

**Marxist Critique of Post-colonialism**  
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One of the most enduring and oft-repeated criticisms against postcolonial theory is that in objecting to the universalizing categories of Enlightenment theories as Eurocentric and inadequate in understanding the practices, experiences and realities in the non-European world, postcolonial critique is ontologizing the difference between the West and the East. If, as claimed by proponents of theories of universalism, humans share common needs and interests independent of historical, cultural and economic differences, then the postcolonial effort to “provincialize Europe” (Chakrabarty 2000), and provide particular histories of different contexts, is rendered questionable. Furthermore, any critique of the Enlightenment and its violent legacies is read as symptomatic of forfeiting emancipatory politics, while justifying an exoticization of the East as different.

Against the claim that the non-European world simply follows in Europe’s footsteps, postcolonial scholars seek to understand disparate operations of modernity by tracing the divergent emergence of cultural, political and economic practices and institutions globally. They argue that the non-Western world does not simply mimic Europe, so Western theories of studying capitalism and modernity, although relevant, are nonetheless inadequate in understanding the postcolonial world (Chakrabarty 2000). Although profoundly inspired by Marx, many postcolonial

scholars critiqued the universalist assumptions of historical materialism which claimed that colonial capitalism would expand from Europe to the rest of the world and function uniformly worldwide. It emphasizes the point that taking the West as the norm for the rest of the world, onto which Enlightenment and Marxist categories were projected, disregards and silences the realities and experiences in the postcolonial world. However, in highlighting the distinctiveness of the postcolonial world, postcolonial theorists are charged with denying the universal validity of emancipatory norms such as justice, democracy and human rights, which are presumably underpinned by common universal interests shared by all human beings irrespective of culture, race, gender, sexuality, religion, or other differences.

The recent accusation by Vivek Chibber that postcolonialism is anti-Enlightenment repeats this gesture. His book *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013) can be read as yet another attack on postcolonial theory in the defense of Marxism, along the lines mounted by Aijaz Ahmad (1992), Arif Dirlik (1994), San Juan, Jr. (1996), and Benita Parry (2004). Chibber (2013, 2) accuses postcolonial scholars of trying to replace Marxism in providing an adequate theory for a radical political agenda, while perpetuating Orientalism in their claim that capitalism and modernity developed differently in the postcolonial world.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in Chibber’s view (2013, 101ff.), rejects a “universal history of capital” because the distinctive forms of power-relations that emerged in the post-colony were not the same capitalist power-relations that emerged during European modernization. Chakrabarty exemplifies this by focusing on disparate political domains, particularly among the subaltern classes of India, which are different from the normative model of European capitalist cultures and political systems. Challenging Chakrabarty, Chibber retorts that capitalism’s universalization does not require homogenization of social diversity or cultural differences, but rather that capitalism can accommodate and sustain cultural or religious diversity (2013, 130-131). Chibber further argues that the claim that in resisting capitalism subjects draw on local cultures and practices, does not imply there are not shared basic needs like food, housing and shelter which motivate all people universally (ibid, 199-200). In Chibber’s view, in arguing that when peasants in India engage in collective action

they have a unique “psychological disposition” which is culturally different to that of Western peasants, the Subalternists<sup>1</sup> are endorsing the same kind of cultural essentialism they accuse the colonizers of perpetuating (ibid, 179; 192; 208). In his view, in treating indigenous and tribal communities as being motivated by traditional and cultural differences instead of by basic needs, one risks exoticizing them, and threatens the Enlightenment notion of universal interests. Chibber firmly believes that upholding a universal theory of human agency, as offered by both the Enlightenment and Marxism, allows anchoring democratic politics in shared global norms, while circumventing orientalism (ibid).

In his response, Bruce Robbins (2014) points out that while making the Marxist case against postcolonialism, with a sole focus on cultural diversity, Chibber disregards economic diversity, thereby failing to explain the different varieties of capitalism. In his rejoinder Partha Chatterjee (2013, 74-75) argues that the problem addressed by Subaltern Studies is not the difference between West and East, whether psychological or cultural, as claimed by Chibber, but rather that the dissolution of the peasant classes in capitalist Europe was contrary to their continued reproduction under capitalism in the non-European world. Chatterjee explains that despite seeming similarities, Subaltern Studies is different to the Marxist project of “History from Below”, for unlike the disappearance of the peasantry in the period of the rise of capitalism in Europe, the inevitable dissolution of peasants in agrarian societies in the non-European world took another trajectory (ibid). Capitalism did not universalize in contexts like India because, rather than abolishing semi-feudal practices of labour, these were harnessed by the colonial state, subsequently generating capitalist formations quite distinct from that of free wage-labour. Thus Western capitalist modernity did not universalize itself because it failed to fundamentally transform antecedent modes of production in the non-European world. Challenging Chibber, Chatterjee explains that getting one’s European history right is not going to help solve the problems of historical change in the non-Western world (ibid, 75). Chatterjee further warns that in claiming political action derives from basic universal human nature, Chibber uncritically endorses the principles of the contractarian school of liberal political thought (ibid, 74).

Chibber, following universalists like Nussbaum, claims that human aspirations are not culturally constituted, but rather that common interests and basic needs, like the universal human need for physical wellbeing, are fundamental characteristics of human nature (2013: 197). This completely disregards the incisive critique, made particularly by postcolonial feminists, that such universalizing gestures disregard disparate historical configurations of family, community, society, and state that differently frame practices, vulnerability, as well as agency, in the postcolonial world. Furthermore, by arguing that in the future, subalterns, who in his view share a common political consciousness, will inevitably fight for “liberal democracy” in order to preserve or enhance their physical well-being (ibid, 179), Chibber ignores the question of ideology and the discontinuity between interests and desires, a key issue addressed by Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”.

As pointed out by Hall (1996), postcolonial studies drew on poststructuralist ideas of difference and contingency precisely because of certain shortcomings in Marxist theories, a point which is conveniently disregarded by Chibber. The biggest fault in Chibber’s text is that he stages postcolonial theory as *necessarily* antagonistic with Enlightenment rationality. If, as claimed by Chibber, the logic of capital is indeed universal and its proliferation in post-feudal and postcolonial societies produces a “universal history of class struggle”, then how can one explain the great many *varieties* of capitalism with very different contexts and historical experiences of political economy? One also needs to account for how the same commodities are produced and consumed under different conditions, but which also simultaneously compete in local and global markets.

In her review, Spivak (2014, 188) points out that, from Antonio Gramsci’s writings on the Risorgimento to W.E.B Du Bois’ writings on the Pan-African movement, the very notion of subaltern social groups was not intended to describe an “international proletariat”, but sections of society which capital’s universal logic failed to assimilate. “Class” differences intersected with racial, religious, gendered, and historical differences resulting in varied proliferations of capitalist systems. Spivak further points out that Chibber’s claim of “race-free” and “gender-free” resistance across cultures disregards the relationship of the internationalism of the labour

movement to colonialism (ibid). In contrast to Chibber's universalist romantic utopian leftist narrative, Spivak, drawing on Gramsci, argues that subaltern social groups are not unified and cannot unite until they become a state (ibid, 193). In heroizing the subaltern classes and making them part of the universal proletarian class, Chibber seamlessly integrates them within "the same history as Europe" (ibid, 197). Spivak, moreover, diagnoses Chibber's position as part of a larger tendency to allow only for a Western-focused Marxism (what Spivak calls "Little Britain Marxism"), which delegitimizes other Marxisms (ibid).

Finally, the larger question is not one of "Marxism or Enlightenment versus post-colonialism", but is rather one of how to use the categories developed by Marx, or for that matter Kant or Hegel, to analyze situations these thinkers neither experienced nor foresaw. This would entail being a Marxist or Enlightenment scholar in divergent ways under conditions of geopolitical and historical difference; as Spivak puts it: "The sun rises at different times upon the globe today" (ibid, 195).

## Notes

1] The Subaltern Studies Collective is a group of Indian and South Asian historians and scholars, who, inspired by Antonio Gramsci, focus on non-elites, namely, subalterns, as agents of political and social change.

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