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## Subalternists Scrutinized. Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London/New York, Verso, 2013)

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IN 1982, A GROUP of South Asianist historians released the first in a series of essay collections, inaugurating what came to be known as Subaltern Studies. In his preface to *Subaltern Studies I*, Ranajit Guha announced that the aim was “to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asia studies, and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area” (Guha 1982<sup>1</sup>: vii). The group adopted the term “subaltern” from Antonio Gramsci, whose cultural Marxism provided the theoretical guidance for their attempts to write a “history from below.” A remarkably generative subaltern historiography ensued, producing many valuable studies of the distinctive political forms of peasants, workers, lower castes, and *adivasis* in colonial and early postcolonial India. While most of these early studies sought to reconstruct Marxism in light of the empirical specificities of the subcontinent, Subaltern Studies eventually adopted a poststructural orientation and joined a wider stream of postcolonial theorizing that emphasized the distinctiveness of non-Western societies and the irreparable Eurocentrism of Western social theory.

Vivek Chibber’s brilliant book is the most comprehensive challenge to this postcolonial turn to date. Using (secondary) empirical data and remarkable analytical rigor, Chibber subjects the historical and theoretical arguments of Subaltern Studies to a withering cross-examination. At stake is the proposition that the social institutions and historical trajectories of non-Western societies (and specifically India) are so different from those of the West that theories originating in the West (including Marxism) are fundamentally incapable of grasping their characters. Against such assertions of empirical difference and theoretical Eurocentrism, Chibber makes an unabashed case for a universal process of capitalist development, a universal set of human needs and interests that motivate “subaltern” resistance, and the necessity of universal Enlightenment reason for capturing both processes in East or West.

<sup>1</sup> GUHA Ranajit, 1982. *Subaltern Studies 1: Writings on South Asian Society and History*, Vol. 1. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Chibber proceeds systematically. While his general target is post-colonial theory, he justifies focusing on Subaltern Studies because, he argues, it represents the most serious attempt to advance a postcolonial framework for the historical analysis of “Third World” countries (5). Chibber’s next step is to extract from Subaltern Studies a set of core arguments with which to engage—a task complicated, Chibber notes, by the school’s poststructuralist eschewal of “clearly constructed propositions” and “reluctance to strive for coherence” (3). He argues, however, that the major theoretical propositions of Subaltern Studies rest on a set of historical arguments that were advanced most powerfully by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. From their works, Chibber extracts six theses that he argues compose the core arguments of Subaltern Studies.

Theses 1 and 2 regard the historical role of the bourgeoisie and the putative derailment of capital’s “universalizing mission” in the colonial world. The Subalternists argue that, in contrast to Western Europe, where a revolutionary bourgeoisie attacked feudal landed property, created a hegemonic coalition with subaltern classes to overthrow it, and implemented a liberal political order and culture, the Indian bourgeoisie failed in its historic mission: it accommodated landed property, ruled through “dominance without hegemony” (Guha 1997)<sup>2</sup>, and failed to democratize the pre-existing political culture.

Theses 3 and 4 flow from this argument: whereas ascendant European bourgeoisies overthrew antiquated feudal power relations and replaced them with specifically bourgeois ones, the failure of colonial capitalism to universalize itself in India left various forms of antediluvian power relations intact. The consequence was to preserve the political idioms associated with them: this is the source of the “structural dichotomy” (Guha 1982: 6) between an *elite political sphere* governed by bourgeois norms and a *subaltern political sphere* with its distinct forms and idioms. Thesis 5 asserts that, by ignoring this structural dichotomy, nationalist historiography has given a spurious legitimacy to an elite nationalist movement that remained isolated from subaltern politics. Thesis 6 involves the epistemological implications of the preceding historical arguments: because the historical trajectories of capitalist development and nationalism in South Asia departed so fundamentally from those of the West, the theoretical categories derived from the Western experience can only mischaracterize them. This charge of Eurocentrism, Chibber

<sup>2</sup> GUHA Ranajit, 1997. *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

argues, rests entirely on the preceding empirical claims about historical difference.

It may surprise the reader that Chibber's critique is based not on the Subalternists' histories of India, but rather on their histories of Europe. The book does not so much challenge the specific empirical claims that the Subalternists make about capitalism, nationalism, and politics in India, but rather argues that these aspects of India's history are not exceptional. The Subalternists' contrastive claims rest on false—and indeed Whiggish—histories of the West. Once these misinterpretations of European history are corrected, the “structural fault” between East and West evaporates. Chibber's premise is that if, in reality, the nature of their bourgeoisies, power relations, and subaltern political psychologies are not fundamentally different, then Western and non-Western societies “turn out to be variants of the same species” (23). And, “if they are indeed variations of the same basic form, the theories generated by the European experience would not have to be overhauled or jettisoned, but simply modified” (*ibid.*). Chibber lays out this plan of attack clearly and elegantly in the book's introduction.

It should be apparent that Chibber has written an immensely ambitious book that raises, in a direct and lucid way, many of the most important questions facing both social science and radical politics today. As such, it deserves a much more serious engagement than it has so far received from both unrelenting critics and uncritical admirers. While I cannot do justice to the entire book here, I will try to convey and assess the book's key arguments (which requires some engagement with the original Subalternist texts), and critically reflect on some large questions they helpfully raise.

### *The “Universalization” of Capital*

In Chapters 2-4, Chibber takes on the first two Subalternist theses through a prolonged engagement with Ranajit Guha's *Dominance Without Hegemony* (1997), which argues that colonial capitalism left India with a bourgeoisie that failed to establish hegemony over subaltern classes and to implant the liberal political institutions and democratic culture characteristic of bourgeois rule in the West. Drawing on secondary historical research on the English and French revolutions, Chibber argues that the Western bourgeoisie was never so heroic: they accommodated rather than challenged landed property except where pushed by subaltern actors, repressed rather than encouraged subaltern political participation, and only grudgingly relented to a liberal political

order in the face of subaltern pressure. Judged according to this historical standard, the Indian bourgeoisie's "limited hegemony" does not "set them apart in any way from their counterparts anywhere else" (Chibber 2013: 84). The Subalternists' argument for historical divergence rests on an uncritical acceptance of liberal apologetics and, ironically, discounts the significance of subaltern agency. The universalization of capital, Chibber argues, in no way requires a liberal political order; the latter only arises from the ability of subaltern agents to act upon their rational interests in opposing domination and securing their material well-being: a capacity shared by those in the East and West.

These chapters compose the strongest part of Chibber's book. His attack on Guha's rendering of bourgeois revolutions in Europe is quite damaging to the contrastive claims of *Dominance Without Hegemony*. In a public response to Chibber, subsequently published in India's *Economic and Political Weekly*, Chatterjee (2013)<sup>3</sup> defends Guha by arguing that the latter was not offering a comparative history but a critique of liberal historiography. In other words, Guha was not comparing colonial India with the reality of 17<sup>th</sup> century England but rather contrasting the liberal ideology of 19<sup>th</sup> century England with its illiberal colonial practices. While Guha clearly was doing the latter, the argument that he was not doing the former remains unconvincing and is, in fact, contradicted by Guha's characterization of the Indian bourgeoisie's "mediocre liberalism" as "a caricature of the vigorous democratic culture of *the epoch of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the West*" (Guha 1997: 5, emphasis added). While one might have wanted Chibber to reflect more on the epistemological complexities of comparing societies separated by several hundred years, he is justified in arguing that the Subalternists' claims to radical historical divergence must rest on *real* historical differences and not simply on exposés of hypocritical discourses (Chibber 2013: 126-128).

Nevertheless, the question arises: in trying to minimize the divergence between the nature of capitalist development in India and Europe, does Chibber gloss over significant differences—not only between India and Europe but within Europe? It is unclear whether Chibber is arguing that a Gramscian "passive revolution" is actually the universal form taken by bourgeois ascents to power. I doubt Chibber wants to make such an argument: he seems to be arguing simply that such differences do not arise from the agency of the bourgeoisie alone.

<sup>3</sup> CHATTERJEE Partha, 2013. "Subaltern Studies and *Capital*." *Economic and Political Weekly* 48(37): 69-75.

But the fact of significantly different processes of state formation and uneven capitalist development remains—whether between France and India, or, as in Gramsci’s comparison, France and Italy (*cf.* Riley and Desai 2007<sup>4</sup>). In trying to argue that capitalism in India looks “fundamentally” or “basically” the same as anywhere else, Chibber gives the impression of flattening out the differences between what Barrington Moore (1966)<sup>5</sup> called the various “routes to modernity.”

Chibber is perfectly correct, however, to push back against the romantic notion that capitalist universalization entails the institutions of electoral democracy and liberal citizenship and that the perceived limitations of these institutions in India attest to the derailment of capitalism’s universalization. The only thing capital does universalize, Chibber argues, is the economic condition of market dependence. This leads to his next critique of the Subalternists’ conception of capitalism.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 9, Chibber challenges the argument that the persistence of “antiquated power relations” indicates a failure of capitalism to universalize itself. Engaging mostly with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s study of 19<sup>th</sup> century jute mill workers in Calcutta, *Rethinking Working Class History* (1989)<sup>6</sup>, and his later theoretical claims in *Provincializing Europe* (2000)<sup>7</sup>, Chibber argues that the coercive interpersonal power relations that Chakrabarty discovers in the labor process of these mills—which Chakrabarty takes to be a colonial departure from capitalism in the West—are not only compatible with capitalism, but have persisted for long periods under advanced capitalism. The Subalternist claim to historical difference in the East rests on a “romantic” and “sanitized” view of capitalism, which has in fact never been content to rely, in Marx’s words, on the “dull compulsion of economic relations.” This leads Chibber into a discussion of why the creation of “abstract labor” does not entail the homogenization of labor, and why “capital does not have to obliterate social difference in order to universalize itself” (150).

In Chapter 9, Chibber returns to this theme by taking on Chakrabarty’s distinction in *Provincializing Europe*, based partly on a reading of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, between what he calls History 1 and

<sup>4</sup> RILEY Dylan J. and Manali DESAI, 2007. “The Passive Revolutionary Route to the Modern World: Italy and India in Comparative Perspective.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49(4): 815-847.

<sup>5</sup> MOORE Barrington, 1966. *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon Press.

<sup>6</sup> CHAKRABARTY Dipesh, 1989. *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>7</sup> CHAKRABARTY Dipesh, 2000. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

History 2—the first referring to those historical conditions posited by capital as “part of its life process” and the second to those historical conditions encountered by capital but not posited by it. Chakrabarty’s argument is that the existence of History 2—for example the non-bourgeois cultures of workers in colonial jute mills that he uncovered in his earlier research—not only shows capital’s universalization to be incomplete, but also signifies the limits of Marxist theory to grasp the character of postcolonial societies. Chibber counters that capital can not only co-exist happily with the various forms of social and cultural heterogeneity that Chakrabarty places in History 2, but can actively produce and reproduce them. To be universalized, capitalism need not revolutionize entire cultures; it need only transform those institutions vital to its reproduction (233-234). To put it simply, so long as workers provide the requisite surplus value, they can have all the cultural difference they want; indeed, capitalists often exploit such differences to their advantage. The implication, for Chibber, is that capitalism has universalized itself in India even if it has not transformed all social and cultural institutions. Marxism is, consequently, perfectly up to the task of explaining the character of capitalism in India and other postcolonial societies—it neither needs nor seeks to explain everything else about those societies.

This is a challenging set of arguments. Chibber’s critiques of Chakrabarty’s over-blown epistemological claims in *Provincializing Europe* are convincing and powerful. It is less clear to me that they apply with equal force to Chakrabarty’s early—and fairly Marxist—work. First, it must be said that Chakrabarty makes precisely the same argument in his preface to *Rethinking Working Class History* when he speaks of the historically “atypical” coincidence of liberalism with capitalist development, notes the ability of capitalism to thrive in “hierarchical” cultures, and concludes that, “Perhaps we have long overestimated capitalism’s need or capacity to homogenize the cultural conditions necessary for its own reproduction (Chakrabarty 1989: xiii). It is hard then to accuse Chakrabarty, in this work at least, of an overly romantic or sanitized view of capitalism, or of arguing that the existence of inter-personal power relations in the labor process is unique to India and attests to capital’s incomplete universalization. Chibber also accuses Chakrabarty of assuming that it is the bourgeoisie and not subalterns that will ultimately transform these hierarchical social relations (Chibber 2013: 186). That seems debatable: Chakrabarty appears concerned precisely with the ability of the Indian working

class to undertake the simultaneous struggle for socialism and equality, while trying to “transcend the bourgeois version of it” (1989: iv).

Aside from these questions of textual fidelity, Chibber’s own view of capital’s “universalization” raises a more important set of questions. Here it might be useful to observe that by engaging so deeply with Subaltern Studies on its own terrain, Chibber perhaps inadvertently gets trapped in its vague conceptual apparatus. One overly capacious concept that Chibber could have dispensed with is “subaltern” itself, which collapses too many qualitatively specific relations of subordination and exploitation to be useful for analytical purposes (a point made in different ways by Sivaramakrishnan 1995<sup>8</sup>; Ludden 2001<sup>9</sup>). Also worth extirpating is the omnipresent “East and West” dichotomy. A third is the constant conflation of Marxism as a specific theoretical tradition and “Enlightenment thought” or “universal categories” generally. But the fourth, to return to the discussion at hand, is “universalization.” The term has Marxist provenance, though Marx used it to refer to a dialectical *process*—capital’s continuous tendency to expand through “self-realization”—not to an accomplished state. Yet Chibber’s debate with the Subalternists gets trapped in static dichotomies, which, to quote from an earlier rendition of this debate, is a product of “applying the categories of formal logic to a process of change” (Patnaik 1976<sup>10</sup>: 98A). Thus, to the Subalternist claim that capitalism has not “universalized itself” in India, Chibber insists that it has. While Chibber is much more precise in explaining what it entails for capitalism to have fully established itself (relying on Robert Brenner’s notion of market dependence), he might have provided a more nuanced account of capitalist development than is suggested by the yes/no terms of the debate. Chibber leaves no doubt that he views capitalism to have become fully dominant in India, though he provides no account of: (a) the timing of this development, (b) its regional unevenness, or (c) through what empirical criteria this can be established. These were precisely the thorny questions that were at the heart of a fierce and inconclusive two-decades long debate on “modes of production” in the Indian countryside beginning in the 1960s (a debate Chibber briefly mentions, but does not engage). While one hesitates to suggest expanding an already long

<sup>8</sup> SIVARAMAKRISHNAN K., 1995. “Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the Subaltern Studies Project.” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 8(4): 395-492.

<sup>9</sup> LUDDEN David, 2001. “Subalterns and Others in the Agrarian History of South Asia”, in SCOTT James C. and Nina BHATT (eds.),

*Agrarian Studies: Synthetic Work at the Cutting Edge*, New Haven, Yale University Press.

<sup>10</sup> PATNAIK Utsa, 1976. “Class Differentiation Within the Peasantry: An Approach to Analysis of Indian Agriculture.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 11(39): A82-A101.

and complex book, engaging the vast literatures on “primitive accumulation” and agrarian transition does seem indispensable to answering the question of what it means for capitalism to have established itself in a largely agrarian society.

Nevertheless, Chibber’s argument is a powerful and useful check on the banal claims that cultural differences and heterogeneities necessarily unsettle capitalist development or make Marxian categories inoperable. His next target is the over-culturalization of subaltern politics.

*The Rational Subaltern?*

Having made his case for the universalization of capitalism, Chibber next seeks to establish the universal ability of subaltern agents to rationally oppose it. According to Chibber, the Subalternists “deny that agents share a common set of needs or interests across cultural boundaries, arguing instead that the peasants and industrial workers in the East have a wholly different psychology from those in the West” (153). Chibber contends that the Subalternists overstate cultural difference and deny that Indian subalterns can be motivated by rational interests. Chibber’s main targets here are Chakrabarty’s account of working class politics in the colonial jute mills and Chatterjee and Guha’s research on peasant politics.

To return to the Calcutta jute mills, Chibber argues that Chakrabarty “reject[s] the relevance of interests” (193) for understanding the political behavior of Indian workers, and denies, along with the other Subalternists, “that agents share a common set of needs or interests across cultural boundaries” (153). Chakrabarty’s account of working class politics in colonial Calcutta, moreover, paints a misleading—and Orientalist—picture of Indian workers that “lack any concept of individuality, are inured to hierarchy, and remain unmoved by calls for equality,” and who “can erupt into orgies of violence at the slightest provocation” (185).

While I agree with Chibber that Chakrabarty’s arguments have significant flaws—many, as Chibber notes, were identified by Bagchi (1990)<sup>11</sup>—I believe he misreads Chakrabarty’s argument and posits an unconvincing theory of political agency in its place. Chakrabarty’s argument, as I read it, states not that *interests* are irrelevant, but that they are insufficient to explain working class *consciousness* (Chakrabarty 1989: 6). Chakrabarty explicitly acknowledges that “serving the ‘needs of survival’ is a function universal to all cultures in all historical settings” (Chakrabarty 1989: 211) and, more to the point, that

<sup>11</sup> BAGCHI Amiya Kumar, 1990. “Working Class Consciousness.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25(30): PE54-PE60.

capitalism put workers in different parts of the world into roughly similar objective conditions. Nevertheless, he argues, this cannot tell you why working class organization and consciousness look different in colonial Bengal than in the England described by E.P. Thompson. In Chakrabarty's account, workers in the Calcutta jute mills acted on their interests with great militancy: the paradox was that their organization did not resemble the "bourgeois" model of unions in the West but was led by charismatic authority and infused with pre-capitalist hierarchies. This distinction may be empirically questionable (Bagchi 1990), but Chakrabarty attributes it, and the violent nature of worker protest, not simply to cultural differences but, in Marxist fashion, to the particular organization of the labor process in the mills. He argues that the violent nature of the jute mill workers' protests arose from the nature of authority on the shop floor (Chakrabarty 1989: 155, 158, 185) and that workers were not passively "inured" to the social hierarchies that characterized their unions but rather *used* these hierarchies strategically to advance their interests (*ibid.*: 141). Chakrabarty also observes that capitalists themselves manipulated and exacerbated social hierarchies among the workers, but that they could only do this because those hierarchies already existed (*ibid.*: 205). Thus, he poses the question: if the culture of the "Free Born Englishman" was, as E.P. Thompson maintains, integral to the development of working class consciousness in England, then what should we conclude about the development of working class consciousness in places without that specific cultural legacy? Are there multiple forms of class consciousness or just multiple routes to it? Whatever one makes of his argument, this was an interesting question to pose to Marxist theory—and he is clear that he is offering precisely this, and "not an exercise in comparative history" (*ibid.*: 66). It was not a question of whether Indian workers were capable of acting on their material interests—it was rather about the particular organizational forms, class consciousness, and political idioms that they drew on when doing precisely that. In his steadfast focus on interests, Chibber, by contrast, has little to say about these dimensions of politics.

Turning from workers to peasants, Chibber charges Chatterjee with the same crime as Chakrabarty. Chatterjee, he argues, overstates the weight of community consciousness in his studies of peasant politics in colonial Bengal (Chatterjee 1984<sup>12</sup>; Chatterjee 1986<sup>13</sup>), and

<sup>12</sup> CHATTERJEE Partha, 1984. *Bengal, 1920-1947: The Land Question*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi.

<sup>13</sup> CHATTERJEE Partha, 1986. "The Colonial State and Peasant Resistance in Bengal, 1920-1947." *Past and Present* 110: 169-204.

denies the ability of peasants to act rationally on their individual interests. In his recent response to Chibber, Chatterjee has countered that he was not denying that individual interests were operative in the ordinary economic life of the Bengal peasantry but rather illuminating the discontinuity between those everyday interests and “extraordinary” occasions when community solidarity proved to be salient in “moments of political conflict with state power” (Chatterjee 2013: 73). The content of the debate aside, Chatterjee’s response underscores an important point: a theory of political agency must be able to explain why, at certain moments, actors pursue some interests over others, and draw on some identities over others. Insisting that actors are motivated by rational interests—whether they seek to maximize them or merely satisfy them (Chibber 2013: 198-199)—does not go very far in answering that question.

This problem surfaces again in Chibber’s reading of Guha’s classic *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*,<sup>14</sup> towards which Chibber is actually sympathetic. But while Chatterjee argues that Guha’s analysis of peasant uprisings in colonial India illustrated the power of “peasant community consciousness,” Chibber argues that it actually provides a “ringing endorsement” of rational choice theory (163-164, footnote 22). According to Chibber, Guha shows peasants weighing the risks of participating in collective action and hesitating in the face of exhortations from their leaders, rather than simply acting on a pre-reflexive sense of community obligation (162-164).

Chibber is perfectly right to insist that Guha’s account of peasant insurgency demonstrates the ability of peasants to deliberate on their course of action—Guha was precisely trying to show that peasant uprisings were not spontaneous and thus “pre-political,” in Hobsbawm’s (1959)<sup>15</sup> words, but consciously organized affairs. Nevertheless, evoking peasants’ rational individual interests hardly explains the various dimensions of peasant insurgency that Guha illuminates—for example, his distinction between individualistic banditry and the communal violence of uprisings (Guha 1999: 115), his description of how at certain moments peasants underwent “unpredictable leaps of consciousness” in which “prestige suddenly assumed for them an importance exceeding that of money and politics transcended economics” (*ibid.*: 143), and his warning, for this reason, not to

<sup>14</sup> GUHA Ranajit, 1999. *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>15</sup> HOBBSAWM E.J., 1959. *Primitive Rebels*. New York: Norton.

take a “narrowly economic interpretation of peasant insurgency” (*ibid.*: 145).

Of course, Chibber, like other rational choice theorists, can respond that rational interests need not be economic and that the pursuit of any end can be interpreted as rational; but this is precisely the problem. Rational choice theory has never overcome this basic tautology and cannot provide answers to why actors pursue different ends at different times. James Scott’s assessment of its limitations for explaining peasant rebellion remains as powerful as ever: “The stakes [of revolution] are often survival or extinction, and the order of reasoning is not the same as deciding what variety of seed to plant. As larger human emotions than trucking and bartering are involved in the enterprise of rebellion, one would expect that a theory based largely on models of bourgeois calculus would fail to do it justice” (Scott 1977<sup>16</sup>: 232).

It is thus ultimately Chibber’s “positive account of how capital, power, and agency really work” (Chibber 2013: 285) that is least persuasive. In contrast to the excessive culturalism of the Subalternists, Chibber posits that all human beings have a universal “need for physical well-being,” which cannot be extinguished by culture, and that the rational defense of this need motivates subaltern agents to defend their material interests against the universal “onslaught” of capitalism and to fight for democracy (*ibid.*: 208). Here Chibber seems to emphasize material interests as a motivation for action, while at other times he is more ecumenical. Nevertheless, even if we agree that cultural differences do not go “all the way down” (*ibid.*: 200) and grant that human beings all share certain basic needs, it is unclear how this can help to answer the most important questions about, say the nature of worker and peasant politics under capitalism. We saw that it was insufficient to explain the *character* of worker protest in Chakrabarty’s jute mills. To bring the discussion to the present, it remains unclear how positing peasants as rational actors can explain why farmers in West Bengal and Rajasthan, for example, react *differently* to having their land dispossessed for a Special Economic Zone. To understand that we need to understand how different manifestations of capitalism refract through diverse agrarian structures with distinct political histories and cultural idioms to produce qualitatively different

<sup>16</sup> SCOTT James, 1977. “Peasant Revolutions: A Dismal Science.” *Comparative Politics* 9(2): 231-248.

political responses. This requires paying attention to the variations within, not the universals of, capitalism and human motivation.

These misgivings about Chibber's rational choice view of Marxism do not, however, vitiate his critique of the extreme culturalism of the late Subaltern Studies. Moreover, I believe Chibber's debate with the Subalternists successfully brings into focus what is perhaps the most significant difference between Marxist and postcolonialist theory: their views of theory itself.

#### *On Theoretical Reconstruction*

What is at stake in Chibber's engagement with postcolonial theory is the limits of theoretical reconstruction. How far can theories be stretched or modified to accommodate variation and anomaly, and at what point do differences become so great that the theories themselves must be jettisoned? Are theories like Marxism that originate in the West irreparably Eurocentric, or can they be reconstructed through empirical research in non-European contexts? Chibber believes that Marxism can be modified to account for empirical differences in the nature of capitalist development in India; the Subalternists believe that the taint of origins is much more difficult to remove. There are both thorny epistemological issues at play, and genuine empirical questions about *how much and in what ways* capitalism in the post-colonial world departs from the original Marxian theory. This is where those essentially inconclusive terms like "basic," "fundamental," "essential" or "same basic species" become significant: what is the "basic" or "fundamental" character of the "species" capitalism, and what kind of "subspeciation" can Marxism accommodate?

The pragmatic answer is that the proof is in the pudding. This is where I fundamentally agree with Chibber vis-à-vis the late Subalternists. As he notes in his conclusion, much of the progression of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Marxism has occurred precisely through the reconstruction of theory derived from the West in light of the anomalies posed by the non-Western world. This is the project that early Subaltern Studies usefully contributed to before abandoning ship for the shores of poststructuralism; it is one that many sociologists of the non-Western world, including Chibber, have continually demonstrated to be a "progressive research program" (Lakatos 1978<sup>17</sup>; Burawoy 1989<sup>18</sup>). While I disagree with some of the directions in which Chibber takes his

<sup>17</sup> LAKATOS Imre, 1978. *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>18</sup> BURAWOY Michael, 1989. "Two Methods in Search of Science: Skocpol Versus Trotsky." *Theory and Society* 18: 759-805.

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theoretical reconstruction, it is the great merit of his important book to clear the underbrush of facile critiques and theoretical dead-ends and to demonstrate the continuing indispensability of Marxian theory for explaining capitalism and social change in the postcolonial world.

M I C H A E L L E V I E N