

Review Essay

No Alternative

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Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital

By VIVEK CHIBBER

London & New York: Verso, 2013. Pp. 306. \$29.95/£19.99/\$31.50CAN

ISBN-13: 978-1-84467-976-8

Vivek Chibber's new book has stirred up a good amount of controversy and passionate position-taking in recent months. This review probes its avowedly Marxist critique of subaltern studies in order to test the validity of some of its central claims and to offer a provisional appraisal of its political implications. A related question is what such a critique might have to offer literary studies, postcolonial or otherwise.

Keywords: postcolonialism, Marxism, sociology, subaltern studies, South Asian studies

Is modernity truly one? Or are the various logics of social development across the globe so divergent as to obviate any unitary frame of reference? Will the underlying similarity of, say, the urban terrain in Kinshasa, Kolkata, and Kyoto—the high-rise architecture, the class-based topographies, the infrastructure, the stacked shop windows—ultimately attest to an identical social *form*, or will the virulent cultural differences visible in everyday life necessitate the fashioning of unique critical optics adequate to each city? Questions like these have been in currency for some time now, batted back and forth across a fault line demarcated by the warning signs: “Eurocentrism,” “Orientalism,” and “colonialist discourse,” among others. One way of answering them is to suppose that “modernity always unfolds within specific cultures or civilizations and that different starting points of the transition to modernity lead to different outcomes,” as the editorial blurb for the landmark collection *Alternative Modernities* stated in 2001.¹ This is, in the spirit of the title, provocatively to reframe the universal within the precincts of the particular, and so dismantle the epistemological presumptions implicit in the singularity of the master noun, thereafter

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1 See the back cover blurb for Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001).

tactically pluralized in accordance with the innumerable specificities it is obliged to traverse. Difference trumps identity. Another way, however, is to insist that “modernity,” evidently a muddy euphemism for something not yet adequately named, disclose its innermost impulse and “fundamental meaning” as global capitalism. “The standardization projected by capitalist globalization in this third or late stage of the system,” writes Fredric Jameson, “casts considerable doubt on all those pious hopes for cultural variety in a future world colonized by a universal market order.”² The bold procedure advocated at the end of his essay on “the ontology of the present”—namely, “substituting capitalism for modernity in all the contexts in which the latter appears” (215)—certainly has the virtue of making a mockery of the fatuous notion of “alternative capitalisms” translated out of the previous conceptual sally. The “singular modernity” that is capital’s domination of the planet here trumps all difference.

It looks like a stark opposition, and as with all oppositions, taking either side will tend to warp your view of the opponent, so that the unpredictable “different outcomes” projected by the thesis of alternative modernities will likely come to appear either evasively noncommittal, or worse, utopian in the bad sense, to the proponent of a “singular modernity,” whose standing commitments to the relentless monotony of the rhythm and logic of capital will surely appear blinkered and rigidly *a priori* to the eye immersed in the riot of cultural detail churned up by the empirical investigations of the “alternativist.” And here comes to light a pronounced theoretical antagonism on either side of the old base/superstructure divide, once thought abandoned to the ashcan of history: for the thesis of alternative modernities is powerfully attracted to matters of cultural and political differentiation, supposedly “superstructural” constraints whose unsuspected determining function with regard to the political complexion of the state now seem more fundamental than the mode of production itself; although the “singular modernist” will always prefer to emphasize the impersonal economic laws of accumulation, in all their remorseless universality, invisibly but predictably informing the trajectories of cultural and political motion within the nation state. The shorthand for this antagonism is Gramsci vs. Marx, an ultimately unsatisfactory and stereotyped opposition within the Left that has nevertheless had a profound role in shaping the nature of contemporary debate about the largest and most urgent geopolitical and world-systemic problems on our immediate agenda—a good many of which have been the preoccupations of postcolonial theory, the academic domain where these divisions have been simmering for decades.³

Vivek Chibber’s new book enters this fractured terrain with all the diplomacy of a stinging backhand across the face. Chibber’s self-appointed role as scourge of the motley charlatans of postcolonial studies has certainly made a dramatic impact in the field: in the few months since publication, the book has been the subject of not a few intemperate controversies in the blogosphere, the central exhibit in some high-profile

2 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 12–13.

3 Tim Brennan begins his stinging review of Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya’s co-edited *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (London: Routledge, 2012) with the words “Postcolonial studies has always been deeply divided politically. These divisions signal sharply opposed, not just different, relationships to theory and history.” See Brennan, “Joining the Party,” *Postcolonial Studies* 16:1 (2013): 68. This review, along with Chibber’s book, seems to signal a new open phase in the ongoing hostilities between the two main camps.

roundtables, and—in the most extraordinary incident to date—the bone of contention between the author himself and one of his more extensively derided victims during a special session at the Historical Materialism 2013 conference in New York.⁴ There is no question that the book was intended to detonate under the comfortable and hitherto relatively untouchable backsides of not the usual targets of Marxian critique—the Bhabhas and Spivaks of the world—but the rigorous historical scholars of subaltern studies, in particular and in great focus, Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee. And detonate it has, bringing out in stark and often somewhat caricatured relief what a certain strain of contemporary Marxism thinks of postcolonial theory in its most esteemed contemporary mode—namely that, whatever its empirical successes, it is at the level of theory a crypto-irrationalist ideological obscurantism, actively misrepresenting capitalism while kitted up in the style of radicalism best suited to institutional success in the Western academy.

The critical targeting of subaltern studies as “a distinct, influential, and representative stream within postcolonial studies” (9) allows Chibber the advantage of remaining on home turf for the duration of his critique—as a practicing sociologist and historian, this spares him the potential awkwardness of challenging the more literary and outright theoretical speculations of some of the other “streams.” Indeed, as we shall see, there appears to be not a little discomfort as regards theory more generally on these pages, and the axiomatic decision to avoid its headier reaches in favor of a single, relatively empirical constellation means that Chibber can limit what one takes to be his scorn for an entire species of discourse. So it is, at any rate, that his book limits its in-depth critical analyses to a clutch of the classics of subalternism—Guha’s *Dominance without Hegemony* (1997), Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), and Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) and *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986)—as representative of the school’s theoretical agreements. The overarching idea is to distill from the often very complicated and richly detailed investigations of these scholars a consistent set of methodological principles that decants, as method and discourse, into a damaging ideology. More than that, however, Chibber offers a set of counterarguments and materialist principles with which to contest the failings of subalternist ideology affirmatively; critique modulates in the central chapters with a detailed program for future materialist work in the field.

Chibber is particularly concerned to address the creeping irrationalism implicit in what he conceives of as a wrong turn taken at a “fork in the road” twenty years ago by the collective in his sights: “the turn in subaltern studies away from its roots in cultural Marxism and toward the greener pastures of poststructuralist irrationalism.” (283). This version of events is familiar to most of us by now, and is consistent with Vinayak Chaturvedi’s observation, as early as 2000, that the subaltern studies project had broken with the “heterodox Gramscian Marxism which had informed its founding theoretical charter” and moved steadily toward an accommodation with the

4 This debate has itself been the subject of innumerable position-takings, on either side, with a fair majority giving victory to the aged warrior Partha Chatterjee over his Young Turk rival. Chatterjee’s performance is indeed a bravura one; his tactical decision to out-Marx the Marxist on spec is masterfully carried out. See the clip at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbM8HJrxSJ4>.

“post-Marxist contours” of a new institutional dominant.⁵ Chibber’s ire is most evidently directed at those pressure points in the discourse where this wholesale capitulation to “poststructuralist irrationalism” leaks through and travesties the project; he is also determined to show how that “heterodox Gramscian Marxism” was always and already contaminated by spores of an insidious tendency—call it “culturalism”—that compromised its very charter.

Chibber’s case against subaltern studies can be condensed into the following articulated suite of claims: that subalternism misreads the nature of so-called “bourgeois revolution” in Europe, so cannot properly understand its deviant “failure” in the East;⁶ that it paradoxically fails to see that the true democratic agent in all transitions to capitalism is the organized working class; that its knee-jerk reaction away from all things “universalist” disables it from thinking adequately about capitalism (whose universalizing tendency, Chibber is at pains to show, is perfectly consistent with entrenched cultural differences in the classes it exploits); that the manifold “differences” of the East, so often accentuated by the subalternist group and elevated to a sort of ontological schism in the checkerboard of capital, are—apart from their Orientalist flavor—not *limits* to capital so much as they are *opportunities* for predictable kinds of capitalist division and exploitation; that the particularist case against Marxist *abstraction* signally does not grasp the true meaning of “labor-power” as an impersonal and systemic market norm; that the dismissive critique of all theories of “interest” as regards subcontinental subalterns, on the basis that interest is *ipso facto* a bourgeois form of mentality, leaves the school dangerously exposed to the charge of a pure relativism that overlooks the fundamental human interest to secure well-being (which Chibber tells us is individual before it is collective—the inverse of the subaltern case for *a priori* communitarian identification); and that the subalternist case for an ongoing, stubborn, systemic resistance to capitalism in India and elsewhere, on the part of indissoluble peasant bonds and norms, fails to establish any real antagonism in social space, and at best merely shows how several economic and social modes can coexist under a given dominant—scarcely a radical claim.

The net result of this profusion of errors and deviations is, in the first place, an ideological mystification of the classical type; as Chibber sums it up:

Capitalism turns into something quite mysterious within Subalternist theorizing. Even though the word appears with numbing regularity in their analyses, it is shorn of its central causal properties. Their “capitalism” generates a bourgeoisie that bears little or no resemblance to the actual historical actor; it creates power relations that capture only a small subset of actual forms of dominations wielded by capital; it lacks the abiding structural power that we have seen it actually exercise [...] (288)

Unable to explain capitalism, subaltern studies lapses into Orientalist essentialism just where it ought to be pressing hard on the true novelties of global economic

5 “Introduction,” in Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000), vii.

6 And there is much resonance between Chibber’s arguments for a nondemocratic European bourgeoisie and Neil Davidson’s striking work, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012).

domination. Second, and we gather even more infamously, it is a capitulation to irrationalism that flies in the face of inexorable Enlightenment principles of reason, secularism, and universalism. Here, subaltern studies all too clearly betrays its genetic allegiance to deconstruction and the upper reaches of what Chibber (with a shudder) calls “Grand Theory” (287–288)—all those regrettable poststructuralist tendencies of the 1980s associated with relativism, the critique of Enlightenment and the “literary” linguistic turn. In his footnotes Chibber keeps up a steady background campaign against all residual traces of the theoretical turn (e.g., “even referring to [Baudrillard’s] work for guidance is rendered out of the question,” 127), while his critique of Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* unleashes a disdain for all signs of the Hegelian dialectic, a vice that leads poor Chakrabarty into a “self-indulgent style of theorizing, whereby the search for ever more abstruse formulations often overtakes any discernable interest in communication” (220). Chibber, having kept his wits about him, and not succumbed to the siren songs of grand theory, can thus describe no less a critic than Robert J. C. Young “spectacularly mistaken” about postcolonial studies’ debts to, and continuities with, the radical Marxist legacy (290), since Marxism is here defined by its incontestable position within the Enlightenment as much as by its ability to specify the logic of capitalism. Chibber’s book is a defense of reason, of the universal, and of the value of speaking plainly and clearly about the structures of dominance, in the East and in the West.

It is, in that sense, a remarkably one-sided version of Marxism on offer in these pages. One of the earliest critical responses to *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* accused the book of being “one of the least dialectical, most flatfooted ‘Marxist’ texts” in recent years, and this charge (which extends to the claim that Chibber’s book is “not even Marxist”) is, on the whole, quite fair.⁷ The consequences at the level of theory are substantial, not least in the very identification and calling-out of the enemy. As I started out by arguing here, taking sides in the antagonism between Gramsci and Marx on the ground of social theory tends to warp or overdetermine one’s view of the other side; it could be argued that Chibber’s book is one long, distemperate construction of an *imago* of subaltern studies that flattens it into a caricature, a negative imprint of what this work is offering us. Deaf as Chibber is to what theory and the dialectic have to offer social cognition, those elements of postcolonial theory are either dismissed as so much irrationalism and obfuscation, or simply not registered—a result that renders the opponent as one-dimensional as the Weberian analytic Marxism championed by Chibber. As many readers will be aware, that is to strip the work of Chakrabarty, Chatterjee, and others of precisely their dialectical spark and agility; and so to misread their analyses. By reducing them to ideologists of the particular, Chibber has the advantage of wielding the universal to chastise and belittle their efforts, but the result is that there is no dynamic interplay between the particular and the universal, between Gramsci and Marx, only the pure hostility of a lifeless opposition.

Consider one of the most important Marxist concepts to have emerged *après* Marx: the notion of “uneven and combined development” as this was first sketched by

7 Chris Taylor, “Not Even Marxist: On Vivek Chibber’s Polemic against Postcolonial Theory,” April 29, 2013, *Of C. L. R. James*, at <http://clrjames.blogspot.com.au/2013/04/not-even-marxist-on-vivek-chibbers.html>.

Trotsky and filled in by later theorists such as Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, and Perry Anderson. It is a concept only in fetal state on the pages of *Capital*, but under this subsequent nurturing, seems best qualified to account for much of what Chibber's book wants to reprimand the subalternists for ignoring: the economic pressures put on nation states by a world market in which each is inserted differently; the frequent maintenance of distinct, precapitalist modes of production within and alongside advanced industrial production; the distinction between real and formal subsumption within the capitalist economy; and the readiness of capital to accept differential wage rates in different geographical locations. And yet this concept, so useful to the kind of critique Chibber *seems* to want to make, is only mentioned once, five pages from the end of the book, and gestured at in passing on page 245. The reason is surely that, for all that the concept illuminates precisely the terrain covered in this book, it does not do so in a compatible way. When Bloch writes about various temporalities beating in the heart of the present, or Jameson about the social and cultural dissonances that arise from uneven development, what is most evident is that there is no way of representing this imbrication of modes of production effectively without employing a dialectical style. Only a dialectical presentation can capture the acute existential and epistemological torsion at stake in the palimpsest-like social formation of capitalist India or communist Russia—and a dialectical style is what Chibber's method is dedicated to invalidating. Sociological and analytic Marxism of this sort is incompatible with the giddy transformations of an idea as it passes back and forth between the specific conjuncture and the universal frame; between the local situation and the global trend; between the particular product and the universal equivalent; between the superstructural detail and the economic ground. Where the style of an Adorno or a Jameson is tailored to these vertiginous shifts up and down the scale of social reality, Chibber's is myopically trained on the "clear and distinct" idea itself; a Cartesian prejudice of the Enlightenment that sees all deviation from rational method as inherently reactionary.

There are several salutary achievements to Chibber's work. I particularly appreciated the detailed and useful recounting of what, exactly, labor power is as an abstract category; the astute critique of the idea of a democratizing middle class; the just emphasis on working-class politics with regard to the establishment of egalitarian norms; and, indeed, the demotion of a culturalist Gramscianism in favor of a more rigorous economic determinism. Others will perhaps appreciate the account Chibber gives of the "universalism" of labor under capital, and its attachment to a roster of individual interests dictating decisions about being—though I am much more skeptical of these and would counter that it is only *collective* interests that finally decide the complexion of a given state of economic and political affairs. Overall, I would even say that this intervention as a whole is itself salutary to the extent that it shakes us out of our complacency and requires us, again, to examine our presumptions about what is, and what is not, a valid mode of inquiry into the logic of our world. And yet, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* is not, in the end, that valid mode of inquiry, because its Marxism is more one-dimensional than can currently be useful. Particularly for students of literature and culture more generally, there is little here—beyond the delineation of some very pertinent lines of force and laws of domination—to offer a thoughtful contemporary approach to representational

dynamics and antinomies in the world system. Readers will sometimes be reminded of the intervention made by Aijaz Ahmad in 1992's *In Theory*—another Marxist rebuttal of complacencies and mystifications in postcolonial thought—but where Ahmad's writing was rife with inspirational suggestions for literary study, Chibber's forecloses any such meditation through its intransigent contempt for theory as such, let alone any non-Cartesian style. Cognate efforts to dismantle a certain strand of postcolonial studies from within the “softer” humanities—work in the materialist tradition by Tim Brennan, Arif Dirlik, Neil Larsen, Neil Lazarus, Benita Parry, and Biodun Jeyifo, among others—promise much more to the future of critical thought than what is finally a rather shrill work of propaganda on behalf of a left sociology that has cut from the heart of the Marxist tradition it speaks for all the most extraordinary and dialectical thinkers. The cloud of puffery that surrounds it—from Žižek, Chomsky, and Brenner, among others—will soon clear.