepticism of explanatory totalities is echoed in the postmodern scepticism of “grand narratives” that draw together disparate phenomena and historical periods in a single explanatory story. Postmodernists accuse Enlightenment philosophy of constructing false binaries between science and superstition, or social progress and backwardness. They allege that the individual subject or agent is treated as some “pre-theoretical given” in Enlightenment thought, when it is in fact created or constituted by a discourse or by ideology.

Postcolonial theory develops in the late 1970s and 1980s by drawing on these theoretical tools to explain colonialism, postcolonial relations between advanced countries and the former colonies, and the specificities of identity that distinguished colonised subjects from colonising subjects.

### **Colonial discourse theory**

Postcolonial studies emerged in the 1970s in literature departments in the USA. Its goals were to broaden curricula to include writers from the former colonies and to critically contrast Western representations of the colonies with self-representations of colonised peoples. This included studying anti-colonial writers like Aimé Césaire, who critiqued the so-called “civilizing mission” narrative of French colonialism in the 1950s; or Frantz Fanon, who wrote in the 1960s on national liberation struggles and the role of racism in colonialism. Postcolonial theory developed out of efforts to make sense of these conflicting representations of colonised peoples in Western texts and the texts of writers from the former colonies. While writers in these debates adopted a range of theoretical frameworks to address these issues, what became dominant were the postmodern and poststructuralist frameworks introduced above.

Just as a literary critic would understand a novel or short story, the aim of colonial discourse theory is to understand the writings of colonists. It uncovers implicit prejudices and stereotypes about colonised people. The Palestinian-American writer Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism* is a landmark in analysing colonial discourse of this kind, and is the foundational text of postcolonial theory. Said identified and critiqued the narrative which depicts the West as a beacon of science, secularism and liberalism, and depicts the Orient as backward, superstitious and tradition-bound. The novelty of Said’s book was to argue that such prejudices coloured not only the writings of colonialist officials and their ideologues, but also the writings of critics like Marx. Said’s target was Western discourse as a whole, whether colonialist or anti-colonialist. This was couched in terms of the Nietzschean idea that no true representation is possible – all representation is a distortion of

facts reflecting the agenda of the writer.

In arguing for the existence of an orientalist discourse that pervades Western discourse, Said uncovers precursors of orientalist tropes in the much older canon of Western literature. As a result, he is inconsistent about when orientalist and Eurocentric discourse originated. He usually situates it in the modern period of colonialism from the 1800s onwards, but also sometimes finds its roots in the writings of ancient Greeks about peoples further East, or in medieval Christians' views of the Ottoman empire. Critics of Said have alleged that he ends up ambivalent between two senses of "the West". In one sense "the West" is not a fundamental explanatory category, but rather a polemical shorthand for talking about the capitals and states (the actual theoretical categories) that happened to be in Western Europe from the 1500s onwards. In the second sense "the West" is a reified cultural or civilisational category that may even date back millennia. For a materialist cultural critic (like Samir Amin, discussed in the next section), the first sense of Western discourse can be connected to theories of competition between capitals and states in sociology and political economy. For materialists, Western discourses can be treated as arising from and reacting back on to the social, political, historical, imperial and economic conjunctures within which they arose.

By contrast, the second sense treats the West as a culture or civilisation that has differed from non-Western civilisations since long before capitalism. Thus culture and civilisation can appear as independent starting points for understanding phenomena like colonialism. When discussing the West in this second sense, Said invokes Derrida or psychoanalysis as explanations for why the orientalist discourse emerges. The very process of forming an identity (as European) requires conceiving the identity as different from someone else. This is either a matter of discourse alone (following Derrida), or of a neurotic drive in the "European psyche". As the critic Aijaz Ahmad notes, this is a deeply reactionary explanation that dismisses the culture of an entire region (Europe) as a "diseased formation".

While Said vacillates between material and discursive explanations for orientalism, the subsequent trend of postcolonial theory was to amplify the latter approach. Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and Homi Bhabha have been influential in expanding the use of Derrida and Lacanian psychoanalysis in postcolonial theory.

### **A Marxist analysis of Eurocentrism**

A decade after Said's *Orientalism*, Egyptian Marxist Samir Amin took up a similar target in his book *Eurocentrism*. In contrast to Said, he explained the development of Eurocentric ideology from a materialist standpoint, and did not restrict his methods to textual analysis and philosophy. For Amin, it is ludicrous to trace a notion of a superior European identity or civilisation back to the ancient Greeks. In fact, the ancient Greeks saw themselves as culturally connected to past Egyptian and Phoenician civilisations. Said is also mistaken in connecting orientalist tropes of Eurocentrism to Christian Crusaders' views about the Ottomans in the medieval period. The Crusaders' ideological demonisation of Muslims was tied to their being heathens and heretics, not to their being less rational, technologically backward, or superstitious. After all, the Holy Roman empire was no more advanced than the Ottoman empire, nor was it less religious or superstitious.

Instead, Amin begins with the political economic developments of the European conquest of the Americas beginning around 1500. While European empires were hemmed in by equally powerful empires around the Mediterranean and West Asia, they faced technologically and militarily much less developed societies in the Americas. Only in this context could it be plausible to hold an ideology about European people being destined to conquer the world. Initially the ideological

explanation for the superiority was Christianity as opposed to heathenism. However, with the enormous enrichment of European merchant classes from pillaging the Americas, space opened up to challenge the (religious) ideological supports of the ruling classes – the Church, and the feudal lords. The scientific revolution in Western Europe over the next two centuries built on technological advancements that had been made in Arab lands in previous centuries. It was spurred on by the engineering problems faced by ocean navigation, shipbuilding and mining. And solving these problems led to substantial advances in the forces of production. With the space for religious critique, and the products of science and engineering, bourgeois thinkers began to openly criticise Church dogma as superstition, and to champion reason instead.

At this juncture ancient Greek culture and ideas were rediscovered and claimed by the European Renaissance as “Europe’s own heritage” – as opposed to a heritage that was arguably just as much that of North Africa and West Asia. The ideological explanation of the advances of West European empires relative to Eastern empires then became “Western civilisation” rather than Christianity. As the accumulated capital from merchant trade sought new avenues for expansion, the engineering advances were marshalled for the industrial revolution in England in the second half of the 1700s. In the first half of the 1800s other West European states began to emulate the English simply in order to keep up in the military rivalry between nation-states. Only at this point do West European nations begin to systematically pull ahead of the non-European empires in terms of wealth and power.

As the English and French bourgeoisies rose in power and challenged the nobility, their ideologues preached the “equality of all men” both to overthrow the feudal order, and to rally larger forces of plebeian commoners behind them. However in the 1800s, as West European empires systematically pulled ahead of non-European empires in industry and military, this apparent inequality had to be squared with the “equality of men”. For Amin, this is where Eurocentric ideology reaches its fully developed form, combining ideological elements that had already built up in previous centuries. In this Eurocentric ideology, capitalism first developed in Europe because of the civilisational traits unique to European civilisation, beginning with the ancient Greek emphasis on reason, and carried on by the industriousness of the European race.

This ideology substituted for more truthful answers that would sit uncomfortably with the Enlightenment declarations of equality, liberty, fraternity. In truth merchant trade, moneylending and production of commodities for the market were also present in enclaves of some non-European empires around the same time. They did not become powerful enough in their own countries to challenge their ruling classes and transform society in their class interests. This was not due to cultural differences in work ethic, but rather due to class dynamics. Merchant capital in Western Europe could accumulate much more in a relatively short time by plundering the Americas. The imperial centre was comparatively strong and unified in the Eastern empires and could thus integrate rising merchant or artisan classes in ways that minimised broader social changes. In Western Europe, the Holy Roman empire disintegrated into national kingdoms. These, in turn, were fractured between into competing feudal lords. This opened up more space for the merchant class to rise in power – often by lending money to a lord or king to finance a war for territory.

Once the prior origin of capitalism in the West is explained, the next issue is the adoption of capitalism in the East. The reason that non-European countries were slow to adopt capitalist production had nothing to do with some alleged psycho-social characteristics. Relatively advanced textile manufacturing in Egypt and India was forcibly shut down by British colonialism in order to remove competitors for its own manufacturers. Development was forcibly reversed in some colonies in order to make them specialise in crops and raw materials needed by industry in the colonising country. When non-European countries did attempt to strike out on their own, as latecomers they perpetually struggled to compete with established powers, and had to find a niche within a world economy already structured by a pattern of forced specialisation.

This ends my discussion of colonial discourse theory. I move to the second main current of postcolonial theory – subaltern studies.

## **PART TWO**

### **Subaltern studies**

The subaltern studies collective argued that politics in India is fundamentally different from politics in the West. They allege that both liberal and Marxist social theory developed to explain and understand Western societies, but are inadequate for understanding how modernity and capitalism have manifested in the postcolonial world. I am interested in disputes with Marxism specifically, but it is sometimes unclear whether prominent writers are attacking liberalism or Marxism. Vivek Chibber, a prominent recent critic of the subalternists, has noted that the “conventional story” that the subalternists criticise is really an amalgam of liberalism and Marxism. I would add that even the supposedly Marxist elements are better understood as Stalinism. Before launching into my own critique, I will summarise the subalternists’ characterisation and critique of mainstream liberal and Marxist historiography.

As the subalternists see it, the conventional historical narrative is that the bourgeoisie was a revolutionary class in its time, leading a struggle to overthrow the aristocracy. To do so, it looked beyond its own sectional interests and created a hegemonic bloc with lower classes of workers and peasants. It emphasised common interests and convinced lower classes to see their interests in terms of bourgeois interests. After overthrowing the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie instituted “modern politics”, with democracy, political liberties, individual rights and secularism. With this there also came a specifically bourgeois culture, where people’s consciousness and motivations are framed in terms of individual self-interest. The bourgeoisie created a single “domain of politics” that fused the elite and popular domains. As a result politics, both elite and popular, would be in the shared idioms of individual rights, self-interest, secularism and parliamentary contests. The bourgeoisie also led a nation-building project that would advance the individual interests of people of all classes (albeit unequally) through economic growth and rising living standards. As the Western bourgeoisie colonised the rest of the world, it would initiate similar changes there, so that the future of the colonies was foretold in the history of the West. The colonising bourgeoisie would do away with feudal relations in the colonies, institute “modern politics”, and even if the colonising bourgeoisie did not initiate nation-building, the native bourgeoisie of the colony would do so once it had gained independence from the empire.

The subalternist critique starts with the point that in the colonies the bourgeoisie (whether colonial or native) did not get rid of the feudal class. It compromised with it. As a result, in the colonies power is pluralised: there is indeed the rule of capital, but power relations from pre-capitalist society also remain. This, in turn, means that the “political idioms” of pre-capitalist society remain. As against the single domain of politics in the West, in the colonies there are two domains of politics, one for elites and one for the subaltern. In the subaltern domain politics remained framed in terms of community, honour, ethnicity, and religious duty, rather than in terms of individual interests – or, for that matter, class interests. As a result, there could be no nation-building project that sought to advance the interests of all individuals. This explains the disillusionment of peasant fighters for national liberation – who had their own vision of the national project – with the elite-driven nation that emerged after independence.

All this means that postcolonial societies are not simply a few decades behind the West, still entering

into modernity. Rather modernity itself has more than one form - one in the West, one in the postcolonial world. Moreover, these differences are not merely superficial. We cannot keep the same fundamental theory - whether liberal or Marxist - and simply make specific additions. The differences are about the very nature of power and politics, and therefore we need new theoretical categories. To reject this is to be Eurocentric. Note that this is a different kind of Eurocentrism from what is critiqued under the heading of orientalism above. The critique does not simply reject a cultural superiority complex. It rejects the very possibility of generalising about societies around the world.

### **Critique of subaltern studies**

In responding to the claims of subaltern studies, we must first eliminate the overstated differences between the West and the postcolonial world in order to isolate the crucial theoretical issues. Canonical Western texts may celebrate the English and French bourgeoisie for initiating liberalism, democracy, individual rights and secularism. Compared to that image of the Western bourgeoisies, the postcolonial bourgeoisies seem very different. Yet English and French historians present more sober accounts of their bourgeoisies than do the novelists, essayists and persons of state whose works tend to be canonised. Constitutions and declarations of rights mean little if they are abstracted away from the historical context of whether and to what extent the subject population forces the state to live up to its own declarations. If the state generally respects civil and political liberties and individual rights, this is because of successful struggle from below, not because of the magnanimity of the ruling class. Universal suffrage was not won in most of the West until the twentieth century. While secularism in politics is indeed a big contrast to the fusion of church and state under feudalism, political parties in the West have used religion to mobilise popular support throughout the modern period. The same goes for ethnic and community identities which some subalternists seem to suggest are superseded under Western modernity.

The subalternists make a substantive claim about there being two "domains of politics", because the elite failed to gain hegemony over the subaltern and thereby integrate them into the elite domain of politics. I contend that this is the wrong way to theorise the ideas that prevail in society. It depicts hegemony in political ideas as just a technocratic task for opinion shapers, with a largely passive subject population who succumb to the ruling discourse. This overplays the autonomy of the opinion shapers, and underplays the effect of social and material phenomena on ideas. The confusion traces back to the Althusserian distortion of Marxism mentioned above. Althusser emphasises ideological apparatuses like church, school and mass media that indoctrinate and in effect constitute the identity, self-consciousness and agency of individual subjects. The mass of people are shaped this way, and only the exceptional intellectuals who engage in science - defined as theoretical practice - can see through the lies.

By contrast for Marxists, great changes in ideas about society do not originate within a self-enclosed intellectual sphere through the inspiration of exceptional intellectuals. They originate in changes in the material context that provide the impetus for the development of ideas. This is true of the prevailing ideas that rationalise the bourgeois order, and that reconcile us to it, as well as the competing ideas of workers' class consciousness. The mode of production inculcates in workers feelings of atomisation, powerlessness, subservience and pursuit of personal gain. Workers' habitual experience is to compete for a livelihood against other workers. Workers offer up their labour-power with no control over what they produce and how the production process is structured. This reinforces habits of order-following. In most large workplaces, workers have little idea of the overall process to which they contribute only a small repetitive task. The larger process is only understood by the managers and supervisors. This encourages passive deference to technical experts. Universal



franchise promises an equal say in the direction of society, yet on a core set of economic issues the laws of competition keep changes within a narrow band. This can produce the impression of the naturalness and inevitability of various capitalist institutions and tendencies. The economic system tends to produce such ideas. The tendency is merely reinforced and refined by the ideological apparatuses.

Yet the mode of production also produces contrary pressures which germinate an international working class consciousness that can challenge the prevailing ideas of society. The struggle for better pay and working conditions in large workplaces pushes workers into collective union activity, promoting solidarity against competitiveness. The power of the strike that emerges in these struggles soon crosses over from the workplace into broader politics because the conditions of workers are affected by laws and policies just as much as by the boss. Engaged in inter-imperial competition, ruling classes must periodically squeeze more surplus product out of the working class, including by concerted attacks on the conditions of workers across the whole economy. This creates the possibility for concerted fightback by workers, across the divisions and segmentation of the national working class. Thus, no matter how widespread ruling class ideology may be, the mode of production itself periodically creates the possibility for workers to break from capitalist ideology during periods of struggle. This makes it too simplistic to speak of an “elite domain of politics” where the bourgeoisie has hegemony over the working class.

The subalternist claims about “the nation-building project” can be criticised from the same point of view. They argue that in the West the bourgeoisie led a nation-building project that advanced the interests of all – however unequally. Yet this grossly overstates the unity of interests and homogeneity of political ideas in the West regarding ruling class projects. Western capitalism, like capitalism anywhere, has been rife with outbreaks from below of political discontent with the ruling class agenda. Perhaps the monolithic view of the “nation-building project” among subalternists writing in the early 1980s was coloured by the 30-year post-World War 2 boom of the advanced industrialised economies. During the boom it seemed to some that with the rising real wages of the working class, Western workers had been bought off by their capitalist classes and had fallen under the spell of their ideological hegemony. For Marxists however, such conditions as the postwar boom for the advanced countries are only possible in very special circumstances and for limited stretches of time, but we need not rehearse those arguments here. In the intervening neoliberal decades since the origin of the subaltern studies approach, the real wages of Western workers have stagnated. Since the 2007 economic crisis, popular discontent with ruling forces has erupted in several Western countries.

It is also misleading to speak of a “subaltern domain of politics” untainted by discourses of either individual interest or class interest, where community and kinship relations constitute the political idiom instead. This paints a false and romanticised picture of peasant life. Typically studies of the peasant economy differentiate rich, middle and poor fractions within the class based on their relative economic position. This pits them against one another in ways that cut against any simplistic reading of traditional communal ties. Rich peasants own enough land to hire some agricultural labourers themselves. Middle peasants work their own land and just scrape by with the labour of their household alone. Poor peasants own some land but not enough to live off it, and must perform some waged labour for a richer peasant in addition to working their own land. There are also landless agricultural labourers. All these groups may be tied together as part of a single community, caste or kinship group. Perhaps they use the idioms of community and kinship when they talk politics, but that is no protection against the harsh reality of class struggle. The landless labourer still has to struggle to raise wages against the rich peasant who employs them. The middle peasant still gets outcompeted and bankrupted by the rich peasant who can afford capital inputs like traction, irrigation and fertiliser. The poor peasant still has to pay usurious interest rates to the rich



peasant who lends them money.

## **Stalinist views of historical development**

When subaltern studies historians criticised Marxist historiography of post-independence India, they were in fact criticising Stalinist historiography. The Stalinist view diverges from Marxism on various theoretical issues in politics, economics, and history. It crystallised among people who wanted to describe Stalin's USSR and Mao's China as examples of "socialism in one country". A corollary of this was to theorise capitalism itself through the national economy in isolation from the world economy. By contrast, for Marx capitalism could only be understood as a world economy. The laws of motion of capital which operate at the world level impose themselves on individual countries. Unless a socialist revolution in one country caught on in several others, especially in industrially advanced countries, the laws of motion of capital and class relations would reassert themselves and eliminate the socialist experiment in one way or another.

Another theoretical legacy of Stalinism is the "popular front", where the working class adopts a strategy of alliance with other classes. The Bolsheviks had hoped that the Russian Revolution would spread to other countries because of the conditions created by the political and economic crises around the world war. While there were indeed revolutionary situations in some countries of Western and Eastern Europe, there were no successful revolutions. By 1923 it was understood that the crisis period had passed and the advanced economies had begun a period of steady economic growth in which mass radicalisation was less likely. By this time the bureaucracy was increasingly powerful within the USSR. Stalin led the consolidation of the distinctive class interests of the bureaucracy. He adopted ruthless means to promote these interests at the expense of the interests of the international working class, and his guiding project for this was "socialism in one country".

Given the industrially backward nature of the USSR's economy and the military threat from the industrially advanced countries, this translated into prioritising realpolitik in foreign policy; and consolidating the power of the bureaucracy at home as it intensified the extraction of surplus product from workers and peasants. In its first years the Communist International had been a means to bring together revolutionary parties around the world agitating against their respective capitalist and landlord classes, and against their trade union bureaucracies. Above all its orientation was to maintain independent working class organisations and politics. As the bureaucracy consolidated power, it turned the Communist International into an appendage of Stalinist foreign policy. The Communist International now aimed to cultivate friends in high places who would keep diplomatic and trade relations with the USSR. It was used to subordinate the Marxist movements of the colonies, to place Stalin's preferred henchmen in positions of power and to expel resisting members. Depending on the country, the Stalinised communist parties abandoned their previous criticisms of trade union bureaucracies, of social democratic parties, and even of bourgeois parties. Independent working class politics was rejected in favour of cross-class popular fronts of workers and the bourgeoisie where, inevitably, workers' movements had to limit themselves to demands that would be acceptable to the bourgeoisie.

To retain the ideological commitment of rank and file communists abroad, it was necessary to fabricate some semblance of continuity with the Marxist tradition. The stagist theory of historical development was the instrument for this. The stagist view holds that each national economy considered in isolation from the rest of the world must pass through a sequence of stages - apparently delineated in Marx's own writings - from feudalism to capitalist industrialisation to socialism. Applied to the colonial world, if colonialism hinders industrial development, then the first task is independent development under a national bourgeoisie that grows the industrial forces of the

country - rather than a comprador bourgeoisie that was a middleman for foreign imperialists and that refused to industrialise. During the anti-colonial struggle, this meant that workers' movements should tie themselves to the national bourgeoisie. This led to disasters like the failed Chinese revolution of 1925-27, when the Chinese Communist Party subordinated itself to the bourgeois nationalist party, the Kuomintang. The Kuomintang itself was under no illusion that the bourgeoisie and the revolutionary workers were on the same side, and it massacred communists when it gained control of cities.

Thus communist movements in places like India came to have a relation of compromise with their national bourgeoisies. They came to see forced industrialisation, led by a state bureaucracy with nationalised property in its hands, as a necessary stage of capitalist industrialisation before any workers' state can be attempted. It was a secondary issue whether this was done by a self-proclaimed Communist bureaucracy which nationalised the bulk of major means of production and left little room for private capital (Stalin's Russia or Mao's China), or by an avowedly bourgeois government that nationalised much less of the economy and left it largely in the hands of private capital (Nehru's state-led industrialisation drive in India). In this context some historians ran together the liberal ideology about a nation-building project that lifted all boats with a Stalinist view of a unilinear succession of stages of history for each nation-state considered in isolation. Thus the amalgam of liberal and "Marxist" views that Chibber notes was due to the ideological justification the Stalinist parties in India gave to their own members to account for why they took such a conciliatory position relative to the national bourgeoisie.

In the 1970s, after three decades of independence, the promises of independent economic modernisation lay unfulfilled. Much of this related to the role of the peasantry. The peasant class had been eliminated in Western Europe. The richer peasants turned into small capitalist farmers hiring waged labourers. Poorer peasants were dispossessed of their land and agricultural tools and were turned into propertyless wage workers. A portion of them remained in the countryside labouring on capitalist-owned farms, but the majority migrated to cities where jobs were more plentiful. These migrants, working alongside other migrants from different parts of the country or continent, shed many of the institutions, outlooks and beliefs of comparatively isolated rural life. Meanwhile industrial agriculture pushed out older farming techniques.

By contrast, there remains a large rural population in India. Some own a tiny plot of land but lack the capital to buy modern tools and inputs. Thus agricultural techniques may remain what they were centuries ago. Some owner-farmers may be in perpetual debt to a moneylender for seeds and fertiliser, and they must sell their crop to a big merchant - who may themselves be a descendant of the pre-capitalist landlord class. Some agrarian labourers are landless, but not wage workers in the same sense as wage workers in the West. They may be bonded labour for instance, sold into servitude in childhood by desperately poor parents. Being bonded to one landlord, they cannot leave the farm and look for another farm if the wages are too low. This echoes forms of unfree labour under feudalism, where peasants were tied to their landlord. Alongside these economic factors, there are political ones. Since pre-capitalist days the economic divisions between landlord, moneylender, merchant, rich peasant and poor peasant have been segmented by caste and communal politics. Much of this politics remains intact, including caste ideology and the upper caste and landlord militias who enforce it. The subaltern school seized on such economic and political differences to argue that capitalism and modernity were fundamentally different in India and in the West. As a consequence, they argued, Marxist historiography and categories would have to be revised and Marxist political programs rethought.

## Marxist views of capitalist development

Marxists accept that there are differences in the politics and economy of the advanced industrialised countries and the industrially backward countries. However they reject the view that the differences are fundamental enough to require altogether new theoretical categories. Rather, the fact that the two types of countries are part of the same fundamental system of world capitalism is what explains the observed differences in standard of living, social relations, and politics.

First, we can agree with parts of the subalternist critique of Stalinism. The Marxist theory of historical development is not unilinear and stagist. In the latter decades of his life Marx clarified this issue, noting that the slave labour form of ancient Greece and Rome was a peculiarity there, and not something that all parts of the world must pass through. Trotsky and others argued that, as compared to the early capitalist countries of Western Europe, social relations from the pre-capitalist tributary mode of production still persisted in a late industrialising country like Russia. Nonetheless Russia could transition straight to socialism so long as the necessary conditions obtained in Western Europe. Indeed, as a result of colonialism, all sorts of societies became capitalist without going through a tributary or feudal stage. Trotsky developed the idea of combined development to analyse the phenomenon of some pre-capitalist social relations being retained, rather than eliminated. The pre-capitalist and capitalist social relations did not exist unchanged side by side, but combined in ways that produced unexpected phenomena, including the particularly acute mass radicalisation that allowed workers' revolution to be tested in backward Russia before advanced Western Europe.

Similarly, the French Revolution was never understood as a schema for how capitalism would develop elsewhere. After the 1848 revolutions in Europe, Marx drew the lesson that revolutionary overthrow of the feudal class looked decreasingly likely as the path for instituting the social changes needed to promote capital accumulation. In the intervening years since the French Revolution of 1789, an organised working class movement had developed in parts of Western Europe. The bourgeoisie throughout the continent feared that the lower classes would seize any revolutionary opportunities to push things further and get rid of private property altogether. Meanwhile the feudal classes understood that to avoid being left behind in terms of industrial and military capacity, they had to emulate various capitalist relations from England. As a result, in Prussia and Japan reforms from above rather than revolution from below caused the state to prioritise capital accumulation and promote state-led industrialisation, even as the power of feudal classes was left intact. Moreover, Marx thought of the capitalist economies of England and France not as nationally delimited but as incorporating their colonies. This was reflected in the forced specialisation of the international economy, with some countries as centres of industry and others limited to agriculture and raw materials. Capitalist development would take different forms in different countries because of this specialisation.

Marxists diverge from subalternists in explaining the nature of postcolonial societies. The distinctive political features of countries like India or Saudi Arabia are comprehensible in the framework of capitalism understood as a social totality that is both internationally integrated and nationally mediated. Understanding the concrete manifestation of capitalism in any country requires a rigorous study of the historical experiences and traditions, economic factors and political agencies at play. Underlying this differentiation within the world economy however, is the fundamental unity of the system given by its laws of motion.

We can distinguish the laws of motion of the economy from the forms of exploitation (i.e. forms of extracting surplus product) that obtain within it. The laws of motion of capital are what define capitalist relations of production: most basically the investment of capital in order to expand it by extracting surplus value from workers, and then the other laws and tendencies that can be drawn

out from this by studying the processes of value production, competition and accumulation. The forms of exploitation include wage-labour, slave labour and serf labour.

For Marx, capitalist laws of motion can operate in the world economy even though in large parts of the world the forms of exploitation are not wage labour but slave labour (as in the slave plantations in the US) or serf labour (in British colonial India). He wrote about Indian peasants being increasingly subordinated to British merchant capital. Their immediate social relations resembled feudalism in that they retained customary use of a plot of land under the control of a landlord, and remained independent producers rather than having their labour managed by a capitalist. Yet other aspects of their social relations changed, and subjugated them to the accumulation of capital at the highest levels of the world economy. The peasant was increasingly under the thumb of a local moneylender who advanced seed money, a local crop merchant who bought up the harvest and then sold it on to the networks of the British merchant capital. Moreover, even though they are subjected to non-wage forms of exploitation, the laws of motion of capital affected the intensity of exploitation, the redesign of the production process, and the decision by exploiters whether to convert from one form of exploitation to another.

Indeed, the laws of motion of capital, applying equally in the West and in the postcolonial world, explain many differences and disparities between the two. Marx's general law of capitalist accumulation describes three related tendencies in world capitalism that are created by the techniques of competition. One is the concentration and centralisation of capital. With concentration the more competitive capitals use their profits to increase the capital they mobilise across a single plant or across a corporation with many plants. With centralisation the accumulated capital in many hands pools together in a smaller number of decision-making hands in order to undertake much larger profit-making enterprises. This is an international phenomenon, with concentration and centralisation in a handful of countries that change over time. Two, the general direction of productivity-raising techniques is to introduce more mechanisation and make the same volume of good with less labour. With international trade, the commodities produced by industrially advanced methods embodying comparatively little labour displace similar commodities produced with industrially backward methods embodying much more labour. This is a kind of unequal exchange that further concentrate profits in the industrially advanced regions and concentrates unemployment induced by cheaper imports in the industrially backward regions. Three, in the process of this competitive development of the production process, a reserve army of labour is created in a way that is concentrated in pockets on the international stage. This is technologically-induced unemployment and underemployment, both in terms of workers shed from a production process at home (industrially advanced) and in the sense of workers whose labour-intensive livelihood abroad (industrially backward) have bankrupted. The existence of this reserve limits the bargaining power of workers. The threat of the sack is politically powerful even when it does not reflect reality.

Despite these differences between the economy in Britain and in its colony, this did not mean that all forms of exploited labour were equally central to Marx's strategy for worldwide social revolution. The industrial proletariat of the world is central. This is because they work with extremely concentrated and highly productive means of production in their factories and in a handful of cities. If they can seize control over these means of production they can pull it out of the logic of competition for profit, and redirect it for a project of cooperation with the rest of the working classes and oppressed. Yet for Marx this does not mean that other oppressed classes are denied revolutionary agency. Marx was keenly interested in the Indian rebellion of 1857 and the Taiping rebellion in China in the 1850s. Above all, he supported those rebellions as anti-colonial or national liberation struggles. However he also saw in them the possibility of contributing to worldwide socialist revolution – even though those countries had relatively little modern industry. If we were to use Stalinist terms of analysis we would have to classify India and China in those days as being at a

pre-capitalist stage of development. Yet for Marx, because capitalism is a world system, class struggle in the colonies, including by labourers who are not subject to wage-labour forms of exploitation, could put pressure on capital in the imperial heartlands. The various forms of exploitation are knitted together by the laws of motion of capital. Rebellion in the East could aggravate political economic competition in the advanced industrialised countries like England, and create the conditions for the radicalisation of the industrial proletariat in Europe. Struggles by the peasantry in India could trigger world socialist revolution. That was in Marx's day. Today of course, there are also large and powerful industrial working classes in many non-Western countries - China, India, South Africa, Egypt, Mexico - whose role is crucial to any prospect for world social revolution.

Thus the central subalternist criticisms of Marxism are misplaced if we set aside Stalinist distortions. Marxism does not require that all countries travel the same sequence of economic stages. The universalisation of capital does not mean that the economic structure of all countries must look the same. It requires only that capitalist laws of motion dominate universally. What remains of the subalternist claim about fundamental differences between Western and postcolonial society is the view about the "subaltern domain of politics".

This pivots on blurring the line between sociology and political economy on one hand, and discourse, self-conceptions, and "political idioms" on the other. It may well be true that many rural communities in India use political idioms of community, kinship and traditional duties to express their own politics, rather than the idioms of individual rights or class interests. However, we cannot determine that some group has a different politics just by looking at the structure of their political discourse - because there is a political reality outside of that discourse. No matter what their political idioms, the laws of motion of capital are no less relevant to them. The political idioms do not change the fact that in their own struggles for a better life they will encounter state forces that are primarily concerned about capital accumulation and that treat them as mere tools for profit-making. The Marxist expectation still stands that the more they struggle, the more they will be forced to realise the inadequacy of some of their own self-conceptions and political strategies. Incidentally, there is nothing Eurocentric about this expectation. It is just as true that many European communities express their own politics and grievances in terms of traditional idioms. In the process of struggle Western workers are forced to realise that the traditions, religion, ethnicity, "small town values" and whatever else they share with their boss or with the police who come to break up their picket, counts for naught when they are getting in the way of profits.

The subalternist current of postcolonial theory, like the colonial discourse theory current, focuses on differences between the ideas, idioms, and politics of the West and the postcolonial world. For Marxists the foundation is what is common to the West and the postcolonial world - the capitalist mode of production, the laws of motion of capital. These laws of motion produce differences. They pit class against class, technologically advanced nation against technologically backward, coloniser against colonised. They create polarisation of wealth. They force specialisation in the international division of labour. Marxists expect the ideas, idioms, and concerns of people to be responses to social relations in which they find themselves. This is not the result of a will to power of Western civilisation. It does not result from the alleged nature of thought or language that we can only form an identity of our selves by contrasting a different, an Other. It is a result of the social relations that animate capitalism.

## CONCLUSION

The characteristic concerns of postcolonial theory are critiques of orientalist and Eurocentric ideology about the East, and the study of socio-political differences between Western and

postcolonial society. These concerns are better studied using a materialist and Marxist framework. The discourse theory and poststructuralism that dominates postcolonial theory is a hindrance to these concerns. Postmodernism has delighted in accusing Marxism of being a “grand narrative” – though in my view it is more accurate to call it grand theory, since it is grounded in observation and explanation of social relations. Yet postcolonial theory has its own grand narratives: philosophical speculations about identity and difference, and reifications of “civilisational psyches” so they can be studied by psychoanalysis. Since they are speculations ungrounded in social explanation, they fail to identify any mechanisms in social reality, and only sporadically provide insights. Moreover, these narratives misorient political strategy for the exploited of the postcolonial world. They lead away from understanding the strategic strengths that lie in the common interests of the international working class across coloniser and colonised countries. If they are politically effectual, they are prone to being yoked to nationalist and nativist political programs of asserting cultural and political difference against the Western states. Even at their most benign they do nothing to encourage a positively internationalist outlook. Instead they negatively attest to the cultural difference of the postcolonial subject, and pile up confessions of Eurocentric bias by Western subjects. Not only the study of postcolonial societies, but also the prospects for emancipation of the postcolonial oppressed, are better advanced by a Marxist standpoint than by postcolonial theory.

## **Sagar Sanyal**

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<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1928/3rd/index.htm>.

### *Footnotes*

1 The simplification is meant to capture the relevant outlook that is carried forward in postcolonial theory, and is not intended to do justice to the views of the writers discussed in this section. For Louis Althusser, ideology constitutes the subject, but he does not extend this to say that ideas or discourse constitute our way of knowing the objective world. He saw economics as the determining element “in the last instance”, making him more materialist than, say, Jacques Derrida’s discussion of texts alone to the exclusion of objective reality. Michel Foucault critiqued the discourses or epistemes (ways of knowing) around particular objects of knowledge, but appreciated that the discourses developed during a specific historical epoch (when great social and political changes were taking place that necessitated those epistemes).

2 Marxist dialectical materialism has often been criticised as deterministic. For a short, clear, response to this criticism, see the section “The structure of the dialectic” in John Rees, “Trotsky and the dialectic of history”, *International Socialism*, 47 (new series), pp113-135.

3 To give a sense of the close-knit circles from which these views emerged, Lévi-Strauss was a significant influence on Lacan. Althusser and Lacan worked together for a time. Foucault and Derrida studied under Althusser.

4 Said’s specific charges against Marx were based on writings that were relatively early in Marx’s career. Yet for the last 20-30 years of his life Marx was deeply interested in the history and present of non-European societies in seeking a more comprehensive theory of history, and a better orientation for international socialist politics. In the process he revised the very opinions Said criticised. I address some of the revisions below. The major work on this is Anderson 2016. For a more succinct account, see Lucia Pradella, “Marx and the Global South: connecting history and value theory”, *Sociology*, 51 (1), 2017.

5 Said 1995, pp203-4.

6 *ibid.*, pp2-3.

7 Lazarus 2002, p56.

8 Ahmad 2000, pp178-182.

9 Parry 2004, pp73-77.

10 Amin 2009. Most of my discussion of his work is from Part Three of the book. In relation to Part Two of this article, I should note that while Amin is explicitly critical of Stalin’s stagist theory of history, he retains some of the resulting distortions. He argues that the major underdeveloped countries must de-link from the world economy and initiate a period of independent capitalist development before there is any prospect of world social revolution.

11 There is some haziness about what writers in subaltern studies mean by “subaltern”. For the most part it seems to mean the peasantry or agricultural labour. A lot of the work is on the history of peasant struggles and peasant consciousness. But sometimes the term includes both the peasantry and at least the poorer sections of the urban working class. And sometimes it is not a class category at all but rather the collective noun for all who are oppressed and marginalised – including women and homosexuals.



12 Chibber 2013, Chapter 1, section 3. My characterisation of the major claims of subaltern studies is based on Chibber's book. I diverge from him in formulating my criticisms of these claims in terms of an "International Socialist" framework. More generally for an overview of subaltern studies, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, 2000, "A small history of subaltern studies", in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray (eds.), Blackwell, pp467-485. Chakrabarty was a founding member and prominent theorist of the subaltern studies collective.

13 For a discussion of why Althusser should be seen as part of the Stalinist distortions of Marxism see Chris Harman, "Philosophy and revolution", *International Socialism*, 2:21, 1983, Autumn.

14 The special circumstances are discussed in Chris Harman, *Explaining the crisis: a Marxist re-appraisal*, Bookmarks, 1984, Chapter 3; and Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: global crisis and the relevance of Marx*, Bookmarks, 2009, Chapter 7.

15 Brass 1991, pp173-205; and Brass 2014, pp3-32.

16 Trotsky 1929, Section I, "The program of the international revolution or a program of socialism in one country". See Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern*, Bookmarks, 1985, Chapters 4-7.

17 There is a longer history to this stagist, unilinear and determinist theory of historical development. Elements of it were present in the period of the Second International. For a brief discussion of this see Davidson 2012, pp190-197 on stagist currents in the Second International and Chapter 13 on the revival and consolidation of these currents under Stalinism.

18 Trotsky 1929, Section III, "Summary and Perspectives of the Chinese Revolution".

19 Davidson 2012, Chapters 9 and 10.

20 An early theorist of state-led programs of national economic development and rapid industrialisation to catch up to the more advanced capitalist economies was Friedrich List in the 1840s. For Marx's critiques of List, see Lucia Pradella, "New developmentalism and the origins of methodological nationalism", *Competition and Change*, 18 (4) April 2014, pp180-93.

21 Pradella 2013, pp121-122.

22 Banaji 1977.

23 For a look at how the opium trade of the 1800s connected up the London financial markets with Indian peasant labour in a single process of capital accumulation, see Jairus Banaji, "Seasons of Self-Delusion: Opium, Capitalism and the Financial Markets", *Historical Materialism*, 21 (2), 2013, pp3-19.

24 In several works over the past decade Lucia Pradella has emphasised that Marx's *Capital* must be understood as talking about a world economy, not a national economy. In the process she has used the discussion of the general law of capitalist accumulation in Chapter 25 of *Capital* to bring out the implicit theory of colonisation and imperialism. See for instance "Crisis, Revolution and Hegemonic Transition: The American Civil War and Emancipation in Marx's *Capital*", *Science & Society*, 80 (4), 2016, pp461-466; and "Beijing between Smith and Marx", *Historical Materialism*, 18, 2010, pp88-109.

25 Anderson 2016, Chapter 1.

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**P.S.**

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