CHAPTER 5

Subaltern-Speak

Bruce Robbins

How do you tell the history of the world? Not long ago this question would have seemed naive. The only people enthusiastic about universal history were complacent idiots who thought that history had ended with the Cold War and the twin triumphs of democracy and globalization, or that it was moving toward an ever fuller manifestation of the glory of the Western way of life. Raining on their parade felt like a civic duty.

Those days are gone. Even the idiots are no longer complacent. Now they worry about the decline of American power and the rise of China; they scramble for a techno-fix for global warming and other looming resource-related catastrophes. Few Whig interpretations of history are left afloat. Sinking them no longer seems the most productive way to spend your time. Meanwhile, urgent reasons have made themselves felt (see above) for trying to make sense of history on a planetary scale. And it seems quite possible to do so without being Whiggish about it.

This planet is home to a large number of nations, societies, regions, cultures, communities, and other variably sized human collectivities. Each is, of course, unique. Each has a legitimate claim to a history of its own. Do these claims mean that no single overarching history is possible? The somewhat obscure impulse behind Vivek Chibber’s polemical and much-debated book is to establish that such a history is both possible and desirable. His motive, stated somewhere in the middle of his book, is “to tie together the political struggles of laboring classes in East and West as part of one—dare I say it—universal history.” Whatever doubts I have about the peculiar version of universal history he comes up with, and I have several, I’m glad he dared.
The target of Chibber's polemic is not postcolonial theory as a whole, about which he says almost nothing. (Verso should have asked him to drop the portentously inaccurate title.) His target is Subaltern Studies, the field created by a group of left-wing historians of South Asia who began publishing in the early 1980s. The Subalterns—represented in Chibber's book by Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee, and who also include David Arnold, Gyanendra Pandey, and Shahid Amin, among others (Gayatri Spivak is a sort of fellow traveler)—wrote from within Marxism but against what Chakrabarty called the "deep-seated, crude materialism of the 'matter over mind' variety" implicitly attributed to orthodox Marxism. Crude materialism, these historians argued, did not give enough credit to the culture, consciousness, or experience of India's poorest. There was also an immediate political context that spurred the historiographic question. In the late 1960s and 70s, India's most oppressed had risen up in what came to be known as the Naxalite insurgency, and received less than full-throated support from the established Marxist parties. When Guha and Chatterjee researched peasant revolts against colonial officials and landlords or strikes in Calcutta's jute mills, they were calling attention to a resistant agency for which even the anti-colonial Left seemed unable or unwilling to find a proper place.

The problem, the Subalterns said, was that this agency was articulated in an "archaic" vocabulary—religious, superstitious, hierarchical, premodern—that did not translate into the modern, autonomous, egalitarian subjectivity that Marxism predicted would emerge under capitalism. Capitalism, though very much present in India, showed no sign of dispelling the older social formations that had stunted over India like permanent bad weather. The Subalterns argued the reason lay with the undeveloped colonial "comprador" bourgeoisie, who were completely unlike their structural counterparts in Europe and had failed; during the Indian independence movement, to assume a similarly revolutionary role, leaving the poorer and less powerful classes—the "subaltern" strata—unintegrated into the nation. India, in other words, hadn't followed the path established by liberal or Marxist theories of development, which were outlined from European models and therefore ill-fitted to the postcolonial situation. In Europe, "history from below," which flourished in the creatively revisionist hands of Marxist historians like E. P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm, had been inspired in part by the actual disappearance of Europe's peasantry. In India, the peasantry was not disappearing. On the contrary, an expanding capitalism was somehow reproducing it with all its feudal quirks intact. Archaisms remained culturally dominant across the board.

Chatterjee made a point of mentioning "industrial capitalists delaying the closing of a deal because they hadn't yet had word from their respective astrologers." The historians were split on the relationship between the expansion of capitalism and the stubborn persistence of the peasantry. On the one hand, it meant that capitalism was not as powerful as some people thought. At the same time, it meant that the Indian peasantry was more powerful: precisely those qualities (handcraft, superstition, and so on) that did not neatly fit the Western narrative of historical progress were unassimilable by capitalism and therefore a bulwark against it, a potential rallying site for resistance. Guha's interpretation—summed up in Dominance without Hegemony (1998)—placed its emphasis elsewhere, on the frustrated role of the bourgeoisie, but his premise was the same: in order to flourish, capitalism needed to subsume nearly everything under its implacable logic, something that manifestly hadn't happened in India.

Generalized, this defense of the cultural particularities of the down-trodden became a polemic against universalizing materialist history as such. To "provincialize Europe," in Chakrabarty's phrase, for the Subalterns did not mean giving up a European vocabulary—far from it—but it did seem to entail rejecting all meta- or master narratives. This not only meant that Eurocentric theories were inadequate to the postcolony, but that the experience of the latter should drastically revise our opinion of the former, and throw in doubt any attempt to universalize based on a single model. Heavily implicated was the particular meta-narrative supposedly established by Marxism, which saw a universalizing, homogenizing capitalism expanding at the expense of cultural difference. "In Defense of the Fragment," an essay by Gyanendra Pandey, strikes the characteristic note. Those who "reduce the lives of men and women to the play of material interests, or at other times to large impersonal movements in economy and society over which human beings have no control," Pandey says,
leaving out human agency. In effect, they leave out India itself. Fragments are the prescribed therapy.

Why was this scholarship such a huge international hit? How did a small group of mainly South Asian historians suddenly get to be world famous? How did they become the symbol of an intellectual paradigm so powerful that Chibber (and others) would come to feel they must be publicly humbled and even humiliated? For one thing, their timing was good. Along with the term "subaltern," they borrowed from the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci an analysis of how the Italian movement of national independence had failed to integrate significant portions of the population. The Subalterns diagnosed a parallel failure. As in Italy, so in postcolonial India: anti-colonial leaders had cared more about shoring up their own niche in post-independence society than about representing the whole of the nation, and the new nation-state had left much of the nation unrepresented. The Subalterns' analysis also arrived at a moment when the nationalisms of the decolonizing nations were coming to be perceived—by their own people and international observers alike—as exhausted. Kenya, Uganda, and Indonesia, stars of the Bandung Conference in 1955, in subsequent years had succumbed to dictatorships; India nearly did the same during the Emergency, and the years that followed were ones of persistent economic malaise. To the question Why did Third World nationalism fail? many answers could be given. But the Subalterns' answer—that it was wrong from the start, because it had not integrated the poorest of the poor into its project—proved, at least in the academy, to be persuasive.

In the US, Subaltern Studies caught the postcolonial wave (Edward Said's Orientalism had been published in 1978). It also got a great deal of momentum from American-style multiculturalism. If Subaltern Studies was to unsettle other, political-economy-based accounts of the unhappy trajectory of the Third World, including Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory and Latin American dependency theory (anticipated, Vinay Bali has noted, by India's own drain theory), it would need some powerful endorsements. American academia's hypersensitivity to the culture of the Other gave it the needed political oomph. It did not hurt that, like postcolonialism, the Subaltern project of retrieving backward or traditional worldviews had recourse to the most sophisticated, cutting-edge theories of poststructuralist interpretation. Necessarily so, one might say, given that these worldviews had not recorded themselves directly in written transcripts: continental theory offered ways of seeing and productively interpreting silences and gaps in a text. It was certainly a transnational and interdisciplinary selling point for the Subalterns: their content was local and piously traditional while their methodology was global and glossy modern.

Later scholarship in Subaltern Studies followed currents elsewhere in the humanities and social sciences. Influenced by Foucault, the Subalterns questioned the power relations that created the archival sources they were unearthing (Who produced them? And for what?). Partha Chatterjee's Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World (1986) refined the categories of orientalism for examining power and culture under nationalism. Gayatri Spivak's 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" questioned whether it was possible to recover the voices of the truly disadvantaged, and introduced deconstruction into the discourse of Subaltern Studies. In an otherwise sympathetic introduction to a selection of their work in 1992, Spivak criticized their lack of attention to questions of gender. It was a criticism the Subalterns took seriously: subsequent writing by Susie Tharu, as well as Guha and Chatterjee, has tried to remedy the gap. Chakrabarty's own Provincializing Europe (2000) assimilated these strands while also attempting to advance them, trying to tease out a notion of modernity that did not rely on Europe as its model and everything else as mimicry.

Early critiques of the Subalterns were sometimes factional (Do I detect vestigial Maoism?) and sometimes regional (Why should South Asia provide the paradigm rather than, say, China? Does all this apply to Africa?). Much has been made of their skepticism about Western rationality and their corresponding taste for postmodern critiques of that rationality, like Foucault and Derrida. Others have questioned their habit of using "elitist" as a killing put-down, which the influence of Foucault and Derrida has ironically served to moderate. Anti-elitism is a dangerous position if (as is often the case) the person making the charge is himself a member of an elite. The fact that Guha comes from the class of absentee landlords he analyzed in A Rule of Property for Bengal was first mentioned, it should be said, by Guha himself.
Chibber’s polemic represents an emerging and much more profound debate. Taking Subaltern Studies as symbolic of a wider intellectual failure, he asserts in its place the validity and explanatory power of a renewed and unapologetic Marxism, and with it the Enlightenment universals that it relied on. In the view of thinkers like Chibber, the charge that Marxist theory suffers from “Eurocentrism”—represented by decades of thinking, entire libraries of books, and hundreds of academic departments—is sterile and empty. Drawing a line in the sand naturally makes both sides upset, and the debate over Chibber’s book has been heated. The field was sowed when his less guarded, even more polemical thoughts about the bankruptcy of Subaltern Studies came out in an interview with Jacobin: “When Subalternist theorists put up this gigantic wall separating East from West, and when they insist that Western agents are not driven by the same kinds of concerns as Eastern agents, what they’re doing is endorsing the kind of essentialism that colonial authorities used to justify their depredations in the 19th century,” he said. “It’s the same kind of essentialism that American military apologists used when they were bombing Vietnam or when they were going into the Middle East. Nobody on the left can be at ease with these sorts of arguments.” The interview seems at times almost unhinged. A widely read critique by Chris Taylor, an English professor at the University of Chicago, published under the title, “Not Even Marxist,” argued that Chibber mistakenly forced readers to “choose sides” between Subaltern Studies and Marxism; moreover, Chibber’s brand of Marxism, Taylor suggested, was a bad one. This received a riposte at Verso’s blog (“Not Even Marxist?”), which got fought over in turn. The closing session of the Historical Materialism conference at NYU in April 2013 was a debate between Partha Chatterjee and Chibber, and was advertised like it was the return of Ali vs. Frazier.

The heatedness of the debates that flared up around Chibber’s book has to do with the place of honor it gives to the showdown between universalism and culture. Chibber’s impatience with culturalist interpretation—that is, interpretation that doesn’t merely deal with culture but wants to demonstrate how unnecessary and misleading it is to talk about the economic at all—is now widely shared. In an era when purely cultural explanations are no longer as persuasive, “economic determinism” loses its force as a smear. It would be surprising if Chibber’s book had not benefited from this development. Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital comes bearing endorsements from a political philosopher (Joshua Cohen), an economic historian (Robert Brenner), Noam Chomsky, and, well, Zizek.

According to Chibber, the fact that the world contains many cultures does not get in the way of the project of a universal history. The reason is simple: cultural particularity does not get in the way of capitalism. Guha, according to Chibber, “never considers the possibility that the expansion of capital’s economic logic simply did not require the kind of deep cultural transformations that he thinks it does. He does not consider that capital might be able to meet its basic needs by relying on the very cultural forms he thinks are inimical to it—those typical of traditional political economies, suffused with outdated forms of social hierarchy and subordination.” It should be no surprise, then, that kinship and religious affiliations have not been swept away by the capitalist tide. It was rational that they be retained both from the viewpoint of labor—they helped rural workers get jobs and survive in the city—and from the viewpoint of capital: employers could use these feudal remnants to weaken their workforces by fomenting splits along caste and other lines. To maintain your cultural identity may make you feel good, but it does nothing to withstand capitalism, which (Chibber repeats) “does not have to obliterate social differences in order to universalize itself.”

This point has enormous implications. In a critique of Chakrabarty that also departs from common opinion in the cultural disciplines (by which Chibber as a sociologist is clearly irritated), he insists that the famous line from the Communist Manifesto (“all that is solid melts into air”) does not after all describe what capitalism characteristically does to the world. It can collaborate with local cultures perfectly well. If it is frustrated, it’s no doubt for reasons that have nothing to do with culture—for example, because of pushback by labor unions. In Chibber’s eyes, the bar for significant resistance must be set higher than mere persistence in one’s identity.

Chibber’s position has an immediate payoff. It reminds us that there are things to which capitalism is basically indifferent—things that neither help nor hinder it, and that it in turn does not do much to
help or hinder. So the particular cultural forces that would seem to be resistant to capitalism turn out not to be. This has a common-sense verifiability to it. The conspicuous success of capitalism (with all its variations) in places as distinct as China and the UAE suggests, on the face of it anyway, that culture is not always a barrier to capitalism.

In pressing his claim against the significance of the cultural particularity of the Indian peasant, Chibber can be a little nasty. At one point, anticipating his public remarks about the book and Vietnam, he makes the claim that the Subalterns are guilty of orientalism. This is too much, and yet, in fairness, the premise that the Indian peasantry can be defined in such a way that no one who is not an Indian peasant can understand it, as the Subalterns sometimes seem to assume, is almost irritating enough to justify Chibber's rhetorical overkill. No doubt there are aspects of a peasant's experience (as of anyone's) that won't compute as simple self-interest. But for purposes like labor organization and political mobilization, it cannot be taken for granted that those perhaps impenetrable mysteries will determine anyone's behavior. In a discussion of Partha Chatterjee's research on peasant uprisings in 1920s and 1930s Bengal, Chibber credits the valuable empirical description but disputes Chatterjee's explanatory emphasis on a distinctive (and religious) peasant consciousness. To my untrained eye, Chibber makes satisfactory sense of the political behavior of the Bengali peasants in terms of their material interests and without reference to a supposedly unique peasant psychology or sense of community.

Chibber's book makes it clear (once again) that the real problem with respect for the particular is infinite regress. Is it the peasant as such who is the Other of the bourgeoisie? Or just the Indian peasant? Why are generalizations about the Indian peasant not guilty of ignoring the specificity of the Bihar peasant, or of peasants from the Bihar town of Bhagalpur, or of the Bhagalpuris last Tuesday? Once the anti-generalization machine gets going, there is no stopping it. Better to bite the bullet: understanding entails generalizing. If you don't like it, you can take a time-out in the corner. But don't complain that you feel misunderstood.

Any history from below naturally provokes the charge of essentializing and/or idealizing the worldview of the lowly, and the related objection that it rejects any perspective on the lowly from above, whether that of the West or that of native bourgeois leaders and intellectuals, including Marxist ones. These charges were leveled against Subaltern Studies from the outset, and they will always have a certain amount of truth to them.

Chibber himself does not seem to object to history from below. He accuses the Subalterns of being anti-Western, but not of being antibourgeois. On the contrary, for him they are not antibourgeois enough. Manoeuvring to outflank Guha on the left, he argues that to accuse the Indian middle classes of failing in their historic mission to bring rights and democracy to the subaltern strata, as Guha does, is to be all too admiring of the bourgeoisie. Chibber's own thinking is more good guy/bad guy. Piously but implausibly, Chibber gives all the historical credit for so-called bourgeois democracy to the efforts of the working class. He does not ask why, if the laboring classes have an elective affinity with democratic rights and liberties, things turned out as they did in post-1917 Russia or Maoist China. He chooses not to recognize political complications, past or present, that have given pause to fellow Marxists and that might compromise the unsullied virtue of his collective protagonist. If the Subalterns idealize the culture of the peasant laborers, Chibber idealizes them just as much, but he idealizes their political rationality.

Whatever else has changed in their thinking, the Subalterns have always kept a watchful eye out for lazy Eurocentrism. Chibber rather artfully turns the tables by trying to catch Guha in the act of slavishly applying to India a European paradigm that doesn't even work in Europe, let alone India. Guha's extremely influential reading of Indian independence drew on an extended contrast with the English Revolution of the 1640s and the French Revolution of 1789. According to Guha, both the English and the French revolutions managed to achieve what Gramsci called "hegemony"--a mode of rule involving an appreciable degree the consent of the governed. The Indian bourgeoisie on the other hand failed to integrate the lower orders, and the outcome was "domination" (rule involving less consent and more physical coercion). This set the stage for the catastrophic exclusion of the lower orders from national life after independence, the pervasiveness of feudal habits of mind, and the lack of a modernizing "bourgeois revolution" across Indian society, as mentioned above.
Trying to undermine Guha's standard of comparison, Chibber disputes the sociology behind this account of both European revolutions. He argues (here I abbreviate radically) that the English Civil War was not anti-feudal (because feudalism in England was already dead) but only a contest within the landed classes over absolute monarchy. And he argues that the French Revolution was not pro-capitalist (because no actual capitalists were present on the scene). He concedes that some seemingly progressive things happened, but they happened only thanks to uprisings from below. Chibber sees these political accomplishments as grudgingly supported by the supposed revolutionaries and in any case quickly and violently rolled back by the forces of counterrevolution. Coercion has always been a large part of the capitalist order. Consent has not been. Dominance without hegemony is the norm in both India and in Europe.

This sounds attractively universal, but it is also wrong, and what is wrong with it gets to the heart of what is wrong with Chibber's book, and with the state of thinking about universal history. If feudalism in England had already been overthrown by 1640, when and how did that happen? Could something as large as feudalism simply disappear without causing any political commotion, without anyone noticing? Is that how the most momentous social changes tend to occur, without any revolutionary tumult, without any changes from deep within society? If so, then politics would seem to be trivial—and economics, now decoupled from it, would also find its duties as an explanatory agent much reduced. In sacrificing the causal connection between politics and economics, Chibber is selling off Marxism's most valued asset: the power to make sense of what happens. If capitalism's rise was not a significant cause of political events in the past, like the French Revolution, then so much the worse for Marxism as a guide to history, whether in the past or in the future.

Chibber's understanding of European history seems to take place in a vacuum; his account of the contemporary world suffers from a similar blind spot. He does not even try to account for the Great Divergence between capitalism in the style of IKEA and capitalism in the style of Rana Plaza. The question of what is specific about capitalism in the East is not posed until page 290 of a 296-page book. As for the West, Chibber's sole point (not an uninteresting one) is that it is less different from the East than it thinks. The West has its political liberties, he says, but even there "capitalists mobilize all available means to increase their power in the organization of work." This is true, but those means are not universally available, and their local unavailability is a fact of some importance. The United Automobile Workers are no longer the force in society they once were, and yet they remain strong enough to ensure that flogging does not happen on the shop floor. If, like Chibber, you insinuate that flogging on the shop floor is the universal norm, readers will suspect that you are not inspecting the premises very seriously.

Chibber is reluctant to march under the banner of "rational choice," to which he allots one brief footnote, but "rational choice Marxism" is probably the best category for him. He is a materialist, but not a dialectical one. His is the pre-dialectical, individualist materialism of self-interest and basic needs. Chibber says he wants a universal history, but his rational choice premises make such a history impossible, or at least dangerously impoverished. His idea of the universal is, well, particular: for him there are only two universals, capital's drive to universalize itself and the attempts of the poor to defend their well-being. Gender and race don't count as universals. What is universal is the self-interested individual. If that were the case, what could history be but an eternal repetition of the same? The rich and powerful will try again and again to maintain and increase their power and riches. Those most injured by their efforts will do what they can to defend themselves. Presumably the dominant class always has, and presumably the oppressed always will. This model unifies East and West under a single principle, but it's an unenlightening principle. The terms of the merger that generates this universal history ensure that it will remain empty and unproductive—not really a history at all.

Here I am somewhat overstating the case. Chibber knows that change has happened, just as he knows that East and West, while sharing a single modern capitalism, have had significantly different experiences of it. He is right to resist explanations of this difference that appeal exclusively or even primarily to culture, which is permanent, rather than to situation, which changes. But he cannot have the universal history that he wants, and makes us want, unless he is willing to give up on the timeless monster he describes as the "asocial individual,
hovering above his culture, ranking his preferences and remorselessly disposing of social relations as they lose value on his utility meter."

Where, then, is universal history to be found? In a talk in Shanghai in 2010 about "the West" and what it has meant to modern India, Chakrabarty ended on a surprising note. He conceded that while holding India in "the vise grip of power," Europe had also "created a room for dialogical maneuvers" by exhibiting "enough contradictions within herself to provide the colonized with terms with which to criticize her doings." Then he wondered aloud whether "the prospect of China and India taking their place among the dominant nations of the world," which he welcomed, would help create new visions of humanity and help humans achieve justice and fairness in a world racked by problems of planetary proportions. His Chinese hosts would have been correct, I think, in perceiving in this a diplomatic hint: that their coming hegemony, while good news in a sense, would not be good news in every sense and thus would require tools of self-critique, as European hegemony had.

Here Chakrabarty hits the true dialectical tonality. Trying to see the big picture at the scale of the Anthropocene, as he demands of his listeners, is a far cry from treasuring every fragment, the tinier and more chipped the better. It's got to feel uncomfortable for all concerned. Your moral and political categories are suddenly less certain, more relative. Chakrabarty looks further into the political future but also further into the past, where the atrocities committed by European colonialism blur together with the conquest and slaughter, plunder and rape, perpetrated by centuries of non-Europeans. Until recently this larger scale has been the preserve of undialectical materialists like Steven Pinker, who saw history as one continuous process of moral evolution, centered in the European Enlightenment, thereby letting Europe off the hook. A new universal history will not want to do that, but it will want to reclaim this scary scale for itself, this time in a dialectical mode: one that is never quite sure where the struggle for equality is located, only that it's there.

CHAPTER 6

Reply to Bruce Robbins

Vivek Chibber

Since its release in March, the response to Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital has, in many ways, been as I expected. From the followers and practitioners of postcolonial theory itself, there has been the predicted hysteria and vitriol. But what has been gratifying, what I did not expect at all, is the steady stream of positive responses, even from within cultural studies and even from some quarters of postcolonial theory. Bruce Robbins's review falls somewhere in between. His tone for most of it is respectful, sometimes positive. He quite ably sets the context for the book's arguments and tries to lay out what is at stake. In this, he rises above the muddling that has been the resort of some of his colleagues. But once he sets out his own criticisms, the essay degenerates into a series of distortions and misconceptions. What makes them interesting, and worth responding to, is that they converge with misgivings that even sympathetic readers have expressed. Hence, although Robbins presents them in a very telescoped form, with the predictable helping of smokes and cheap shots, they are worth responding to, mainly because of their resonance with other criticisms. I can only give a flavor of the arguments I need to make, since this is a short essay. A longer response will have to wait for another occasion.

The crux of Robbins's criticism comes at the end of his review, and it comes down to three issues: whether my views of the English Revolution of 1640 and/or 1688 are defensible; whether my framework can apprehend the difference between East and West; and whether my materialism is really a restatement of rational choice theory. Robbins quite summarily dismisses my arguments on all three counts. I wish to show here that all of his criticisms are mistaken.

Let us start with the English Revolution. In PTSC I examined whether Ranajit Guha's view about the events of 1640 were correct.
Guha, in essence, understands 1640 to be an instance of a "bourgeois-democratic revolution," in which the emergent capitalist class undertakes and accomplishes two goals—the eradication of feudal landed relations, and the establishment of a liberal, consensual political order. I showed that this view is irredeemably flawed, and that it sets up an illusory contrast between the history of the bourgeoisie in the East as against the West. First, the English Revolution was not a war between a rising bourgeoisie and the ancien régime, for the economy was already largely capitalist. Second, and most importantly, the victorious post-revolutionary regime had no interest in, and did not establish, the liberal, encompassing, consensual order that Guha attributes to it. In fact it strove mightily to squelch what democratic rights there were. What the revolution bequeathed was a narrow bourgeois oligarchy.

Robbins dismisses this argument out of hand as being wrong. He seems to think that an economic transformation of this magnitude had to have occurred through something like a political revolution. How, he asks, could feudalism have disappeared without anyone noticing, without a "political commotion"? I seem to make politics recede into irrelevance. Two points are worth mentioning here. First, I do not say that feudalism was replaced without any political commotion, or transformation of political relations more generally. In fact, as I argue in some detail in the book, there was a very important political transformation that accompanied the change in agrarian relations in the Tudor era—the landed classes acquired greater and greater political power for themselves throughout the country by capturing local juridical institutions and in parliament by controlling regional elections. Over the course of a century, they bent the structure of the state toward their own interests, thereby constraining the monarchy in its unilateral power. This was a transformation of epochal significance, in that they slowly turned the state into an organ of their own power—albeit with a monarchical form. The strife in 1640 was the final act in a decades-long effort by Charles to wrest control away from the landed classes, centralizing it again in the person of the monarch. The revolution itself was a war over what kind of state an already bourgeois England would have. My argument doesn't consign politics to irrelevance—it simply corrects an erroneous story about what the battle was fought over.

But even more importantly, Robbins fails to understand the real issue. Even if the traditional story about the revolution were true—that it was a political revolution led by the bourgeoisie against a feudal state—it wouldn't be enough to save the Subalternists' case. For them the central issue isn't whether or not England was already capitalist by 1640. It is, rather, whether or not the capitalists who came to power were committed to a liberal, consensual, inclusive political order—their commitment to "speak for all the nation." This is where they set themselves apart from the postcolonial and colonial capitalists. And on this score, there is simply no debate among historians. What the English bourgeoisie wanted, and what it erected after 1688, was a narrow bourgeois oligarchy, geared centrally toward the exclusion of popular classes from the political arena. The heroic bourgeoisie against which Guha compares that of the East is a historic myth.

I point out the centrality of this issue at some length in Chapter Four, but Robbins seems not to have noticed. Indeed, his entire line of criticism is not based on any empirical grounds at all. He rejects my argument, not because he has any facts to marshal against it, or any historical literature he can cite, but from first principle. He announces from on high what events must look like in the advent of capitalism. If a particular narrative fails to conform to his model, well then, so much the worse for the narrative. This is certainly an interesting approach to historical inquiry, but one more properly belonging in a church or synagogue.

Turning now to the second issue, the chasm putatively separating East from West, Robbins fares no better. Now, I have to tread lightly here, since his argument gets very murky. But he seems to think that a focus on the universal properties of capitalism, which he takes me to be recommending, can only end up papering over the real differences between regions. So even though it might be that capitalism has swept the globe, surely we want to explain the difference between "capitalism in the style of IKEA and capitalism in the style of Rana Plaza." Apparently I am not interested in such mundane matters, being slavishly bound to capitalism as a Grand Narrative. As proof, Robbins adduces numbers—it is not till page 290 that I even broach how Eastern capitalism actually diverges from its Western counterpart. Robbins has to know that he is being disingenuous. My entire book is wedded to showing that taking cognizance of certain universal forces
is no impediment to also explaining diversity. The issue of social and historical difference is at the very heart of my argument. The clearest discussion of this is in Chapter 9, on Dipesh Chakrabarty’s confused and rather tortured analysis of abstraction. I explain there that the very universalizing forces of capitalism also generate very diverse forms of capitalism, because even though the pressure to accumulate is common across economies, local response to it can be quite varied. This is in part due to the unevenness of the accumulation process itself, but also because of the contingencies of class conflict and local institutional influences. Capitalism thus universalizes its dynamics, but exists in variable forms. Just so readers know how bizarre Robbins’s accusation is, my discussion of this issue is in a section labeled “Capitalism and Diversity Revisited” (Chapter 9, Section 6), in which I summarize the argument in its subsection titled “Three Sources of Diversity in Capitalism” (pp. 244–6). So I literally spell out what I am arguing—and Robbins still manages to miss it.

It is true that I do not produce an actual theory, a historical account, of why this or that country—say, a Sweden—turned out differently in its capitalism than another one—perhaps an Argentina. But that is because I have to set the argument at the same level of generality as the theories that I criticize, those of the Subalternists. The argument coming from their camp is not that some particular theory is falling short; it is that any theory built on certain premises is incapable of ever recognizing difference. I try to show that the kinds of theories they impugn are in fact quite capable of appreciating historical diversity, and I show what it is about their logic that enables them to explain both universal processes and divergent social formations. I then point, on page 290, to the veritable mountain of literature that does just that—explain how Sweden and Argentina are both capitalist but still very diverse. I do not offer such an explanation myself because I do not have to, since it has been at the core of several theories’ research programs for more than one hundred years, which postcolonial theorists either pretend doesn’t exist, or are ignorant of.

Finally, the question of rationality. Robbins seems of two minds here. He accuses me of offering a model of action derived from rational choice theory, on top of which he heaps further opprobrium—not the least of which is the dreaded verdict of being “pre-dialectical.” But he also quickly draws back and admits that he might be exaggerating (even my being weak on the dialectic?). Since it isn’t clear which of his accusations he actually believes, let me address the question squarely. Do I rely on a rational choice model of action? I have to admit being puzzled by this question, since I go to some lengths in the book—not just in a footnote, as Robbins wrongly asserts—to show how and why my argument is not a version of rational choice theory. Robbins is again a little dishonest here. He uses a quotation from me about the “asocial individual, hovering above his culture, ranking his preferences,” and so on, implying that that is the view that I wish to endorse—when he notes perfectly well that, in that passage, I am lampooning that view as one that I reject.

So what is the view that I endorse? Do I reduce agents to asocial automatons? What I actually say in the book—and it is hard to see how Robbins could miss this—is three things. First, that people are largely shaped by their cultures, but culture is not constitutive of human psychology. There are some needs that exist and endure independently of culture, and chief among these is the need to attend to one’s physical well-being. Second, that people are typically cognizant of this need and it therefore generates interests that influence political and social interaction. And third, that it is the universality of this need that explains the universality of resistance to exploitation—since the latter typically undermines the former. Note that I don’t simply assert this argument—I show that the actual historiography of the Subalterns themselves validates this proposition, even though they deny it (with the exception of Guha, who never denies it).

None of this entails a commitment to rational choice theory. All I am offering is one route to what was once called materialism, and those are two very different animals. I do not imply, indeed I explicitly deny, that people are welfare-maximizers. Nor do I suggest that people are selfish or competitive individualists—the two implications most commonly associated with rational choice, and rightly rejected. What I do say is that people have a healthy appreciation for situations in which they are being oppressed or exploited, that this appreciation holds steady across cultures, and that it generates reasons for action. This is why what we typically see is what James Scott called “everyday forms of resistance.” If anyone has an alternative foundation for
non-reductionist materialism, I'd be happy to entertain it. I don't know of any.

Furthermore, my argument does not in any way imply that a concern for one's well-being is all there is to human nature. In the book, I offer that people are probably also hardwired for a desire for autonomy or self-determination. But I also say, and I will repeat, that human nature is in fact much richer than either of these—there is the innate creativity, the desire for love, for social ties, for meaning, and so forth. All those needs and capacities that Marx describes in the *1844 Manuscripts* are ones that I accept. The reason I focused on one particular property is that this is the one that is at the core of Subalternist arguments, and it is the aspect of human nature they deny, especially to people with darker skin—and I have to go where my quarry goes. It is worth repeating that Marx, the Enlightenment thinker with the richest conception of human nature, never doubted the existence of basic human needs, nor the importance of material interests as the fount of politics and political struggles. What made capitalism unjust was that it turned—and in so many parts of the world, continues to turn—workers' lives into a struggle around their bare material well-being, suppressing the development of their other manifold capacities. We should of course object to any theory that reduces peoples' motivations to those focused on this one goal—but we should be equally suspicious of a theory that denies or impugns its salience outright. The most deplorable consequence of the "cultural turn" is that it does just this, and Robbins's response is just another example of it.

The sad fact is that every accusation Robbins throws at me was anticipated in *PTSC* and addressed to a greater or lesser extent. Now he is of course free to disagree with the defenses I offer in the book. But in pretending that I don't address the issues he raises, and in simply ignoring what I explain quite clearly and at great length, Robbins only confirms what I predicted at the end of *PTSC*—that the most likely response from the defenders of postcolonial theory would be to dismiss and calumniate outside criticism, rather than addressing it squarely. As I said at the outset of my response, he is not as hysterical or shrill as some others. But he also doesn't manage to rise above the dismal level of debate that the field has established.