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SUBALTERN STAKES

With dialectics, the mob comes to the top.[1]
—Friedrich Nietzsche

Frantz fanon, or at least his American translators, famously wrote of a dying colonialism.* If today we hear of a dying postcolonialism, it is because no amount of parsing can rid the term of its many ironies. Alongside the 'post' of a supposed aftermath lies the metallic reality of a penetrating, if at times indirect, imperialism—still deepening in Puerto Rico and Palestine, and recently expanding into significant new territory in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Ukraine, replete with their pro-Western juntas and complicit local satrapies. Colonialism, it seems, is not altogether dead. The immiseration wrought by capital continues to express itself in broadly cultural, not only military or financial, ways, displaying all the hallmarks of that older system of resettlement and re-education. Quite apart from the Western dominance of global news, entertainment and trends in higher education, a massive diaspora of semi-permanent legions of Western tourists, expatriate fun-seekers, missionaries, mercenaries, academic theorists, real estate speculators, and diplomatic ensembles, all make the late-nineteenth-century era of the Berlin Treaty look comparatively underdeveloped.

The term 'postcolonial' is constitutively troubled, then, since it carries with it the strategic temporizing of its inception—the incongruity of its discursive tones and themes, in contrast with a rather blunter reality of imperial propaganda, foreign torture chambers and the stealing of others' lands. Against this stark backdrop, the debates prompted by Vivek Chibber's magisterial *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* seem a little narrow.[2] To lay bare the inner workings of the influential academic field known as 'postcolonial theory', as he sets

out to do, would first require clarity about this catachresis at the core of its idea—some account of how the earlier traditions of anti-colonial thought suddenly, and violently, became *post*colonial in a hostile takeover in the metropolitan academy of the mid-1980s.

Postcolonial studies emerged uncertainly, without even a settled name, primarily within academic departments of literature. In retrospect, certain signature events appear now to have helped call it into life: the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, the conference on 'Europe and its Others' at Essex University in 1984, and the special issue on 'Race, Writing, and Difference' from *Critical Inquiry* (1985), the most prestigious American journal in the humanities. As the postcolonial began to coalesce around a number of related themes, its brief acquired consistency: to expand university curricula in order to include non-Western sources, to uncover and promote historical acts of native resistance, and to challenge the misrepresentations of imperial history, forging a new vocabulary to contest Eurocentrism. On all of these grounds, the initiative proved very successful and its effects—not only in scholarship but in mainstream publishing and the arts—have, over the years, been largely positive.

Othering Europe

Although the creation of English departments, postcolonial inquiry was far from only literary. Already by the early 1970s, disciplinary revolutions prompted by the unsettlings of Franco-German 'theory' had yielded mixed kinds of writing in the literary field itself—works of philosophy, really, that combined the techniques of ethnography and history in a language speckled with Marxist and anarchist terms and attitudes. To most in the humanities at the time, postcolonial studies simply *was* cultural theory in one of its specialized institutional forms—that is, predominantly continental, and largely psychoanalytic, semiotic, and phenomenological. These particular strands of the philosophical past were now wedded, as though they possessed a genetic compatibility, to a critique of Eurocentrism. 'Postcolonial theory', then, was the name

* I would like to thank Keya Ganguly for her help with this essay.

[1] *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche,* vol. 16, ed. Oscar Levy, London 1909–13, p. 12. Nietzsche loathed subalterns, denouncing Socratic dialectics for placing the lower classes at centre stage.

[2] London and New York 2013.

that came to be affixed to an unlikely marriage—an othering of Europe articulating itself in the concepts of a specialized group of European philosophers and their various late twentieth-century disciples in an ambiguous rejection of 'Western Man'. The content of this theoretical amalgam in all of its variants—drawn primarily from Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger by way of postwar interpreters such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault—stitched together a number of plausible, but not obviously related, themes: scepticism towards the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment, the idea of 'otherness' as an ontological fact (in the form of being or alterity), and the death of the historical subject as a willed or active self. With unfeigned militancy, theory set about codifying forms of resistance that explicitly precluded Marxist contributions to anti-colonial independence, not simply as the by-product of its search for fresh paradigms, but as a central and self-defining *telos*.

Postcolonial studies gained momentum in an environment marked by the end of the postwar economic boom (1972), the media rhetoric of what Fred Halliday at the time called the 'Second Cold War' (1983), and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989). Under these pressures, the thematic emphasis tended to shift away from wars of manoeuvre to the mutual complicity of colonizer and colonized, from class antagonisms to migrancy and 'sly civility', from a struggle over political sovereignty to a rejection of the so-called oppressiveness of modernity, on the one hand, and the 'productivist' bias of political economy, on the other. This volatile ensemble, militant in tone but resonating with more conventional attitudes in the general culture, swept victoriously through the humanities and into the arts, anthropology, history, geography, and political science. As the laboratories of theory, literature departments found themselves in the vanguard. No field was left untouched by their initiatives under the sign of 'the subject', 'difference', and the 'interstices'. The irrepressible élan of the larger movement made proclamations of a 'Copernican break' seem reasonable. New journals came into being to give the new agenda a voice—*Interventions, Postcolonial Studies, Transition, Public Culture*—and older venerated journals were retooled to fit the new dispensation. A pantheon was born, whose principal figures are now widely known—Edward Said, whose *Orientalism* was supposed to be the field's founding document, but with elaborations later provided—in a very different vein—by scholars like Gayatri Spivak, Peter Hulme, Abdul JanMohamed, Homi Bhabha, and many others.

The emergence of subalternism

Subaltern studies, by contrast, had a very different aetiology. It was developed by mostly Indian social historians rather than cultural critics, and before 1988 remained influential, but only relatively so, and within a small orbit. Launched in 1982 by Ranajit Guha in a three-volume series on colonial India—it would later grow to more than ten volumes—this was above all a rebellion against the elite historiography of the Indian freedom movement. By reading between the lines of official documents, or extrapolating from new archival discoveries, they sought to provide a portrait of the intelligence and improvisational skill of peasant insurgents. If their Marxism was somewhat unorthodox, they nevertheless drew their inspiration from Antonio Gramsci's supple theories of hegemony, the state, 'common sense', and, of course, the 'subaltern' itself, one of his major coinages in the *Prison Notebooks*.[3] Guha's teacher had been instrumental in bringing Gramsci to the attention of intellectuals in West Bengal, where his writings had been enthusiastically discussed since the 1950s—in the translations of the US edition of 1957. The movement also took some of its impetus from important precedents in the antinomian histories from below produced by veterans of the Communist Party Historians Group in Britain, especially perhaps Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels,* Rodney Hilton's *The English Rising of 1381* and Edward Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.

By 1986, the focus of the subaltern group was beginning to shift away from the spontaneous consciousness of peasant rebellion. In place of anecdotal accounts of local struggles, one was more likely to find a sweeping interrogation of 'modernity'. As one of the original members Sumit Sarkar himself lamented, the presence of subalterns in their work waned, replaced by a stress on historical ruptures, the dangers of universalism, and the 'fragment'—an open-ended, ahistorical datum offering itself up to hermeneutical improvisation while resisting incorporation into a theory of the social whole. Truth came to be defined more as *need*—that is, as what one could make out of the record for one's purposes. History, the suspect progressivism of a narrowly empiricist historical materialism, was held to be inferior to subaltern *memory* and

[3] For a sense of how 'theory' affected the reading of Gramsci in India, see the proceedings of a workshop on Gramsci and South Asia at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta 1987, repr. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30 January 1988.

the felt realities of indigenous 'culture'. Subaltern studies, in short, had discovered postcolonial theory.

In time the relationship came to be formalized. The official enlistment of subaltern studies into postcolonial theory took place when Spivak, along with Guha, edited a collection of the group's essays from the 1980s, with a foreword by Said. *Selected Subaltern Studies* (1988) essentially inducted them into the larger field, although this required a good deal of conceptual translation. In order to welcome subaltern studies into the emergent camp of postcolonial theory, Spivak had to get around the problem that its historians were focused on individual and collective subjects whom they had described as sentient, feeling, struggling actors in history, as opposed to representational 'traces'. Spivak's delicate operation was to allow 'subjects' to be both there and not there at the same time, permitting tactical allusions to the (illusory) subject in pursuit of a larger project, which she called the 'critical force of anti-humanism'. It was by entering this discursive milieu that subaltern studies acquired the theoretical credentials that gave it international prominence, in turn rendering it a conduit for postcolonial notions in the social sciences.

Chibber's intervention

Vivek Chibber's study took shape in the force fields of this history, if not always in full awareness of its details. A professor of sociology at New York University, Chibber had already written a favourably received book, *Locked in Place: State-Building and Late Industrialization in India*.[4] This finely textured study of the post-colonial Indian state explored the dynamic relative power of bourgeois interests in the demobilization of labour. The long chapter on the 'myth of the developmental bourgeoisie', in particular, anticipates some of his arguments in the new book, proposing, for example, that the new India—unlike China and Russia—had set out along a capitalist path as though to show that 'planning need not presuppose the abolition of property, but could, in fact, be harnessed to the engine of capitalist accumulation'.[5] Its development was blocked, however, by 'the widespread and organized resistance of the business class'.[6]

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[4] Princeton 2003.
[5] *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, p. 3.
[6] *Postcolonial Theory*, p. 85.

Still, little in this earlier study would prepare anyone for the event that *Postcolonial Theory* became, not least because Chibber had never travelled in postcolonial circles and was entirely unknown there. Accused by some of caricaturing the subaltern project, of being inauthentically postcolonial, too Europe-focused, or hyperbolic, the book has risen above much of this criticism to be respectfully discussed in specialist sociology journals, highbrow French Maoist reviews, Indonesian newspapers, American crossover magazines, and the blogosphere.[7] Featured at *Historical Materialism* conferences in New Delhi, New York, and London in 2013, and debated in academic conferences and round tables, it triggered revealing exchanges between Chibber and his detractors. His ripostes have been vigorous, enlightening, and for the most part, persuasive.

The arguments laid out in the book, after all, are nothing if not well-supported, at least on the grounds that he chooses. Chibber's procedure is to restate the claims of subaltern studies—his paradigm case for postcolonial theory generally—letting it speak for itself in lengthy quotations, and then submitting these claims to a series of tests. This is very thoroughly done, and it is among the most distinctive features of the book. His conclusion is that the subaltern studies understanding of capitalism is flawed, its portrait of Marxism distorted and tendentious, and its insistence on the cultural difference of subaltern consciousness uncomfortably essentialist. In fact, it is a new, if concealed and self-alienating, return to the orientalist claim that rationalism, secularism, and realism are disqualified from being of the 'East', that only the absolutely peripheral has found a space outside the hold of the ideologically polluted West, and then only so long as it is fixed in its otherness, impervious to any other otherness.

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[7] Among the most balanced and informative discussions of the book is Pranav Jani's 'Marxism and the Future of Postcolonial Theory', *International Socialist Review* 92, Spring 2014. For a highly informed scholarly treatment, see the Ho-fung Hung roundtable, featuring George Steinmetz, Bruce Cumings and other social scientists, in 'Review Symposium on Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*', *American Sociological Association*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2014. For critiques of Chibber from the left that demonstrate real familiarity with postcolonial theory—many reviews do not—see, for example, Julian Murphet, 'No Alternative', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 1, no. 1, March 2014, and Axel Andersson, 'Obscuring Capitalism: Vivek Chibber's Critique of Postcolonial Theory', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 6 November 2013. For a defence of subaltern studies against Chibber, see Partha Chatterjee, 'Subaltern Studies and *Capital*', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 14 September 2013, and Gayatri Spivak (cited below).

Building his case on a close reading of three of the principals affiliated with the subaltern studies collective—Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty—Chibber fixes his attention on what he considers the cornerstones of their supposed revision. These involve postulating the failure of capital to universalize itself in India; and the consequent inability of the Indian elites, in contrast with their European predecessors, to achieve hegemony by way of democratic institutions: the Indian bourgeoisie was not heroic but timid, and Indian subalterns were marked by an obdurate cultural difference resistant to Western norms—religious modes of thought primarily, but also practices of kinship and loyalty that made Western modernity a closed book.

Chibber refutes these assertions effectively, with a great deal of evidence and counter-argument, amplifying contentions found in others before him.[8] He explains, reasonably, that the subalternists confuse universality with homogeneity; that, contrary to their flattened portrait of capital's logic, its own history even in Europe was as uneven, non-linear and complex as in the global periphery. Moreover, it is undeniable that the material needs of life—food, housing, and shelter—motivate subaltern classes everywhere. Struggle over them is, in fact, the *universal* condition of conflict between elites and the poor. For its part, the bourgeoisie of Europe displayed the same timidity and treachery as its Eastern counterparts, and, like the latter, had to be pushed from below in order to make possible the establishment of basic democratic institutions.

A history misperceived

Here, however, despite the argument's firm ground, we begin to see *Postcolonial Theory*'s lack of contact with the ideological universe it set out to diagnose. To claim, as Chibber does, that subaltern studies is postcolonial theory's 'most illustrious representative' is not only to reverse the order of influence, but to fail to see that internalizing the already entrenched positions of postcoloniality allowed the subalternists to acquire a more general reach.[9] So it is not that postcolonial theory 'became influential'—as he writes—when it allied itself with subaltern studies, but the other way around.

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[8] For instance, Tom Brass and Sumit Sarkar in Vinayak Chaturvedi, ed., *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, London and New York 2000, pp. 127–62, 300–23.

[9] *Postcolonial Theory*, p. 5.

The book's reception has to this degree been frustrating. It is as though on one side we find in boldface a renewed emphasis on class, revolution and capital; on the other, 'subaltern thought'; but in neither, any attention to how structural adjustment, World Bank austerity measures, or Natopolis are mediated by living agents, repudiating the claim that capital's imposed limitations are natural laws impervious to the rebels' logic. Between Chibber and his detractors, thought and structure have been kept safely distant from one another. On one side of the agon, materialism appears as a bulwark against the vagaries of the contradictory; on the other, the contingent is home to a sacred principle, a barrier against all determinations. Since the politics of subaltern studies took shape in the elevation of signifying or discursive regimes, we might say that the problem of the *literary* reverberates throughout the debates around Chibber's book: in part, as he would have it, in the form of an idealizing, culturalist contamination, but also—in a move he neglects—as the concern of one of the most vital currents of twentieth-century Marxism itself. To this degree, the literary remains the blind spot of an otherwise admirable polemic.

What would it take to challenge fully the claims of postcolonial theory? It would, at the very least, involve questioning the field's self-conception as a Copernican break; and it would take submitting its purportedly anti-Eurocentric theoretical basis to greater scrutiny, in a more intellectual-historical investigation going beyond Chibber's comparative study of capital transition and bourgeois revolution. Both lines of questioning take us, somewhat unexpectedly, back to the interwar era.

Seeing itself as an inaugural leap, postcolonial theory makes an extreme claim: that all scholarship in the west before it should be considered nothing less than 'an embarrassment'—as one set of commentators put it—marked by shameful neglect of third-world emergence and non-Western ways of being.[10] But such a charge elides the insurgent sociologies, oral histories, and black and ethnic studies of the preceding generation; it moves one to write, as postcolonial critics frequently have, as though there had been no early twentieth-century scholarship on the impact of global capitalist expansion, no economic theorizations of the system known—for the first time—as imperialism itself; no critical

[10] Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman, 'Introduction: The Globalization of Fiction/the Fiction of Globalization', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 100, no. 3, 2001.

explorations of the political aesthetics of the Latin American 'boom' in the 1970s; and, for that matter, no dependency or world systems theory.

Anti-colonialism in Europe

Key precursors were left out of the conversation, even as their ideas were often quietly borrowed: Jean-Paul Sartre and *Les Temps modernes*; the Chilean media critique led by Armand Mattelart in the early 1970s; the writings of Oliver Cromwell Cox on race and class; Basil Davidson on African state-formation; Leo Wiener on the role of Africa in the pre-Columbian New World; the acute imperial histories of James Morris, V. G. Kiernan, and Eric Wolf; C. L. R. James on Lenin and black liberation. All at once these rich contributions—really part of a substantial, interlocking system of writing in the broadly Marxist environs of critical theory, left philology and the solidarity movements—were abruptly severed from the present.

Postcolonial theory thus implausibly presented itself as a kind of 'year zero' of anti-colonial thought; the prevailing assumption has been that the early twentieth century, prior to postwar decolonization, was 'a period of largely uncontested imperialist enthusiasm'.[11] But this is to overlook the years between the two world wars, when European consciousness of the colonies abruptly changed. A new culture of anti-colonialism grew up and thrived in the art columns of left newspapers, cabarets of the political underground, and the cultural groups of the Popular Front. Shock waves from the Russian revolution on Europe's eastern periphery were dramatically and immediately felt throughout Asia and the Middle East. International organizations sprang up, bringing emissaries from throughout the colonies, meeting European intellectuals on a formally equal footing in a single front with a shared anti-imperial agenda.[12] Intellectual ferment on this scale was a rarety in European history. The sponsorship of anti-colonial rhetoric and practice created a massive

[11] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York 1993, p. xix.

[12] M. N. Roy, in a familiar kind of criticism, rightly excoriated the Third International for its 'defective understanding of the situation in other countries', and for 'projecting Russian problems' onto their realities (*The Communist International*, Bombay 1943, pp. 42–3). But like others, he recognized that the International created networks, devised rhetorical weapons, and gave material assistance that became models for postwar decolonization.

repertoire of images, tropes, and vocabularies that hovered over everyone's thinking—from right to left—throughout the period.

Sensitive engagement with non-western cultures and thinkers—in the work, among others, of Ilya Ehrenburg, M. N. Roy, Larissa Reissner, Nancy Cunard, and Sergei Tretiakov—a deeply ethical resistance to empire—in Willi Münzenberg, Rosa Luxemburg, César Vallejo, George Padmore, and Ho Chi Minh, all active in Europe during these years—an examination of the aesthetic and epistemological rubrics of colonial rule—in Carl Einstein, Paul Nizan, Diego Rivera, and Alejo Carpentier—these were initiated not by the postcolonial turn of the 1980s and after, but much earlier, between the world wars, and by intellectuals white and black, European and non-European, in the broad ambit of the international communist movement. Chibber mentions in passing Karl Kautsky, Leon Trotsky, and others who explored the dynamics of agrarian economy and uneven development, but the sense of this broader politico-cultural history is missing, and its vexing relationship to theory and method goes undiagnosed.

Racism in philosophy

As for postcolonial theory, we need a better sense of its own prehistory, above all, with respect to the neo-racialisms of the interwar philosophical *demi-monde* upon which it drew. For what needs to be acknowledged are the ways in which postwar French thought wove together the threads of a German philosophy least compatible with it. The main strands in this fabric were, firstly, the key interwar reception of Nietzsche's earlier *Grosse Politik,* the 'great politics' of a new cosmopolitan elite that would beckon resentful proletarians to go to the colonies where they might escape socialist enslavement and rediscover their manhood by bringing colonial subjects into line;[13] secondly, the *Kriegsideologie* of Martin Heidegger and others who sought to save German civilization with a new imperium enriched by German metaphysical depth, fighting the shallow shopkeeper mentality of the twin behemoths, Washington and Moscow; and, finally, Edmund Husserl's phenomenological paeans to the European mind as against the intellectual poverty of its global minions.[14] Leading

[13] *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche,* vol. 9, pp. 215–17; vol. 10, p. 78; vol. 12, p. 196; vol. 13, p. 224.

[14] Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* [1935], New York 1965, pp. 149–92.

the postwar enthusiasms—and creating a paradigm for so much of what theory later became—were Georges Bataille, who playfully subverted the ideals of anticolonial liberation in *The Accursed Share* (1949), and Alexandre Kojève, whose profound influence on postwar French thought is commonly recognized.[15]

Europe, which Kojève called 'the vanguard of humanity', faced the spectre of its own end, he argued, in the postwar 'Sino-Soviet actualization of Robespierrian Bonapartism'. Sneering at the 'accession of Togoland to independence' and 'the self-determination of the Papuans', Kojève considered such movements little more than a communist bid to eliminate 'the numerous more or less anachronistic sequels to its pre-revolutionary past'.[16] If such pronouncements were idiosyncratic, they are nonetheless signposts along the route that postcolonial theory travelled—in its own mind 'subversively'—from the murkier side of that same Europe it wanted to provincialize.

The more immediate theoretical models for postcolonial theory were, of course, Foucault and Derrida, though very little of the disturbing implications of their affiliations with these interwar ideas have been mooted. This has to do in part with the ways in which a theoretical eclecticism confounds the past, generating insights but also blocking, or at least muddying others. To take one example, although *Orientalism* is generally considered Foucauldian, Said explicitly distanced himself from those aspects of Foucault's thought deriving from Heideggerian sources. While known for his study of orientalist 'discourse', Said understood by that term a concept derived ultimately from a Marxist theory of ideology.[17] His argument might be said to bear on ideology in a more

[15] Published during the first surge of postwar decolonization, Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (vol. 1, [1949], New York 1988; vols. 2 and 3 [1976], New York 1993), seized upon the watchwords of the independence movements—freedom, political representation, development—in order to explode them from within. Alluding to the new 'world situation' of decolonization—and his own fear of its Sovietization (vol. 1, pp. 147–68)—his study took as its central term 'sovereignty', which he wrestled away from its associations with the independence movements so that it came to mean rather the cruelty of sexual freedom.

[16] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, Ithaca 1969, pp. 160–1.

[17] I make this argument more fully in 'Humanism, Philology, and Imperialism' (in *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right*, New York 2006); and in 'Edward Said as a Lukácsian Critic: Modernism and Empire', *College Literature*, vol. 40, no. 4, Fall 2013.

traditional sense—in that his conception of discourse, unlike Foucault's, does not preclude the idea of guilty agents of power, people with agendas and privileged interests, constituencies of active belief and policy, or the basic *injustice* of the orientalist worldview. It was more than contradictory that these multiple interrogations of the human as agent, as historical subject—deconstruction's insistence on the written over the oral and the vernacular, say, taken to be examples of a suspect 'metaphysics of presence'—would be so widely attacked and undermined by the very forces that were seeking, apparently, to promote the emergence of peripheral peoples.[18]

Philological traditions

These half-understood collisions of various traditions attain a greater salience when we begin to give a name to the cultural and literary theories of Marxism against which the interwar philosophical right devised its counter-attack. Our current renderings of intellectual history downplay severely the extent to which Marxism could be seen as belonging to 'philology' in the expanded sense in which Erich Auerbach used the term in his 1924 German translation of Giambattista Vico's *The New Science*. There he defined it as 'anything that we now call the humanities: the whole story in the strict sense, sociology, national economy, the history of religion, language, law and art.'[19] Both Marxism and philology adhered to historical forms of knowing at a time when they were under intense attack from Saussure's followers—'neo-lalists' in Gramsci's terms—logical positivism, and the emergent formalism of Prague linguistics. Interwar Marxism found a common cause with philology in that both looked to the sedimentary traces of a past, to the creativity of the unnamed, unheralded, subaltern elements of society. Both were sceptical of the philosophical move to evacuate the historical subject and to insert, in its stead, a fetishized subject of writing—what Gramsci sardonically dubbed 'calligraphism'.

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[18] Chibber's argument would have benefited from exploring the bases of subaltern essentialism in the broader circles of 'theory' itself. See Ian Almond's provocative study *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*, London and New York 2007.

[19] Erich Auerbach, 'Einleitung', in Giambattista Vico, *Die neue Wissenschaft*, Munich 1924, p. 23 (my translation).

Gramsci himself marks the linkage explicitly: 'The experience upon which the philosophy of praxis is based cannot be schematized; it is history in its infinite variety and multiplicity, the study of which can give birth to philology as a method of scholarship for ascertaining particular facts and to the birth of philosophy understood as a general methodology of history.'[20] From the rather different tradition of the circles around the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin makes this connection even more strongly in *The Arcades Project,* when he expresses his intention as being in part 'to prove by example that only Marxism can practice great philology, where the literature of the previous century is concerned'.[21] Even in passing, these examples show that a true accounting of Marxism's contributions to reflexive knowledge cannot bypass its humanistic and interpretive dimensions or sources, and much of what subaltern studies thought it was correcting in Marxism with its focus on the particular, the fragmentary, and the multiple is found here in philological Marxism—expressed much earlier and without theory's anti-historicist prejudices.

Limits of plain speaking

Such matters are, for all his book's merits, unaddressed—even unimagined—by Chibber, even though they direct us to the central and silent question at the heart of the conflict of traditions into which he inserts himself: what does it mean *to read*? The problem of evidence and truth brings us face-to-face with the substantive issues raised by *Postcolonial Theory* regarding the transition debates in post-Independence India. Otherwise supportive readers begin to question the book at the point where he announces that he will confront subaltern 'theory'—its historiographical practice—but not theory as postcolonial studies has always understood the term. Avoidance of this particular institutional encounter makes it impossible for him to meet his audience where it lives, limiting his ability to grasp the discursive and epistemological art of his interlocutors.

It is reasonable to say that the integrity with which Chibber pursues his object sometimes gets in the way; it is the positive side of a negative trait, a plain-speaking rationalism that treats each argument innocently, as

[20] Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, vol. 2, ed. Valentino Gerratana, Turin 1975, Q11, §25, p. 1429 (my translation).
[21] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Cambridge, MA 1999, p. 476.

though its pragmatic unpacking might lead to its undoing. For example, he poses a much-needed corrective to the subalternists' misreadings of Marx, but loses the opportunity to reinforce the accuracy of his sociological arguments by demonstrating Marx's reliance on the truth-contents of his own suasive literary style. Anyone who has closely read Hegel will know that truth has a form, and that form is a substantive aspect of both his arguments and those of Marx. The literary element in subaltern studies attends to this dimension, however tendentiously, and for this reason it cannot simply be evaded. Effective resistance to its lures, in fact, demands that it be met head on.

The way in which something is expressed has, for Marxism as well as for postcolonial theory, a great deal to do with its truth in the Hegelian sense that truth is an active exchange, the 'making' of a concept adequate to its object. Marx's polemical manner is not only a rhetorical strategy but a particular kind of intelligence that allows for insights not possible only in a dispassionate, social-scientistic dwelling on materialities. The famous use of the image of the 'fetish', for instance, or the description of the commodity as a 'hieroglyph', are much more than Hegelian residues in Marx's writing. Despite his repeated mockery of Hegelian abstraction in favour of the sensuously material, such figural language enables the philosophical point that the material basis of society is brought into view by the conceptual, in a process of intellectual synthesis that is the work of the writing itself. As Keston Sutherland usefully puts it: 'Marx's thinking in *Capital* is philological as well as satirical just as the risks of style in his satire are themselves the work of thinking and not a mere decoration of it.'[22]

Two styles of argument

Chibber dismantles the pretences of subaltern historiography with admirable precision. Even when it appears he has gone too far, overstating his case—some readers have taken his charge of 'orientalism' to be such an instance—a comparison with his sources reveals he has been judicious, often in the face of intemperate reactions from certain quarters. On the other hand, the weaknesses he probes are few in number and of similar type, and his arguments for this reason tend to drag. Even more, the structural categories of his argument—class, revolution,

[22] Keston Sutherland, 'Marx in Jargon', *World Picture* 1, Spring 2008.

liberalism, labour—have a settled definitional character lacking the supple attention to reversals and incongruities that characterize more interpretive approaches. The bad infinity of subalternist claims to an abiding otherness cannot be displaced by the invocation of capital and class if the terms come off as dead universals. The syllogistic ordering of his argument is too reliant on a logic of rebuttal—mere negation—and thus fails to capture dialectically the reliance of his opponents on the very Marxism they appropriate, if only to distort.

Chibber's intervention is likely to strike those involved in postcolonial theory as borrowing from their realm but without having the hang of it. There are also some fundamental mistakes. He takes the 'cultural turn', for instance, to refer only to post-structuralism's unwelcome influence on disciplines outside literature, whereas left-Hegelian critique from very early on opened the door to a particular investigation into culture as a site of political and economic training, evaluation, and understanding—in the work, among others, of Engels, Alexandra Kollontai, Georg Simmel in his poetic, non-Marxist sociology, or Trotsky on everyday life. One could argue, thinking of Raymond Williams, Henri Lefebvre and Georg Lukács, that materialist theories of culture are among the core insights of twentieth-century Marxism.

To be fair, Chibber never claims to be comprehensive, and there is throughout his performance an ingenious clarity and calm that is *pedagogically* superior to most before him. And yet, to justify excluding an engagement with cultural theory, he avows that, 'what matters is not whether [the subaltern historians] are true to this or that theoretical tradition but whether they have produced sound arguments'. The problem is that what is or is not 'sound' or 'true', or indeed an 'argument', has a great deal to do with one's 'theoretical tradition'. As Nietzsche presents 'genealogy' in *On the Genealogy of Morals,* for example, it is not, as it is sometimes taken to be, an aleatory, multi-causal, subaltern history, but a theory of reading. Nietzsche counsels us first to enlist the 'perverse' in order to stimulate agreement with the seductions of the antinomian; next, to replace the subject who wills with a textual 'will to truth'; and finally, to avoid refutation, never denying the truth of one's antagonists—since critique only empowers rivals by honouring them with engagement. This taste for outmanoeuvring rather than arguing with opponents is powerfully connected to the methodological coups represented by a number of the central figures of postwar theory—

Althusser's 'symptomatic reading', Deleuze's productivity of truth, and Derrida's confidence in semantic plenitude—the illusion of any definitive interpretation. Each of these strategies courses through the postcolonial corpus. Together, they definitively express its outlooks and procedures.

So, to demolish the pretensions of the subalternists' 'infelicitous terminology', in Chibber's words, is at least in part to miss the point. He says he finds the formulations of Chatterjee and Chakrabarty elusive, vague, obscure, and difficult to understand. But this is a little like finding geometry abstract or obituaries brief. The manner is intrinsic to the project. The methods of this kind of cultural theory—and we can by now agree that subaltern studies falls within their orbit—are based not on historical accuracy, context or intention, but on the production of political outcomes by way of a textual occasion. Earnest criticism of opponents, in Chibber's vein, effectively leaves unexposed what Alain Badiou aptly calls 'the power of the false'.[23] And this is what has to be addressed, among other things, in any fully effective critique of postcolonial theory.

Two strains in Marxism

Reviewers have seen *Postcolonial Theory* as a showdown between Marxism and postcolonial theory, though I would suggest that it also illustrates a more interesting conflict within Marxism itself. Implicit in the exchange is a culture/science divide that neither Chibber nor his reviewers—critical or otherwise—seem to recognize: the internal bifurcation of humanist and social-scientific interpretations of Marxism found in the debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These are still very much with us.

Confrontation was liveliest, perhaps, in the resistance of Georges Sorel and Paul Lafargue to what both took to be the mechanistic Marxism of Rudolf Hilferding and Georgi Plekhanov—indeed, Sorel explicitly enlisted Vico in his book-length study of 1896 in order to re-inject into the idea of social transformation the 'poetry' of his forbear's sociological imagination.[24] Traces of that confrontation are legible also in Gramsci's

[23] Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being*, Minneapolis 2000, p. 55.
[24] Lafargue, *Le déterminisme économique de Karl Marx: Recherches sur l'origine des idées de justice, du bien, de l'âme et de Dieu*, Paris 1911; Sorel, *Études sur Vico et autres textes*, ed. Anne-Sophie Menasseyre, Paris 2007.

embrace of the Russian 'revolution against *Capital*' and his frequently testy dismissals throughout the *Notebooks* of the positivism of Achille Loria and what he called 'Lorianism' in favour of the 'active'—cultural—element in social strata always struggling over their own political status with uncertain outcomes. A more recent pairing of this sort might be found in Edward Thompson's challenge to Louis Althusser.[25]

Such pairings point to a larger divide over the theoretical regeneration of Marxism in the postwar period: on the one side, the well-known models derived from Spinoza by Althusser and Antonio Negri—Karl Korsch was complaining about Plekhanov's creation of a Spinozist Marx as early as the 1930s; on the other, philological, side, the less well-known, but earlier and arguably more far-reaching presence of Vico in the work of Marx, Lukács, Horkheimer and others, including, of course, Said.[26] Vico's attractions for Marx and later Marxists are, by this light, not hard to explain. In the early eighteenth century, his defence of historical writing against the scientific Enlightenment's claims that it was pointless and arbitrary—a prejudice articulated most unguardedly by Descartes—rested in *The New Science* on class struggle and the centrality of labour to civilization. Vico, the materialist, was the first to write history combining its objective material conditions and its qualitative, felt textures. The first sociologist, he is also the first to argue that specific ideas, linguistic innovations, and forms of art correspond to a period's conditions of social organization—a view that many have seen as the genesis of Marx's historical materialism.[27] Vichian configurations of Marxism have received

[25] Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, New York 1978.

[26] Marx refers to Vico at least three times in his writings, although what is Vichian about his thought—as later commentators observed—has more to do with its systematic parallels to Vico borne out in common sources (Varro on Roman Law, for instance [*Grundrisse*, London 1973, p. 834]), and by way of Hegel, whose Vichian influences have been well marked. See *Capital*, vol. I (London 1990, p. 493), and the letter to Ferdinand Lassalle (*Collected Works*, vol. 41, Moscow 1985, p. 355), where Marx praises Vico and observes that he was at 'the foundation of comparative philology'. For more on this tradition, see Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel and the Colonies*, Stanford 2014.

[27] For example, Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin in their brilliant introduction to *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca and London 1944), where they point out that the attribution is as old as Georges Sorel's *Études sur Vico*; a more contemporary example, one of many, can be found in Lawrence H. Simon, 'Vico and Marx: Perspectives on Historical Development', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1981.

very little attention, and yet they are centrally relevant to the debate generated by *l'affaire Chibber,* not least because in them its apparent antinomies—which are partly exacerbated by the framing of Chibber's argument as a rejection of 'culturalism'—are in principle superseded.[28]

Marxism in postcolonial theory

Given these considerations, one can appreciate the otherwise puzzling fact that *Postcolonial Theory* has received so much attention in a milieu where so many critics of postcolonial theory before him were ignored. Conspicuously endorsed by leading figures on the left as a breakthrough, the book was actually written very much in the wake of Marxist critics within postcolonial theory who had been skewering the postcolonial 'pseudo-radical establishment'—Slavoj Žižek's words—for more than two decades. The 'spectre of capital' has haunted postcolonial theory for quite some time. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Marxist critics of the postcolonial turn chipped away at the edifice of the problematic idea of the 'west' itself, disempowering its hold on a field predicated on civilizational oppositions, mapping a vital Marxist counter-trend within the field, a force that now found itself in a visible constellation that the postcolonial establishment could not ignore.[29] Benita Parry's early broadside in the *Oxford Literary Review* (1987) against the 'exorbitation' of colonial discourse set a new tone, reclaiming Fanon from his latter-day postcolonial interpreters, such as Bhabha; Fernando Coronil, already in 1992, was urging nothing less than the decolonization of postcolonial theory; and Neil Lazarus's work distilled the Marxist critique of postcolonial theory in a series of influential essays, finally bringing a number of heterodox ideas and thinkers into institutional centrality with his *Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies* (2004). The scope of the work, much of it prominently published and discussed, was by no means limited to the 'literary and cultural front', to which Chibber somewhat dismissively refers in an early footnote, even if no one before

[28] The Vichian lineages of Marxism have been enthusiastically discussed, at least, outside the Anglo-American academy. See, for example, David Roldán, 'La recepción filosófica de Vico y sus aporías filológicas: El caso del marxismo occidental', *Pensamiento*, vol. 68, no. 253, 2012; Alberto Mario Damiani, *La dimensión política de la Scienza Nuova y otros estudios sobre Giambattista Vico*, Buenos Aires 1998.

[29] Respectively, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*, London and New York 2004, p. 36; 'Can Postcoloniality Be Decolonized? Imperial Banality and Postcolonial Power', *Public Culture*, Fall 1992, vol. 5, no. 1.

him had previously examined in so systematic a manner the component elements of bourgeois revolution in a comparative mode.[30]

This neglect of precursors extends also to Chibber's antagonists. It bears noting that subaltern studies encompasses more than three scholars (or three books). Setting aside the narratological focus of subaltern studies, its deployment of a Foucauldian *récit de crime*, its moving dramas of the *adivasis* and village widows who speak in 'sobs and whispers', Chibber in some ways neglects its best work: Gyanendra Pandey on the construction of communalism; David Arnold on the Indian body, disease, and medicine; Bernard Cohn on language and colonial command; and Shahid Amin on the silences of elite texts.[31] Much of this oeuvre is empathetic, gritty, and intelligent—a world apart from the extreme cases of Chatterjee and Chakrabarty (perhaps especially the latter)—where the caricatures not only of Marxism but of history and the human are no longer incidental but programmatic. Even when Chibber praises Guha's work, he does not convey any sense of the passion of the writing—extending from his influential reading of the *Grundrisse,* and his keen analysis of colonial dominance, to his spirited asides on some of the more outrageous moments of colonialist historiography, a literature Guha describes as 'still incarnadine with the glow of imperial "achievements", a language that permits racist insults to pass in everyday use as harmless jokes'.[32]

Chakrabarty partakes much less of Chibber's focus—labour and the state—than he does of the art of conversation, the 'textures' of language, and untranslatability. He quotes Derrida, proclaims Heidegger his

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[30] *Postcolonial Theory*, p. 4. The work of Vasant Kaiwar is very interesting in this context. From 2004 onwards he anticipated many of Chibber's later lines of attack, demonstrating peculiar strengths missing in the latter's efforts: for example, wider reference to previous scholarship, exhibiting a feel for the textures and flavours of everything from Bengali *adda* to the holistic blend of sociology and literature that animates the best postcolonial work. He too attributes to Guha an 'orientalist enthusiasm', criticizes him for sidestepping the Muslim question and for expressing views that at times come uncomfortably close to the 'organicist fantasies of the contemporary Hindu right about "tradition"': *The Postcolonial Orient: The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincializing Europe*, Leiden, forthcoming.

[31] See Priya Gopal's 'Reading Subaltern History' (*The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, pp. 139–61), which I follow here. The quotation is from Guha's 'Chandra's Death', in Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies V,* Delhi 1987, p. 141.

[32] Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony,* Cambridge, MA 1997, pp. 14–16.

'icon', and lingers over Benjamin's Kabbalistic moments and his eschatological forebodings. By counterposing memory to history in order to set up a contrast between the subaltern and the intellectual, he replicates the familiar Heideggerian masquerade of the philosopher presenting himself as a lonely warrior battling the speculative chaos of European metaphysics. Although an intellectual—and not a subaltern—in this way he can assume the guise of a village seer, charting his path through the woods of thought, gnomic, intuitive, revelatory. Heidegger's reactionary peasant sublime is in this way replicated in this postmodern avatar.

But none of the tone of this *contretemps* can enter the frame since Chibber's professed interest is only in 'the empirical work'. In Chakrabarty's argument, he complains, 'reasons have to be based on beliefs, wants, values, and so on, all of which are culturally constructed', just as Chatterjee assumes 'the deep significance of culture and consciousness'. But this is to assume that the insistence on 'culture' led inexorably to all their errors and elisions: the foggy treatment of capital or the one-sided assumptions about subaltern consciousness. Even when referring to work as critical of subaltern studies as his own, the same apparent hierarchy of concerns prevails.

Legacies

One might be inclined to overlook Chibber's hostility to culture as an object were it not for the fact that it actually deflects him from his target—for instance, one of Chakrabarty's principal tropes, the affirmation of the present 'against itself' in colonial formations. This idea, we should recall, is taken from Ernst Bloch, whose highly original investigations into the cultural domain of religiosity—as a committed Leninist—throughout the 1920s and 1930s, are totally elided in Chakrabarty's predictable charge that Marxists have nothing productive to say about religion. He thus embraces what in Bloch was actually a lament: 'the plurality that inheres in the "now", the lack of totality, the constant fragmentariness, that constitutes one's present.'[33] If, that is, the entwinements of culture and objective being were integral to Bloch's way of thinking, they are missed by both Chakrabarty and Chibber. A more supple foray into and

[33] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* Princeton 2000, p. 243. The appropriation is derived from Homi Bhabha, as Keya Ganguly has pointed out in 'Temporality and Postcolonial Critique', *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies,* p. 174. Quotations from Bloch are from this essay.

against the subaltern project would have dwelt on these often imitated—and somehow also reviled—interwar Marxist precursors who zeroed in on the very intellectual dissonance between city and country, centre and periphery so mulled over in contemporary subaltern work. Bloch wanted to wrest people from the grip of an 'ascetic contemplation of the unresolved myth of dark old being or of nature'—a point that could not be more germane to subaltern studies' identitarian faith in the airtight otherness of the Indian collective subject.

The advantage of having claimed for oneself sole authority both to evoke and to be the subaltern is that one can refer, without self-consciousness, to a 'Western historiography' that supposedly narrates history as a progress of awareness, and do so while being coy about the degree to which one is speaking in and through this so-called west. If Chakrabarty reflects what the historian Vasant Kaiwar aptly calls a 'remarkably narrow' historical curiosity—'with rich descriptions on one side (Calcutta) and rather stark, schematic outlines on the other (Europe)'—such reductionism is also evident in Spivak's recent review of Chibber's book.[34] There she dismisses its publisher, Verso, for its 'little Britain Marxism' as though it were not Verso that, more than anyone, introduced metropolitan readers (east and west) to the writing of intellectuals and activists from Brazil and China to Italy and India, creating by all accounts the most far-reaching international left public sphere anywhere since the second world war.

Clearly, as such reactions indicate, the political differences swirling around the debate over who has the right to speak and in what disciplinary or theoretical language, are very real, even irreconcilable; for that very reason it matters a great deal how one expresses differences—both as a matter of hitting the mark and of demonstrating the strengths of one's own position. My bid would be to give more sway to the vital inheritances of a humanist intellectual *generalism* that has, for so long, animated left-Hegelian thought in the form of a properly philological and interpretive Marxism.

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[34] Kaiwar, *The Postcolonial Orient*; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Review of *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2014.