CHAPTER ELEVEN

Conclusion: Subaltern Studies as Ideology

Postcolonial theory is a diffuse and nebulose body of thought. I have focused on Subaltern Studies because it is acknowledged, both by its leading exponents and by commentators, as the most successful exemplar of postcolonial theorizing in historical and social analysis. My premise has been that if the theory has real value for social analysis—in a domain beyond its home in literary theory—then this value should be apparent in the work of those historians most famously associated with it. Furthermore, and to its credit, the Subaltern Studies project has produced a body of work that is quite tightly wrapped around a shared set of assumptions and propositions. This makes it possible to engage Subaltern Studies somewhat systematically—unlike so much of the literature bearing the theory's imprimatur. Toward this end, in the opening chapter of this book I assimilated most of the project's core ideas into a set of six theses, which I examined in the succeeding chapters. These theses, it should be noted, are culled not just from my own reading of the Subalternist oeuvre, but from the summary statement by Dipesh Chakrabarty, one of the collective's leading members.

The two main virtues attributed to postcolonial theory are that it offers a new theory of global modernity—especially pertaining to the non-West—and that it is the new face of radical critique. Often the theory is presented as the inheritor of the great radical traditions of the twentieth century, but shorn of their analytical and critical infirmities. The obvious target here is Marxist theory. For more than a hundred years, across the globe, it was the Marxist tradition that carried the banner of radical analysis. Its analytical categories formed the lingua franca of political analysis, and its anticapitalism formed the core of radical critique. Postcolonial theory presents itself as Marxism's successor in both dimensions, the critical and the analytical. Its theoretical framework supposedly remedies the usual laundry list of ills attributed to Marxist theory—its determinism, teleology, Eurocentrism, reductionism, and so forth. In addition, its critical core supposedly aligns more closely with the aspirations of subaltern groups, particularly in the non-West. In all the best-known works produced by the Subaltern Studies collective, even though the Enlightenment tradition as a whole is routinely impugned, it is Marxism that takes the brunt of the attack.

Analytically, perhaps the core thesis of postcolonial studies is that a deep structural chasm separates East and West, so much so that it undermines any framework claiming universal applicability. As one of its most prominent streams of theory, Subaltern Studies has become famous in large measure for its
defense and elaboration of this thesis. It is the basis for the collective's indictment of Western theory as hidebound and parochial, blind to the specificities of postcolonial nations, and hence in need of drastic overhaul. In the preceding chapters, I have focused on three areas in which this divide supposedly obtains. The first has to do with the bourgeoisie in the East, the putative failure of which is taken as an expression of a deeper failure, that of capital's universalization. Second is the ostensible distinctiveness of power relations in the East, which, Chakrabarty claims, depart fundamentally from those generated by capitalism in the West. Third is the matter of Eastern political psychology, which, we are told, is unmoved by matters of individual interest. These are the East's dimensions of difference, and it is their purported uniqueness that motivates the call for a drastic rethinking of social theory.

While my burden has been to show that the Subalternist collective has failed to establish their case in any of these domains, I have chosen to complement my critical analysis with a positive account of how capital, power, and agency actually work. Four basic elements tie my alternative argument together. The first is that the universalization of capital is real, pace the claims of the Subalternist collective. The colonies' political dynamics did not attain a fundamentally different kind of modernity than did the Europeans'. More precisely, their modernity may have been different, but not in the ways that postcolonial theory insists. Theirs is a modernity that, over time, became no less reflective of capitalist imperatives than the French or German. The second is that the universalizing drive of capital should not be assumed to homogenize power relations, or the social landscape more generally. In fact, capitalism is not only consistent with great heterogeneity and hierarchy, but systematically generates them. Capitalism is perfectly compatible with a highly diverse set of political and cultural formations. The third proposition is that the universalizing drive of capital comes up against some universal facts about human psychology, and these facts are what explain subaltern resistance to capital's drive to establish exclusionary political orders, to dominate them in the labor process, to rely on interpersonal coercion, and so on. The modern epoch is driven by the interaction between these two universalisms, not just the one. This overturns the Subalternist insistence on the unique political consciousness of non-Western agents. Which brings us to the final point: that the universalizing categories of Enlightenment thought are perfectly capable of capturing the consequences of capital's universalization and the dynamics of political agency—indeed, these categories are essential to their analysis. If these four propositions are true, it means that at least some of the European theories, Marxism in particular, need not be charged with Eurocentrism simply because they originated in the West. The dynamics that they place at the heart of their framework are in fact cross-cultural, common to East as well as West. Hence, Marxist theory may be wrong, but not because it is Eurocentric.
These basic counterarguments have been advanced through a critical examination of the six theses central to the Subalternist project, which I described in Chapter 1. The theses' multiple infirmities announce the failure of Subaltern Studies as substantive theory. But I have argued that the project also fails as a platform for social critique. Not only are the six theses mistaken, they are also deeply ideological. The irony of the project is that, while it presents itself as the new face of radical critique, as the leading edge of criticism in an age of global capitalism, its arguments resurrect key pillars of conservative ideology. In chapter 1, I proposed that these apologetics could be assimilated into two broad kinds: the tendency to obscure or deny basic properties of capitalism, and the valorization of some profoundly Orientalist constructions of Eastern cultures. Let me now draw together our findings, which have been dispersed across the preceding chapters, so that we may better appreciate the ideological tenor of \textit{Subaltern Studies}.

\textbf{11.1 Obscuring Capitalism}

Subaltern Studies can be neither a theory of globalizing capitalism nor its critique, since it systematically misrepresents how capitalism works. We have seen instances of this tendency in virtually every chapter.

- \textit{Subalternists attribute to the bourgeoisie a democratic mission that it in fact rejected and fought against}. The idea that modern democratic culture derives from the beneficence of capitalists is central to Ranajit Guha's work. We saw in chapter 5 that Dipesh Chakrabarty, too, accepts this argument; indeed, the premise runs through much of the Subalternist literature. It is of course wholly mistaken. But it also has a multiplier effect. Many of the downstream mistakes of the Subaltern Studies framework can flow directly from this prior mistake. Two central errors are that the violence and authoritarianism of so many postcolonial countries can be traced to the fact that their capitalist classes failed to live up to the achievements of their European predecessors (chapters 2–4); and the argument that democratic consciousness within the working class requires the prior transformation of political culture by the bourgeoisie (chapter 8).

- \textit{Subaltern Studies accepts a highly romanticized story about power relations in capitalism}. By doing so, it obscures how power actually functions in capitalist societies. More important, Subalternist theorists mistakenly urge that the forms of domination that obtain in postcolonial formations are \textit{not} capitalist, and that they cannot therefore be analyzed through the categories developed by political economy (chapter 5). In this argument, coercion and violence within the employment relation are seen as departures from capitalism,
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whereas in fact they are, and have been, employers' preferred mode of power through most of capitalist history. Subaltern Studies airbrushes out the violence out of modern capitalism.

- It underestimates capitalism's ability not only to tolerate heterogeneity—"difference"—but to actively promote it. Subalternist theorists, along with many of their fellow travelers in postcolonial studies, seem to assume that for capital to universalize, it must also homogenize. This simple notion is the foundation for the entire argument in Provincializing Europe—its critique of abstract labor, its analysis of History 1 and History 2, and of course its tortured analysis of historicism (chapter 9). It is also the basis on which they reject Marx's concept of abstract labor (chapter 6). Doubtless it is true that capitalism does dissolve many sorts of social differences. But it also sustains and generates difference. Both of these outcomes are perfectly consistent with capitalism. In their insistence that the index for capital's universalization is the extent of social homogenization, the Subalternists end up denying capital's existence even in those areas where it has taken deep root, and pronounce as anomalous those outcomes which are a direct consequence of capitalist dynamics.

- It fails to recognize the pressures that capitalism exerts on national institutions, and hence overestimates the role of ideology. This is most clearly evident in Chatterjee's diagnosis of modernizing nationalism (chapter 10). Chatterjee explains the turn to modernization as a consequence of nationalism's internalization of Western ideology—not as a rational response to economic and geopolitical pressures. Thus, he simply denies what so many nationalist leaders saw as self-evident—that whatever else the postcolonial state did, it would have to find a way to develop the local productive forces. I showed in chapter 10 that his argument falls flat. But just as important is that it also obscures real facts about the constraints that capitalism imposes on national political strategies.

There are two important consequences of these errors. The first is rather straightforward: postcolonial theory, as developed by Subaltern Studies, simply misdiagnoses the trajectory and internal dynamics of modernization—not just in the East, though this is quite spectacularly the case, but also in the West. It fails to recognize the real dynamics that drive political change, misidentifies the relevant actors, attributes to them preferences or interests that they do not have, and refuses to recognize the constraints under which social actors make their choices. This is a rather dramatic failing for a theory that purports to supplant the reigning theories of social change. Flowing from this mistaken historical analysis is the second consequence: because of their fascination with Grand
Theory, Subalternist theorists are not content simply to generate a (flawed) historical sociology. They proceed to justify their sociology by generating a rather confused metatheory about determinism, agency, abstraction, explanation, and the like. Thus, in order to justify his culturalism about jute workers' mobilizations, Chakrabarty spins a dubious theory about the role of needs in social agency; and because he mistakenly equates universalization with homogenization, he creates a category called "historicism," thereby inventing a whole family of Enlightenment conceptual errors that do not in fact exist. The confusion is therefore not just about what happened in history, but also about how to think about what happened in history.

In the process, capitalism turns into something quite mysterious within Subalternist theorizing. Even though the word appears with numbing regularity in their analyses, it is shorn of its central causal properties. Their "capitalism" generates a bourgeoisie that bears little or no resemblance to the actual historical actor; it creates power relations that capture only a small subset of actual forms of domination wielded by capital; it lacks the abiding structural power that we have seen it actually exercise; it is attributed with a totalizing force so awesome that every known instance of capitalism must of necessity fall short of the concept—which impels Chakrabarty to announce that the very idea of its universalization is a mistake. Naturally, if a theory cannot make basic sense of how capitalism works, then the very idea of its supplanting Marxist or other radical analyses cannot be taken seriously. Subaltern Studies realizes at least tacitly that, much as in Marx's time, the central issue in our own time is still the juggernaut of global capitalism. This is probably why they cannot exorcise the word from their lexicon, even if it bears little resemblance to the concept as we know it. And it is what makes their failure all the more striking: in their hands, the most powerful social and structural force in the world becomes a wisp of smoke, something so ghostly that one becomes not quite sure it exists.

11.2 RESURRECTING ORIENTALISM

While Subaltern Studies fails in its analysis of capitalism, it also cannot be the leading edge of anticolonial or anti-imperial critique, because it resurrects the worst instances of Orientalist mythology.

- Subaltern Studies insists that Eastern agents operate with an entirely different political psychology than do Western agents. This is perhaps the oldest canard in the Orientalist worldview. It is not hard to fathom why it occupies pride of place among imperial ideologues—there is no more effective justification for denying people their rights and freedoms than the claim that those people simply do not value those freedoms, or that they are not motivated by their material needs—in sum, that they do not deserve the same protections that
we do because they do not "think like us." One of the most enduring contributions of anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements of the past century has been to reveal the ideological character of these notions—and yet, in the name of radical critique, these are the very claims that Subaltern Studies revives. We witnessed this most dramatically in chapters 7 and 8, which dealt with the political psychology of the laboring classes.

- *It assigns science, rationality, objectivity, and similar attributes to the West, instead of regarding them as common to both cultures.* This is the central argument in Partha Chatterjee's analysis of colonial nationalism, but it lurks in much of Dipesh Chakrabarty's work as well. Hence the bizarre conclusion that for the East even to embark on a political strategy guided by Reason is to consign itself to perpetual subordination.

- *Its celebration of the local, the particular—whether as History 2, or as the "fragment"—ends up justifying an exoticization of the East.* This is most evident in the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, subjected to critique in chapter 10, who builds an entire social ontology in defense of the exotic. Notice that this flows directly from the mistaken understanding of capitalism. Because capitalism is wrongly taken to require complete homogenization, any departure from the homogenizing drive is seen as resistance to the abstract logic of capital: any practice not reduced to the abstract logic of capital is thereby a resistance to capital. The minute examination of such practices can then be linked to emancipatory theory, and so, offsets the intrepid area specialist in search of the myriad "particularities and incommensurabilities" of his region, whether India, or Bolivia, or Turkmenistan. The more marginal, and the more mysterious, the better. The various practices are all construed as ways of being, or better yet, ways of *knowing*, that have escaped the totalizing grasp of capital, and hence presented as potential escape routes from it. Traditional Orientalism is thereby repackaged as resistance to capital.

One could list other features of postcolonial theory that essentialize the East. The point of this discussion, however, is not so much to formulate an exhaustive list of such misdemeanors as it is to emphasize some of the more obvious instances.

In light of the preceding findings, we can firmly reject any claim for the value of postcolonial theory as an analytical framework or as anti-imperial critique. Consider the description offered by Robert J. C. Young in his widely used text *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, in which he assimilates postcolonial theorizing into the tradition of socialist and anticolonial movements. He characterizes it as a form of critique that "incorporates the legacy of the syncretistic traditions of Marxisms that developed outside the west in the
course of anti-colonial struggles”; it is “a form of activist writing that looks back to the political commitment of anti-colonial liberation movements and draws its inspiration from them, while recognizing that they often operated under conditions very different from those that exist in the present.” To underline his point, Young traces the lineage of postcolonial theory not just to Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, but to Marx and Engels themselves. Moving forward, he draws a line that runs from the anticolonial writings of Marx, through Lenin’s “Draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions,” to the revolutionary writings of Mao, Cabral, Nkrumah, and thence to Derrida and Subaltern Studies. The road from Marx leads straight to Subaltern Studies.

By now it should be clear that Young’s description is spectacularly mistaken. Certainly, a good case can be made for a connection between the anticolonial writings of Cabral and Nkrumah, even those of Fanon, and the socialism of Lenin or Marx. Whatever the particularities of their thought, they were all deeply committed to the reality of capitalist universalization and to the basic humanity that binds together laboring classes in the East and West. All proclaimed fidelity to the Enlightenment project, to science, rationality, and universal emancipation. But we have just seen, in intricate detail, that Subaltern Studies and, by extension, postcolonial theory are either in tension with, or simply reject, these as nostrums. It is not that Subalternist theorists disagree with given elements of the theory offered by anticolonial socialism—it is that their theory is fundamentally at odds with it. For example, by Partha Chatterjee’s description, the socialism of all the leading anticolonial theorists of the twentieth century means that they were all prisoners of the colonial thematic; they could not be taken seriously as anticolonial theorists until they rejected humanism and universal ethics, confidence in science, in rationality and objectivity—in other words, until they rejected their socialism. Given its irrationalism, its embrace of an Orientalist sociology, and its romanticization of capitalism, postcolonial theory has little or no connection to the theoretical lineage invoked by Robert Young. How could it, when that lineage is its favorite target of critique?

11.3 HOW TO PROVINCIALIZE EUROPE

Obviously, my verdict on the merits of Subaltern Studies is not favorable. What, then, remains of the impulse to “provincialize Europe”? One reason postcolonial theory is so attractive to so many people in the academy is its hostility to Eurocentrism, and its related commitment to appreciate the specificity of the colonial experience. Readers might wonder if my critique and counterarguments amount to the view that there is in fact nothing specific about colonial

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What is objectionable about postcolonial theory is not that it insists on "provincializing Europe," but that, in the name of this project, it relentlessly promotes Eurocentrism—a portrayal of the West as the site of reason, rationality, secularism, democratic culture, and the like, and the East as an unchanging miasma of tradition, unreason, religiosity, and so on. Theirs is a world in which capitalism transforms the West but loses its nerve in the East, where materialist categories are therefore appropriate to the West but only an essentializing culturalism is workable for the East. It should be obvious that, in the name of displacing Eurocentrism, postcolonial theory ends up resurrecting it with a ferocious intensity.

By way of an alternative, I would like to make only two points. The first is that the way to provincialize Europe is not by continually harping on some unbridgeable gap that separates East from West, but by showing that both parts of the globe are subject to the same basic forces and are therefore part of the same basic history. The forces I refer to are what I have called the two universalisms—the universal logic of capital (suitably defined) and social agents' universal interest in their well-being, which impels them to resist capital's expansionary drive. These forces impinge on both East and West, even if they do so with different intensities and in different registers. This means that there is a universal history, in which East and West are both full-time participants. But while both East and West are part of the same history, and subject to the same forces, it does not follow that they lose their distinguishing characteristics. In chapter 9 we saw that recognizing the reality of capital's universalization is perfectly consistent with an appreciation for the persistence of difference. It is unnecessary to rehearse those arguments here. But if we accept them, then we can also agree that a recognition of the two universalisms does not automatically generate a blindness to difference.

Now the second point. The history of Marxian analysis in the twentieth century is the history of doing just this—understanding the specificity of the East. There is probably no project to which Marxist theorists have devoted more energy and time since the first Russian Revolution of 1905 than to understand the peculiar effects of capitalist development in the non-West. Perhaps this seems shocking at first blush, especially in light of the unceasing claims from postcolonial theory to the contrary. The fact is, owing to the peculiar fate of socialist movements—namely, that they gained the most traction in the less-developed parts of the world—Marxists were driven from the outset to train their lenses on the backwaters of global capital, every bit as much as on the developed West. If we draw up a list of the main theoretical innovations to come out of the Marxist tradition after Marx's death, we see that many of them are attempts to theorize capitalism in backward settings: in the first half of the
century, there was Lenin's theory of imperialism and the "weakest link," his analysis of agrarian class differentiation, Trotsky's work on the agrarian question, Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development, Mao's theory of New Democracy, Gramsci's distinction between state legitimacy in Eastern and Western Europe. All of these were attempts to understand social reproduction in parts of the world where capitalism was not working in exactly the way Marx described it in Capital. In the years of the New Left, there came dependency theory, world-systems theory, Cabral's work on the African revolutionary path, the theory of the articulation of modes of production, the Indian "modes of production" debate—and the list goes on.

I mention this in part because Marxism is the favorite target of postcolonial theorists' accusations against the Enlightenment tradition. They invite us to believe that Marxism looks at the East only as a blurred reflection of the West, where any departures from the Western model are mere anachronisms, bound to vanish in due course, inasmuch as the East is supposed to follow passively in the tracks laid down by the West. Yet the history of Marxian analysis is exactly the opposite—it exhibits an enduring appreciation of the fact that Eastern societies seem to be driven by logics that require fresh analysis and even, at times, a modification of received categories.

To offer just one example: Trotsky's theory of uneven and combined development was an explicit rejection of the argument that later developers would simply replicate the developmental path of the early ones. For Trotsky, the fact of their later insertion into the capitalist vortex meant that such societies would be able to import the most recent innovations in certain spheres, while preserving a whole gamut of older social relations in others. There is no implication of homogeneous time, no historicism, no "stageism"—indeed, the theory is immune to virtually every accusation that Subalternist theorists make against the Marxian tradition.2

Similarly, Kautsky's classic work on the agrarian question ends up making a case for why the peasantry will not simply be dissolved by the forces of agro-industry or urban capitalism—rather, they will be incorporated into the circuits of capital, thus giving smallholders a place within the order that their counterparts lost within the early developers.3 Here, too, there is no stageism, no historicism, no presumption of homogenization. Or take a theory of more recent vintage, the articulation of modes of production. In this approach, capitalism does not obliterate all History 2s, nor does it resolutely lurch from stage to predetermined stage. Instead, it forms an uneasy accord with archaic modes of production, so that instead of displacing them it cohabits with them over

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2 A short representation is found in Trotsky's introduction to his *The History of the Russian Revolution*.

long periods of time. This was a theory developed by French anthropologists focusing mainly on the study of Africa, and was made famous in the English-speaking world by theorists such as Harold Wolpe, who mobilized it to study the peculiar capitalism of South Africa.

Many of these theories, of course, are deeply flawed and can be criticized on various grounds, but never on the grounds that Subaltern Studies associates with Enlightenment—especially Marxian theories. If they are wrong, it is not because they are teleological, or deterministic, or stageist. Indeed, every one of these theories was developed as an explicit rejection of these very modes of thought. On the other hand, all of them have something significant in common: they affirm the two universalisms, and thus provincialize Europe far more effectively than anything coming out of the stable of postcolonial studies. Whatever their flaws, none of these theories grounded in Enlightenment principles is Eurocentric, none of them essentializes the East, and none can be accused of Orientalism. This being the case, the project of developing theory that effectively analyzes the specificity of the East is more likely to emerge from the research program associated with the Enlightenment than with postcolonial theory. And here is the reason: postcolonial theory obscures the very forces that drive the political dynamics in that part of the world (the two universalisms), while simultaneously promoting conceptions of it that are systematically misleading.

The aim to provincialize Europe, then, is wholly laudable. The problem with postcolonial theory is not that it is committed to this agenda, but rather that it is incapable of ever carrying it out.

11.4 ENVOI

My argument amounts to the contention that postcolonial theory impedes the development of an adequate analysis of the modern epoch, whether in the East or the West. Is there any chance it will be displaced from its exalted status in the near future? Interestingly, if ever there was a time when the sheer force of events should suffice to undermine a theory, it is now. Two facts about the current conjuncture would seem to deliver a decisive and devastating blow to the postcolonial studies framework, while affirming the arguments I have leveled against it. The first of these is the global economic crisis that began in

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4 As for Marx's own Orientalism, I believe he was guilty of this at times. But the Subalternist accusations against him, which portray him as an apologist for imperialism, are so off-base that they suggest a genuine ignorance of his work. Luckily, a superb recent book lays this matter to rest once and for all. See Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Compare Anderson's impressive scholarship to the ill-conceived and rather baseless accusations of Gyan Prakash in his "Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography," *Social Text* 31/32 (1992), 14–15.
The global economic crisis has brought into relief the basic fact that the entire world is now part of the same universal history, subject to the same underlying forces. There is no more dramatic illustration of capital's universalization than the fact that the entire world has been engulfed by its effects. This is not the first time this has happened, of course. Crises in the history of capitalism have always been global in their impact. But it is the first time such a cataclysm has hit since postcolonial theory arrived on the scene. For the first time since the 1980s, everyone is talking about capitalism—not alterity, or hybridity, or the fragment, but the ubiquitous, grinding, crushing force of capital. This certainly makes for a friendlier environment for the arguments I have been developing in this book, and which others will no doubt make in the years to come.

Even more devastating than the economic collapse, however, is the Arab Spring. It is hard to imagine a more dramatic confirmation of the two universalisms than the demands that came from the streets of Tunisia, Egypt, or the other centers of revolt. These were demands for bread, rights, jobs, and democracy. In fact, without exception, commentators were taken aback by the centrality of secular, universalistic, and materialist demands in the movements. This is not the first time such demands have been seen in the Middle East; secular nationalism was the main political ideology of the region in the middle decades of the twentieth century. But since the 1970s, it was Islamists of varying stripes that had gained traction within civil society. The growth of religious political organizations, and the steady enervation of secular Left forces, had been one of the conditions that lent credibility to the new Orientalism espoused by postcolonial theory. Yet when the Spring’s mass movements exploded onto the scene, the Islamists were largely marginal to them. Their banners were hard to find. What the masses of young revolutionaries called for was liberty, justice, and dignity—demands one should expect, if postcolonial theory is to be believed, only in the streets of Paris or New York. And if that were not enough, when the United States and Europe experienced a series of mass mobilizations against austerity during the months after the Arab Spring, the youth in the

5 Committed Orientalists will no doubt point to the political gains of Islamists since those heady days as being a problem for my argument. The victories by Islamist parties in the elections, the critics would say, show the deep roots of religious consciousness in the Middle East, and the marginality of universalistic motivations. This argument readily fails. The balance of votes in an election is the result of numerous factors. It is not a key to the wellsprings of a national culture. The most salient explanations of a party’s electoral success are political, not cultural. So, in Egypt, the most powerful explanation for the Muslim Brotherhood’s success is that it was the most well-organized party in opposition, with national organizational presence, deep roots in communities, etc., while the newer, secular parties were much weaker organizationally. In any case, the Muslim Brotherhood itself supported many of the universalistic demands made by the crowds in Tahrir Square, and reaffirmed its commitment to them after its electoral success.
streets of Barcelona, New York, and Athens carried signs saluting their counterparts in Cairo and Tunis, citing them as inspirations. How could this be? How could calls for jobs and rights in the West take inspiration from the Orient, if the latter are not even supposed to be motivated by such matters?

Hence, one can make the argument that the past five years have created optimal conditions for the recognition of postcolonial theory's shortcomings. But will it be displaced? In fact, I doubt we will witness its eclipse anytime in the near future. Postcolonial theory came to prominence during a period of massive political defeats for the Left, all across the world.6 Indeed, I rather doubt there has ever been a time since the birth of the modern Left that its forces were as enfeebled as they have been since the 1980s. It is now a commonplace that the turn to irrationalism within the self-styled “radical” intelligentsia was very closely tied to their retreat into the academy.7 But it was not just that this brought about a change in intellectual culture, narrowly conceived. Over the past quarter century, enormous resources have been sunk into the material infrastructure that sustains the theory. There are journals wholly committed to it, chairs in humanities departments dedicated to its propagation, sections in disciplinary societies that convene annually with hundreds of attendees, book series at publishing houses with enormous lists and promises of forthcoming volumes. None of this will come to an end anytime soon simply because the theory happens to be deeply flawed.

And this brings up the second obstacle. By now, not only have lavish material resources been plowed into the field, but hundreds of scholars have built their reputations on it. This institutional network is staffed by academics whose professional life now orbits around the ideas propagated by the theory. Apart from the first generation of postcolonial theorists, the second generation, their students, constitutes a bulwark against the possibility of critique—and hence the possibility of one's own reputation becoming sullied. For scholars from the Global South, who have now for decades promoted the Orientalism central to postcolonial theory, the prospect of exposure is especially devastating. There are now legions of intellectuals who have staked their reputations on this theoretical framework, who have made their careers on extolling its virtues and its deep insights. Put these factors together, and one should expect that the response to the political developments of the past couple of years will be twofold: to bend and twist the theory so that it might appear capable of accommodating

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6 Much of the analysis in the next paragraphs is a highly condensed presentation of my argument in “On the Decline of Class Analysis in South Asian Studies,” Critical Asian Studies 38:4 (Dec. 2006), 357–87. Readers should refer to that essay for a more detailed accounting of the conditions that gave rise to, and have sustained, postcolonial theory over the past decades.

7 See the early analysis by Perry Anderson in his In the Tracks of Historical Materialism (London: Verso, 1983), and the brilliant distillation by Terry Eagleton in his The Illusions of Postmodernism (London: Verso, 1999), chap. 1.
developments that rather directly undermine its basic propositions; and to violently attack any concerted critique issuing from the outside.

For those familiar with the literature on the history of science, my prognosis ought not to come as a surprise. Decades ago, Thomas Kuhn described the process of theoretical development in the history of scientific thought. He showed that when scientific theories meet with empirical anomalies or even outright disconfirmation, they are not easily displaced by their rivals. They are able to survive for long periods, in large part because of the resources that can be deployed to defend them, and because the reputations of so many scientists hang on the success of the flawed theories. What I have described in the case of postcolonial theory is much the same phenomenon, except that it is occurring in the moral sciences. If anything, the absence of experimental conditions, along with the more dubious intellectual culture of the social sciences and humanities, makes the likelihood of rapid displacement even more remote.

None of this is to suggest, however, that the situation is hopeless. Quite the contrary. The times in which we live do offer a tremendous opportunity to expose the flaws of the theory and even to displace it. My point is simply that if this is going to happen, it will not happen on its own. It will take some time and a great deal of effort. All the more reason to begin now.

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8 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, first published in 1962. My invocation of Kuhn should not be taken as an endorsement of the more controversial parts of his argument in *The Structure*—namely, the strong version of the theory-dependence of observation and the attendant claims for the incommensurability of theories.