CHAPTER 3

Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital

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Penny for the old guy.¹

Alexandre Aspel told me that I should always try to see what is best in what I read. Jacques Derrida taught us to say "yes" twice to a text. I have tried to read Vivek Chibber's book in that spirit.² He himself participates in that by locating Ranajit Guha as the best of the three authors he reads. If, however, the book wishes to "begin . . . to expose the flaws of [postcolonial theory], even to displace it,"³ I am obliged to say that Vivek Chibber may not be the person to do that. His definitive example of postcolonial theory is the Subaltern Studies group of historians of South Asia (1983–2005). This choice is perhaps not an entirely convincing one. The thrust of the work of the Subalternists was the colonial history of India and the historiography of anti-colonial resistance. They brought about a significant change within the discipline of history—especially the history of South Asia. This change is perceptible in the Indian subcontinent and in the United Kingdom (UK), South Africa, and Australia, where the study of Indian history is more robust. Chibber's need to misrepresent this field in order to make his point obliges him to disregard two of the most powerful Subalternist historians still working in India: Shahid Amin and Shail Mayaram.

Specifically "postcolonial" theory, arising in the United States (US) and UK with Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, related back to Edward W. Said's Orientalism,⁴ and to the phenomenon of cultural studies in Birmingham under the auspices of Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall.⁵

Subaltern Studies certainly came in contact with the US branch of postcolonial studies through Spivak's visit in 1984. (I believe Guha has known Bhabha's way of thinking since the latter was a student at Oxford.) Chibber refers to this insultingly at the beginning of the book,
and assumes this to be sufficient proof of the pernicious effect of "post-structuralism," undocumented as such and presented through the generalizations of received wisdom.

In actual fact, Spivak's intervention, perceived as applying standards of literary criticism to history, was hotly contested by Subalternists as well as general historians from and of South Asia. Guha himself was disappointed by Spivak's performance of her co-editorial obligations to the original volume of Selected Subaltern Studies. Although her relationship with the collective remained cordial and intellectually productive, Spivak's "influence" on their work is insignificant, if at all there.

Chibber pays no attention to Pan-Africanism (including Negritude), which was the first example of a postcolonial vision. He refers not at all to the significant phenomenon of Latin American postcolonial theory (Walter Mignolo, Mary-Louise Pratt) and Latin American Subaltern Studies (John Beverley, Alberto Moreiras, Ilyana Rodriguez, this last with the connection to Spivak's work which Chibber incorrectly claims for South Asian Subaltern Studies).

In a 306-page book full of a repeated and generalized account of the British and French revolutions, and repeated clichés about how capitalism works, and repeated boyish moments of "I have disproved arguments 1, 2, 3, therefore Guha [or Chakrabarty, or yet Chatterjee] is wrong, and therefore Subaltern Studies is a plague and a seduction, and must be eradicated, although it will be hard because careers will be ruined, etc." there could have been some room for these references to describe the range, roots, and ramifications of postcolonial studies, so that the book's focused choice could have taken its place in Verso's protective gestures toward the preservation of "Little Britain Marxism," shared to some degree by the journal Race and Class. Aijaz Ahmad's In Theory was such an attempt. Postcolonial theory is the blunter instrument, and its attempt to disregard the range of postcolonial studies in order to situate Subaltern Studies—confined to three texts—as its representative can mislead students more effectively.

There is no room in this book for perceiving nuance, as described in the following passage at the very opening of Chatterjee's Nationalist Thought:

In an ideological world ... words rarely have unambiguous meanings, where notions are inexact, and have political value precisely because they are inexact and hence capable of suggesting a range of possible interpretations. This inexact world ... of dreams and illusions ... rules established, values asserted, revolutions accomplished and states founded ... Critical viewpoint reveals that [a political revolution] ... at the same time, and in fundamental ways, is not a revolution.

Writing as a member of the Subaltern Studies collective, I should say that we could not doubt profit from a robust constructive criticism of Chibber's sort. In order, however, to be successful at such a critique, the critic must not only give the reader an idea of the scope and range of postcolonial studies, but also be able to enter the actual project of Subaltern Studies and notice that the two are not the same. Vivek Chibber is stumped by his desire to "correct" everybody—the examples are altogether too many to quote. Here is a typical sample: "Guha's mistaken view of the European experience does not simply undermine his analysis of the postcolonial polity. It also has grave implications for his more ambitious project of political critique."

There is no hint here of the sense where Chibber might himself be corrected—with a careful auto-critique, a strong sense of being folded together in a complicity with the very people whom he wants to demolish in an embarrassingly arm-wrestling way. (If he thinks they ignore class, they think rigid class analysis ignores subaltern social groups.) The harder they come, the harder they fall. Interpretation is a responsible task, a risky business.

And so Chibber carries on, merrily mistaking a primary text for a secondary text as he proceeds to "correct" Ranajit Guha because he is "wrong" about the British and French revolutions. Guha's "understanding of the European experience is fatally flawed." The order to prove someone completely mistaken, you have to read all of what they have written. It is embarrassing to be told that, "judged in terms of space or of word count, Guha does not devote much attention to the fortunes of the landed classes," when the entire deep background of Guha's work lies there. The thing to do is to read A Rule of Property for Bengalis side by side with The Small Voice of History.
get a grasp of what is at stake in the work of this counterintuitive historian.

Guha, a seasoned communist who paid the price of his political convictions during a brilliantly maverick career as a historian, created a revolution within the discipline. For Chhibber to prove him "wrong"—especially as an orientalist misreader of Europe who believes that the "non-West" has a different psychology—is somewhat like proving W. E. B. Du Bois "wrong" when he calls the exodus of the newly emancipated slaves a "general strike," like the repeated attempts by folks like Bernard Lewis to prove Edward Said "wrong," even, and I do not want to be mischievous, a well-meaning smart sophomore's attempt to show that in the Poetics Aristotle is "illogical."

I will look at the way in which Guha establishes his premises and alliances in Dominance without Hegemony. I will begin with a longish quotation from Hayden White, cited by Guha:

There does, in fact, appear to be an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality. The very claim to have discerned some kind of formal coherence in the historical record brings with it theories of the nature of the historical world and of historical knowledge itself which have ideological implications for attempts to understand the "present," however this "present" is defined... The ideological dimensions of a historical account reflect the ethical element in the historian's assumption of a particular position on the question of the nature of historical knowledge and the implications that can be drawn from the study of past events for the understanding of the present.

To read this citation correctly, Chhibber has to be able to understand the difference between "ideology" and "psychology." (This is also true in the case of his unproductive misreading of Chakrabarty and Chatterjee.) He uses "ideology" in the uncritical colloquial US sense of "ideas held by a particular group." The Subalternists, including, of course, Guha, use it in the Marxist tradition, beginning with The German Ideology and continuing through a long critical tradition of debate, which Chhibber simply dismisses without discussion because it does not square with his presuppositions, his method being to trivialize the opposition and show, point by point, that every principle emphasized by them—as he understands without his being prepared to read them with the sympathy required to produce constructive, or even destructive, criticism—is just "wrong," as proved by him, Q.E.D.

This is an embarrassing method. Guha and the Subalternists certainly use the word "consciousness," in the Hegelian tradition, with the lightest touch of psychoanalysis (to which they were never seriously committed), certainly not to be confused with "psychology," the accessible workings of a rational choice/behaviorist model of mind that is presupposed by analytic/US ideology and all thinking influenced by it (an extended discussion would have to make an exception in the case of Noam Chomsky).

Chhibber cannot distinguish between "capital" and "capitalism." Here are some examples. "What does capitalism universalize?" he asks. And, in the next sentence, answers: "To assess whether capital abandoned its universalizing mission in its colonial venture, we must first ask, what it is supposed to universalize?" The answers to the two questions are different. Capital is the abstract concept; capitalism and/or socialism are two opposed means of human control of capital, requiring coercive/persuasive ideology and policy. This is where an understanding of "ideology" in the sense used by the Subalternist historians (and many others, of course) would lead to a possibly serious criticism, if needed.

Capital "universalizes," then as now, because it seeks to establish the same standard of exchange, whatever the level of "development." This is, in different ways, colonialism and imperialism. This is how capital's behavior becomes different. Capitalism finances this by talking of a "civilizing mission," then as now. At the same time, capital produces difference in order to be capital (produce and use surplus). That is called "class." To suggest that "subalternist theorists mistakenly urge that the forms of domination that obtain in postcolonial formation are not capitalist" is itself mistaken because Chhibber is focused on a "correct" reading of the French and English revolutions.

Chakrabarty gets it in the rear because Chhibber is unable to grasp the difference. History 2 is "the category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrust of History 1," writes Chakrabarty. (Is he thinking of the permanent parabasis whereby, in
the old Attic comedy, the chorus interrupts the main action repeatedly, as Fichte noted? No matter.) "To interrupt the totalizing thrust of capitalist"—how did "History i" become "capitalism"?—"is to undermine its universalization," writes Chibber. Chakrabarty is consistently talking about "capital," and then, in an intriguing move, invokes translation into "capitalism" and suggests that that move does not just happen in one way. Chibber cannot read this. The same problem crops up on page 227 before we finally get this narrative:

Hence, if there is any genuine source of opposition to capital's universalizing drive, it is the equally universal struggle by subaltern classes to defend their basic humanity. That is the core motivation in all those thousands of campaigns for wages, land rights, basic health, and security, dignity, self-determination, autonomy, and so forth—all those Enlightenment concepts against which post-colonial theorists inveigh. Investigating the absence of internationalism in the rank and file of the labor movement and its relationship to colonialism has to beforgone in a brief review, as must the pre-critical notion that capital's universalization is "market dependence." Any effort with labor worldwide immediately brings up the issue of outsourcing. There is also the gender politics within established organized labor which encourages the cynical concept of "permanent casuals."

The main problem, however, is not labor idealism. The main point is that subaltern social groups are not the international proletariat. That is the basic message of Gramsci's essay on the historiography of the subaltern classes. That he does not know this is clear in Chibber's dismissal of Chatterjee's reading of Gramsci as "references to Gramsci more prominently on display." In order for the South Asian subaltern to find an objective concept for collectivity, it is often the discourse of religion that is mobilized. This is no mere liberation theology, as I will explain below.

Indeed, because Chibber is eager to prove that nothing that the Subalternists acknowledged was more than "trend"—he dismisses Gramsci's influence as a trend. When on page 27 he discloses, "I do not analyze the nature of [the Subalternists'] connection [to Gramsci] ... primarily because of my desire that the reader not be distracted by whether Subalternists have correctly interpreted a given theorist," this reader is obliged to conclude—and not only because of this "correct"-fetishist guruamahay's demonstrated inability to be auto-critical—that he is not "familiar with the relevant literature."

For then he would have known that Gramsci's main contribution was not "popular history and matters of consciousness." (Gramsci's concern anyway is not consciousness raising but epistemology, education.) Gramsci's main contribution was to notice that, precisely because Italy, with its tail tucked into Africa, is not France, Britain, Russia, or the US, the Risorsimento did not sufficiently assimilate "class" differences created outside of capital logic (basically the incentive to establish the same system of exchange everywhere). This is why the Subalternists chose the word "subaltern." The existence of the subaltern is also evident in the Pan-Africanist W. E. B. Du Bois's writings, in such essays as "The Negro Mind Reaches Out," although, being a distant yea-sayer to Stalin (of whose purge techniques he was unaware, as opposed to the lynching techniques of the Southern bourgeoisie), Gramsci's "enemy," he did not know the word "subaltern." So, not not capitalist, but separated from full capital logic. The distinct difference is that, whereas a Southern Benedetto Croce could become fully "Northern," in a colony, full P (power) could not be acquired by the "improved" (in French, the word is évolution) bourgeoisie. Chibber should have known a bit more about colonialism "correctly" or perhaps remembered that Guha had the lived experience of full colonialism and complicity with the "improved" class. If you are repeatedly going to "prove" a respected senior scholar "mistaken," it is your obligation to research him well. It is in that spirit that I have recommended the introduction to The Small Voice of History as required reading. One of the chief insights in Spivak's generation, in India and North and continental Africa, was the inability to use the Enlightenment when the colonial difference was no longer at work in postcoloniality. She " parachuted" across the street in Calcutta, turning left by an open garbage dump, because the Subalternists were theorizing this.

Chibber takes his model of postcolonialism from upwardly class-mobile or professional second-generation immigrants in the US, whom do speak of the "East" and the "Non-West," and may sometimes imply
culture equals psychology, legitimizing by reversal. By contrast, Subalternists everywhere name countries and colonies.

Here I would like to mention Kathleen Collins, author of the excellent book *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*. Because she wanted to avoid, like the Subalternists, the (racialized) idea that there is some peculiar psychology in Central Asia, she made it her business, although not a trained Europeanist, to include a short narrative “history of Europe” and empirically established a possible relationship between clan/gan politics in the historical gap between the absolutist state and democracy. She does not consult Gramsci. But her intellectual curiosity and disciplinary acumen permit her to rediscover that Southern Italy has a conjuncture comparable (of course not identical) to Central Asia—a mixture of capitalist and pre-capitalist ideological formations (not psychological essentialism, as per Chibber)—separating proletarian and subaltern. Chibber, ignoring this type of possibility, takes “subaltern” as a synonym for “proletarian” and offers the usual mechanical Marxist utopian pronouncement.

It is on this level of generality that Chibber insists that what produces a connection between all the “subaltern classes” (according to his definition) all over the world is “physical well-being.” There is no grand narrative on the level of “physical well-being,” or it is so grand that it is inaccessible to the subject (Lévinas’s argument in *Otherwise than Being*). The moment you go from body to mind, from physical well-being to fighting for physical well-being, there is language, history, and “permissible narratives.” For example, the mother thinks honor, the daughter thinks reproductive rights. What history happened in between? A change in localized permissible narratives that still cannot touch pharmaceutical dumping. If physical well-being were a race-free, class-free, gender-free grand narrative, there would be no point in having any theories of justice, politics, human rights, and gender compromise. (Ellen Bostrup and Amartya Sen’s work on women’s notion of preserving physical well-being is by now honorably dated.) Indeed, there is no point in Marx’s exhortation to his implied readership in *Capital*, volume 1, to change their self-concept from “victim of the capitalist” to “agent of production.” (The “subaltern” is not an agent of capitalist production.) If we go back to “whose physical well-being, by what permissible narrative,” we are back in the division within

organized labor in terms of outsourcing, of the sub-proletariat, its complete ignorance of the non-generalizable subaltern populations of the world, its usual lack of sympathy for women and homeworkers and its connections with management. The required reading, at two ends of the spectrum, is the entire vanguardism–social democracy debate, of which Rosa Luxemburg’s *The Mass Strike* is a part, and the new thinking started by D. D. Kosambi, whom Guha cites at the very beginning of *Dominance without Hegemony*. This is like justifying war or peace through the Christ story (a different permissible narrative). No psychological essentialism here, especially since polymath Kosambi, whose polymath father became a Buddhist under B. R. Ambedkar’s influence, is speaking of how the converted Buddhist Emperor Ashoka’s new imperial-universal notion of dharma, not to be found in the classic Arthashastra, was in its turn miscast into dharma, both instruments of class reconciliation between sovereign and subject. Historical change, class accommodation, not psychological essence. Just dharma, dharma. “Improvement,” “civilizing mission” in general theory, today “development”: allowing invented “tradition” to work at reconciling established class/caste convictions in the lower social strata, related to, but certainly not identical with, building temples and churches. To say that Guha does not consider that the shift to capitalist social structures might actually fit quite well with the idioms of traditional politics, or that “postcolonial theory . . . portray[s] the East as an unchanging miasma of tradition,” is astonishing.

Would Professor Chibber correct Rosa Luxemburg and D. D. Kosambi? No, because he knows they are primary texts. He misses out on Guha because Guha has been placed within an academic battle between what I keep calling Little Britain Marxism and located postcolonial historiographies, here confused with the metropolitan second-generation version, particularly in the US. Chibber’s knowledge of the detail of Marx is shaky, but his convictions, coming as they do from a disciplinarianization in sociology, notoriously quantitative in the US, with some notable exceptions, such as his alma mater Wisconsin, especially if the degree comes through their spectacular Center for South Asia, are remarkable in their qualitative vigor. I therefore guess that, if I remind Chibber of the famous first paragraph of Kosambi’s *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, he will
perhaps say that, although this is acceptable in a dated classic, his own general idea is that Indian colonial and postcolonial history "are subject to the same basic forces and are therefore part of the same basic history." He does not have enough auto-critical skills to know that his own position is also dated and spaced within a turf battle slightly more than academic, that the same basic history is a site of conflictual differences.

Here is Kosambi:

The light-hearted sneer "India has had some episodes, but no history" is used to justify lack of study, grasp, intelligence on the part of foreign writers about India's past. The considerations that follow will prove that it is precisely the episodes—lists of dynasties and kings, tales of war and battle spiced with anecdote, which fill school texts—that are missing from Indian records. Here, for the first time, we have to reconstruct a history without episodes, which means that it cannot be the same type of history as in the European tradition.

I have indicated that Kathleen Collins found, in accounting for clan/goon politics in some places and not in others, that such politics was determined by the gap between the establishment of the absolutist state and democracy. Into this argument we can also place the colonial state, without direct access to the agency of P at the top and, of course, the totalitarian state.

Let us now consider Chibber's remark about the Subalternists' assumption about democracy: "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."

To begin with, the passage is problematic because "bourgeoisie" and "capitalists" are used as synonyms. (As for the passage on page 147, where Chibber does grant that there is a "link between capitalism and democratization," there he again thinks the Subalternists mean "capitalists" when they say "bourgeoisie"; the bourgeoisie are actually the politico/ideological, the juridico/legal, the intellectual/rentier; a section of the bourgeoisie may be capitalists.) But let us lay that aside. It is not capitalist beneficence that calls forth something that looks like democracy. Marx abundantly acknowledged capital's social productivity. Capitalism manages it for sustainable underdevelopment. Capital needs to establish uniformity in order to function well. (I prefer that to "universalization," but it is not a serious objection, simply a preference.) Capitalism, and its organic intellectuals, who are probably members of the bourgeoisie, finesse this in various ways so that capitalist social relations of production can be preserved. This is not a romantic belief. It continues to our own time. I am sure Professor Chibber has read the work of Jack Snyder, Fareed Zakaria, Nicholas Doyle, and many others, arguing that the enforceability of democracy depends upon per capita income and a good working capitalist system. "Exporting democracy" and "liberating women" have also led to some tremendous wars, beginning at the turn of the twenty-first century, in the oil circuit of the Middle East; Syria will not be the last domino to fall. To get a detailed argument about the connection between the establishment of democracy in the American South and the play of Northern capital, controlled by Northern capitalists, to undermine labor's agency of capital, once again I would recommend consulting W. E. B. Du Bois's Black Reconstruction in America.

Chibber's confusion of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist is a serious problem if one wishes to understand what people like Guha—and there were not too many like him when he began—are talking about when they compare the colonizing and the colonized bourgeoisie. These are people who are steeped in the long debate between vanguardism and social democracy, within which the critique of imperialism and the possibility of socialism are launched—even with deep background in inconvenient people like Bakunin, and that is where the argument is coming from. This is why, if I may leap forward a bit, Chibber is unable to understand, when Chatterjee is criticizing Nehru and Gandhi, that Chatterjee may be thinking of the possibility of socialism, not of giving up on reason; that he may be questioning the version of reason that grounds Chibber's own conviction that economic growth is human development—a position opposed by millions of people in the world outside the academy as well: "In the era of decolonization parts of the Global South have dramatically improved their material conditions." Kosambi could have told him that many on the Left thought Nehru was selling capitalism in the name of democratic
socialism. And Ranjit Guha actually quotes a cluster of passages from Gandhi, in Domination without Hegemony, claiming that his theories of corporate social responsibility were there to fight socialism. I give one example here: "I enunciated this theory; he [Gandhi] said, 'when, the socialist theory was placed before the country in respect to the possessions held by zamindars [landowners] and ruling chiefs.'" Professor Chhibber may not agree, but he cannot accuse Chatterjee of illogic if he suggests that, in different ways, Gandhi and Nehru are continuing the old "improvement" logic. Professor Chhibber, in spite of the good motive to clean the house of poor theorizing, cannot, to quote my old friend Teodor Shanin, understand that "socialism is about justice, not development"56 (here our generation understood "development" as "exploitation").

It is also clear that Chhibber has not read the Subaltern Studies material clearly. One of their research undertakings was to point at Gandhi's separation from peasant movements.77 If Chhibber wants to get a sense of this, he may also want to look at the exchange between Sumanta Banerjee67 and David Hardiman68 in the pages of Economic and Political Weekly.

Is it only the Subalternist historians who believe that liberals supported modernization as capitalist development in order to keep socialism at bay? Professor Chhibber comes out with a centrist common-sense bit of criticism: '[Chatterjee] 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.'69 Is this what Verso wants to propose as a socialist solution, mindful of classes, in globality?

To continue with the things that one must be familiar with in order to point out that Subaltern Studies have not been useful, I cite "abstract average labor," or labor-power. It is not a dimension of concrete labors, nor does it "refer to properties that the latter have in common, properties which can be compared with one another and which are rewarded by the market." "The most important such property is not "labor's productive efficiency, which can be measured in its throughput." It is the product of what today we call "quantification." In order for the capitalist to progress, labor must be put in the form of value ("contentless," says Marx70 in Capital, volume 1), so that calculations can be made. It is as simple as that. Chhibber seems not to have grasped this at all, and ignores the ins and outs of the so-called "reification" debates—which are now going completely in the direction of liberal humanism in the work of Axel Honneth and others.71 Honneth's recent Tanner lecture simply put the critique of reification in the classless identitarian area of "recognition"—which reflects a tendency much more insidious than anything the efforts of the Subalternists might signal. But Chhibber is located in the tendency among Little Britain Marxists patronized by the now defunct British New Left, which produces, periodical, peculiar texts demolishing any attempt at expanding the scope of a general Marxist discourse—by which I mean something like the "broad Left" now innovated in Greece, facing the depredations of the eurozone, internal colonialism, if you like—into the interplay of capital and colony.

Again and again, Chhibber shows us that capitalism does indeed create social difference. But of course. This is the double bind of capitalist that Marx pointed out in a spectacular passage quoted by Guha toward the beginning of his book. Capital creates tremendous social productivity and to manage this capitalism must proletarianize; and, after Gramsci, we have also learned to say "subalternize."

Chhibber accuses the Subalternists of romantic Orientalism. Because he cannot acknowledge the difference between the conduct of the Industrial Revolution using so-called Enlightenment practices at home and coercion at best in the colonial field within which these practices needed to be played out as the markets expanded, he has a romantic notion of how the entire world has changed, which shows very clearly that he has no idea at all of Gramsci's attempt to distinguish the subaltern from the proletarian. To bring together the subaltern and the proletarian, both seen as riddled with prejudices—and Gramsci was after all in the thick of things, not just writing books—was the last piece of writing Gramsci was engaged in when he was nabbed by the fascists. This piece was already distinctly different from the kind of positive reinforcements that, as a leader of the communists, he had wisely produced for the Turin proletariat hitherto. Acknowledging that the General Strike of 1920 had not worked, he was now looking at the possibility of making long-term change. Once incarcerated, Gramsci72 expands this concern into the period of
self-study leading to a book (which he did not have the time to write) that would take all of this into consideration. And in that period he distinguished the subaltern very carefully as follows:

The subaltern social groups [gruppi sociali], by definition, are not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a "State": their history, therefore, is intertwined with that of civil society [an extended discussion would have to consider Gramsci's special understanding of "civil society"] and thereby with the history of States and groups of States. Hence it is necessary to study: 1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. their active or passive adherence to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assert the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them; 4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a restricted and "partial" character; 5. the new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy . . . etc. 11

How Gramsci would have developed these thoughts and his many meditations on the relationship between the intellectual and the subaltern classes can only be surmised. This, however, remains one of his most important themes, precisely because of the fact that the subaltern is not the proletariat. Politics did not permit him to write his books. Many of his notes end in "etc." The Subalternists must take into account, however tacitly, the difference between the Italian state and the colonial state. They use Gramsci and transform him some. Chhibber, ready to tilt at the Subalternists, and unaware of Gramsci's distinction between subaltern and proletariat (although he does comment upon the Risorgimento), produced the universalist romantic utopian leftist narrateme that I have cited above. The sentence "there was simply no way to accommodate subaltern demands for improvement in their living standard, while keeping domestic capitalists on board, except through a modernizing agenda" shows no awareness of the subaltern social groups' distance from the state.

This is a disciplinary problem, an inability to read philosophical writing that is also political, and diagnosing it as nonsense. After all of the attempts by people who are not necessarily less intelligent than Chhibber to establish how "discourse" works at the social construction of reality—not necessarily my position, but I can certainly read this work in order to learn from it—Chhibber produces a sentence that shows an ignorance of the entire field of discourse studies. I refer him to Discourse and Power by Teun A. van Dijk. 12 Structuralism and poststructuralism, never discussed, are similarly dismissed as irrational—this is a book, not a rant! These are fields that, again, the Subalternists assume to be part of the familiar background of all kinds of actors attempting to rethink a Left that was moving more and more toward totalitarianism. I remember clearly that just after 1989, at a Radical Philosophy conference in London, nearly all of the papers presented were still involved with the Jerusalem built on England's green and pleasant land—therefore to call Ranajit Guha useless because he did not understand the British and French revolutions is not surprising from Verst, but it's somewhat shocking nevertheless that this kind of thing still continues. It may indeed be true that in these small countries, which by then had national languages more or less understood by everyone, "the peasants . . . had to reach out to the dignitaries in order to get the reform coalition to turn into a revolutionary one." 13 If, on the other hand, instead of "examining the British and French experience in far greater depth than does Guha," Chhibber had tried to look at India in deep focus, he would have seen how absurd it is not to acknowledge the obvious differences between Britain and France, taken as "Europe," and the huge multilingual, multicultural, multiethnic, multi-religious reality of the Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is derisive to say that in "the broad sweep of modern political history in the Global South, there is ample evidence that" a nice compendious footnote would have persuaded me against my common sense—"in nationalist movements during the
capital/capitalism equated, yet uniformization/universalization is
rarely to break through (like the steam in the steam engines that we
traveled by in my childhood and adolescence): Shanghai and Shenzhen.

This inability to read any other kind of writing is shown in an
embarrassing footnote where, I must say, Chakrabarty would have
done well to acknowledge the source. Citing a passage where
Chakrabarty is clearly paraphrasing Walter Benjamin’s notion of “now
time,” Chibber asks the rhetorical question, “Is this passage meant to
explain anything at all?” It would be more convenient for him simply
to dismiss Walter Benjamin as a fool and a knave, and “correct” the
“Theses on the Philosophy of History,” but unfortunately the inability
to hold on to the present as present is a bit of the mundane experience
of life that has been considered philosophically by too many people,
including Hegel—another fool to be corrected—for Chibber simply
and blithely to dismiss. I am a literary critic, so let me cite an example
from poetry, which also should perhaps be dismissed because it does
not accede to the Enlightenment as understood by Chibber—a rational
choice as defined by academic infighting:

The last line of William Butler Yeats’s poem “Sailing to Byzantium,”
“Of what is past, or passing, or to come,” spells a non-accessibility to
the stability of the present, a gesture, protecting from claims to influ-
ence. The present is a vanishing relationship, constituted by its vanish-
ing. Let us look at Benjamin’s powerful articulation, which I will cite
again at the end. “The past can be seized only as an image which flashes
up at the instant of its recognizability, never to be seen again... History
is the object of a construction, whose site forms not with homogeneous
empty time, but time filled with the now time.” Yeats’s time, the
time for literary action, for literary activism, now time, not a present of
the sort that you can catch as something that actually exists. Here

Many people think that “homogeneous empty time” was a phrase
coined by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities, a book
which does not grant us the ability to understand what we are about,
or to understand and use the great economic and political narratives
of liberation that come from Europe. Many people think that Benedict
Anderson wrote “homogeneous empty time” and that Homi Bhabha
opposed it, but in fact, it comes from this extraordinary passage in Benjamin where he talks about the time of action.\textsuperscript{44}

When Chakrabarty suggests that there should not be a "simple application of the analytics of capital and nationalism available to Western Marxism,"\textsuperscript{45} he is appealing for complexity and not the top-down approach that mere application implies. Chibber is fixated on "political psychology." It is not a question of being "disdainful"\textsuperscript{46} (no documentation for this nice psychological term) of subaltern agency; it is a question of, given what the "subaltern is"—as defined by Gramsci, "on the fringes of history" and not yet generalizable—that entire social group falling through the cracks of the theory applied. French theories of "relative autonomy" would not help here, as Chibber suggests in a footnote. The "metanarrative" Chakrabarty is speaking of contains the relatively autonomous fields of politics, ideology, and the economic in a structural fit. In his earlier work as well, he is speaking of the strong hold of an older ideology ("residual" on the Raymond Williams model) rather than a "unique psychological disposition of Indians"\textsuperscript{47}—all Indians? Incidentally, Chibber's dismissal of the History 1/History 2 distinction would also dismiss the entire rethinking of historiography introduced by Fernand Braudel.

As a result of this problem of reading, Chibber does not understand what Guha is doing in the defining sections of Dominance without Hegemony. I have given enough examples of this to say here, simply, that, far from asserting that there is an immutable difference in the Eastern psyche, Guha is suggesting that, if "Indian history [is] assimilated to the history of Great Britain"—as Chibber suggests—it would be "used as comprehensive measure of difference between the two countries."\textsuperscript{48} Already in the first paragraphs of the book, Guha makes it quite clear that he is not claiming that the European liberals did everything they promised. I think the only difference that he is arguing is that in the context of an imposition of a stage of capital not yet arrived at in the colonized space—here the work of Ritu Birla\textsuperscript{27} is essential—the nationalist historians did not recognize that the peasants found in so-called religion a way out of simply individual interests into a more world-historical perception. The description of religion as the insurgentists' way beyond mere personal suffering toward "the world-historical" matters a great deal today, as does the construction of an "ideal consciousness" for the deserving and undeserving other by the human rights lobby and the self-selected moral entrepreneurs of the so-called international civil society as well as by the proliferation of "empty abstractions [in] tertiary discourse."\textsuperscript{72} This use of religion can then be contrasted to the ideological script of dharma as urging patriotism to the Indian nation.

Since Chibber can only see this as an Orientalist statement about the East being psychologically different, he cannot see how bold it is. In the context of the Arab Spring that he brings in at the end of his book, this particular opposition, between liberalism and religion as access to the world-historical, the clash of discursive fields tangling with irregular class and gender formation, becomes crucial. I cannot go there in a review, but this needs to be considered more carefully.

Professor Chibber takes Ranajit Guha to task for "never tak[ing] up the question of why popular forces failed to gather enough strength to push the INC [Indian National Congress] in a more radical direction.\textsuperscript{79}" Our point would be that the entire work of Guha, Chakrabarty, and Chatterjee is about how this was prevented by both leadership and historiography. But if we are wrong, we ask Chibber why? Is it because they were psychologically "different" from the French and British "popular forces" so many centuries ago?

I want to close with a reference to feminism, of which there is no mention here at all. Some of us have argued for rather a long time that feminist movements had an oblique relationship with the tradition of imperialism. When the nature of this relationship is not recognized, it is precisely the subaltern woman who is ignored. I was visited two days ago by a young Indian American woman wanting to make a film about the rape of Jyoti Singh, by consulting "experts" like Noam Chomsky, Sudhir Kakar, and Gayatri Spivak. I was not able to rise to her request, because I felt that this was not a productive enterprise. In the process, since she was also using the fact that this idea came to her through her son's sex education class in the Midwest of America, I tried to tell her about the use made by men on the Left, so-called, of women who believe in the Enlightenment, just exactly as use is made of women who believe in anti-feminist traditions. I told her that the general sympathy for a mother-son discourse, family values (my son's
Making Sense of Postcolonial Theory

A Response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Vivek Chibber

I will respond as best I can to Gayatri Spivak's criticisms of Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital (hereafter PTSC), though, as I will suggest below, the task is not an easy one, owing to Spivak's peculiar style of engagement.

Spivak begins by castigating me for focusing narrowly on Subaltern Studies, even while I claim to critique postcolonial theory. Why do I leave out so much of what has been produced in the field? In reality, I offered an explanation in the book's opening chapter, but, since Spivak does not address my reasons, please allow me to repeat them. The decision to focus on Subaltern Studies was not arbitrary. I was fully aware that postcolonial studies has generated a wide and varied universe of scholarship, expanding across many disciplines. My goal was to assess its contributions in the more empirically oriented fields such as history and anthropology, where it has exercised considerable influence. Hence, right at the outset, I signaled that the focus of the book was a somewhat delimited portion of what the field has to offer. I chose to focus on these areas because my interest was in what postcolonial scholarship has to say about the social structure, politics, and historical evolution of the Global South, since its claims about these phenomena are of considerable interest, and they have been extremely influential across the academic universe.

To examine postcolonial studies in the empirical disciplines, the next challenge was to locate a central cluster of arguments that are associated with it and could be taken to embody a theory, or a research program. In other words, I had to see if postcolonial studies has generated a theory that explains the specific dynamics and evolution of
colonial societies, or of the Global South more generally. The arguments I would focus upon not only had to have some theoretical and empirical content, but also had to have two other characteristics, if the project was to succeed—they would have to resonate with the claims being made in the wider field, even in cultural studies, and they would have to be arguments that wielded actual influence in scholarly work. Hence, focusing on arguments that had little influence, or which could not prove their bona fides as genuinely "postcolonial," would undermine the project right at the outset. On these criteria, there can be little doubt that Subaltern Studies was not only a legitimate target for my project, but the most natural one.

First, it is recognized as a legitimate, even central, current of scholarship within postcolonial studies. Works by its founding members are included or discussed in the most widely used textbooks on postcolonial studies, and, just as importantly, its members routinely describe their work as belonging to the field.

Secondly, Subaltern Studies has remained committed to a stable and remarkably coherent set of propositions about the dynamics of the (post-)colonial world, its evolution over time, and the ways in which that part of the globe differs in its structure and culture from the West. In other words, it has generated a core set of arguments that can be taken as a theory and a research program. While it is conventional to mark a break of sorts between the "early" volumes in the series and the later ones, this distinction is misleading in some ways. The real core of the program—the idea of the bourgeois elite's failure to speak for the nation and hence of the subaltern sphere remaining a domain separate from elite culture—was announced famously in the very first volume, and has continued to serve as the foundation for the rest of the project. Much of the subsequent evolution of Subaltern Studies can be understood as a very ambitious project to tease out the consequences of this momentous fact about colonial history.

Thirdly, the arguments associated with the Subalterns do in fact resonate with much of the larger field. Some of these are:

- An insistence on locating the specificity of the East and on examining how and why its evolution differs from that of the West.
- A focus on culture and forms of consciousness as objects of study and a source of historical difference.
- The insistence that subaltern groups in the East operate with their own political calculus and forms of consciousness, different from that of elite groups and from what is projected onto them by Western theory.
- The insistence on purging social theory of its Eurocentric bias and the claim that Western theories are heavily imbued with this bias, Marxism included.
- A boilerplate skepticism toward universalizing discourse, and hence toward many of the theories emanating from the Enlightenment tradition.
- Skepticism toward modernizing discourses, and their defense of rationality, science, objectivity, etc.

These are all absolutely central themes for Subaltern Studies, and they are also at the very heart of postcolonial studies more generally. Indeed, the Subalternists have probably done the most of any group to give real historical and sociological ballast to postcolonial studies. Rather than just asserting that there is an ontological divide of some kind dividing East from West, they try to provide real historical arguments for its plausibility. And the arguments they have developed have been enormously influential, especially since the late 1990s. By the turn of this century, the Subalternists were widely recognized as being the most influential of all the empirically oriented streams within the field—to the point that many of their arguments achieved the status of being encapsulated in new buzzwords, instantly recognizable—nationalism as a "derivative discourse," rescuing "the fragment," the task of "provincializing Europe," One could even hazard a guess that certain key concepts, which they borrowed from others, like "subaltern" or "dominance without hegemony," are as much associated with them as with the terms' originators. In sum, while Subaltern Studies does not itself comprise postcolonial theory, it is one of the best exemplars of the latter's core arguments. In other words, while it does not exhaust the field, it is very much representative of it. Indeed, it is more than that. I did not randomly select Subaltern Studies as but one of many exemplars of postcolonial theory. I settled on it because it is actually better
argued, more coherent, and more consistent than much of the rest. Thus, it is hard to find more careful arguments in postcolonial studies explicating why capitalism, and hence modernity, in the East is taken to be fundamentally different from the West, or for why the claims of universalizing theories ought to be resisted.

All this was in the introductory chapter of PTSC. Spivak may object to my reasoning, but the decision was not arbitrary, as Spivak seems to suggest. If she feels that it lacked warrant, then she is obliged to at least offer some reason for this judgment, which she does not. The reader is left with a sense that I closed my eyes and plucked a random assortment of theorists out of the basket.

RANAJIT GUHA AND THE STATUS OF PRIMARY TEXTS

A most significant contribution of Subaltern Studies to the development of postcolonial theory is its historical argument for why the political culture of the East is fundamentally different from that of the West. I argue that Ranajit Guha's work is the pivot on which this argument turns, and Spivak seems to agree with my placement of him. Guha argues, famously, that the source of East–West divergence can be found in the divergent characters of the bourgeoisie in the two settings. In the paradigmatic Western experience of England and France, the bourgeoisie led a successful project to capture state power and then create an encompassing, inclusive political culture based on the consent of the dominated classes—it strove, in his words, to "speak on behalf of all the nation." In the East, however, it abandoned any such ambitions and chose to sustain its rule by political coercion, perpetuating the division between the elite and subaltern spheres. This historic failure on the part of the bourgeoisie signalled a structural mutation in capitalism as it left Western shores—a stalling of its universalizing drive. Capitalism in the colonial world failed to properly universalize, evidenced in its failure to create a consensual, liberal political order. Other Subalternists derive from this their famous conclusion that this break in capital's universalizing drive is why theories built on the assumption of that universalization—liberalism and Marxism—cannot find purchase in the (post-)colonial world.

The argument for capital's failed universalization is the foundation on which much of the Subalternist project rests. I show in some detail in PTSC—over the course of five chapters—that it is deeply flawed and cannot be sustained in any form. Partha Chatterjee has responded to my arguments with a quite brazen falsehood—that Guha simply does not say what I attribute to him, even though Guha makes it clear in the first twenty-five pages of his book that this is exactly what he is arguing, and then confirms it throughout the course of his text. Spivak now joins the fray with an even more novel stratagem, one that I could never have anticipated—she censors my criticism of Guha not because it is mistaken but because Guha's work has the status of a "primary text," and one does not criticize primary texts.

I read and carefully re-read Spivak's argument here, because it seems impossible to imagine that anyone could believe what she so cavalierly announces. But there is no other way to interpret her—Spivak thinks that there is a class of scholarship, which she calls "primary texts," whose members are to be memorialized and interpreted, but never assessed. The task of criticism is to be reserved for something called "secondary texts." What the difference is between them we are never told. But, whatever it is, Guha fails on the protected side of it. To drive the point home, Spivak asks us rhetorically, "Would Chibber correct Rosa Luxemburg and D. D. Kosambi? No, because he knows they are primary texts." I am not sure what to say here. Not only would I feel free to criticize Luxemburg and Kosambi, but I would be obligated to do so if their theories or their scholarship were flawed. And not only would I respect this obligation, but so have generations of scholars and activists the world over. The distinction that Spivak urges upon us, and the attitude to it endorsed by her, would shut down most of the academy. It is an essentially theological mindset, properly belonging in a church or temple, not a university.

Spivak does propose one other justification for why my criticisms of Guha are misplaced, which needs to be taken seriously. She suggests that my criticism rests on a category mistake. I criticize Guha's argument for being empirically and theoretically flawed—his historical account of the bourgeois revolutions is unsustainable, and his understanding of capital's universalizing mission is mistaken. Because of this, his explanation for the colonial world's political dynamics also
largely fails. Spivak offers that this is like criticizing Du Bois for calling the exodus of slaves a “general strike,” or criticizing Aristotle’s Poetics as “illogical.” The Aristotle example suggests that certain kinds of criticisms are misplaced because they misunderstand the very nature of the text they interrogate. The text is not vulnerable to the criticism being leveled at it because of the nature of its project. Spivak is right that criticism of this kind is jejune. But it should be self-evident that such is not the case in my treatment of Guha. Guha’s arguments are eminently subject to both empirical and theoretical assessment, because they are claims about how the world works, and about the character of historical events. Hence, this defense is no more successful than the call for deference to primary texts.

**CAPITAL AND CAPITALISM, BOURGEOISIE AND CAPITALISTS**

Spivak further contends that my criticism of Guha elides the difference between capital and capitalism, and erroneously equates capitalists with the bourgeoisie. Let me start with the claim that capitalists cannot be identified with “the bourgeoisie.” This is the same argument that Partha Chatterjee used in his riposte, and I will respond to it only briefly, referring the interested reader to my fuller treatment of his argument elsewhere.

Here is what is at stake. Guha castigates the Indian bourgeoisie for failing to integrate the subaltern domain with that of the elites, and, in this, falling short of the historic achievements of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe. I show that the bourgeoisie in England and France never aspired to, or strove for, the goals that Guha ascribes to them, and that, in fact, they were as contemptuous of subaltern interests as their later Indian counterparts. The question here is: what does Guha mean by “bourgeoisie”? I show in PTSC that he means “capitalists,” and I offer more evidence for this in subsequent work. Spivak now claims that “bourgeoisie” means lawyers and intellectuals, not capitalists. But, however Spivak may wish to define the concept, it is abundantly clear that when Guha uses it he simply refers to capitalists. Spivak is creating an entirely fictitious Guha here, one who only exists in her imagination.

As to my elision of the difference between capital and capitalism, let me start by cautioning the reader that, pace Spivak, there is no established convention regarding the distinction. Usually, “capital” is taken to mean “capitalists,” people whose actions propel the accumulation process, whereas “capitalism” is used to denote the properties of the social structure in which these actors are located. But there is plenty of room for theorists to take some license with how they use these terms. So when scholars intend to deploy the two as distinct concepts, they usually alert the reader to what each one is supposed to convey. Otherwise, one usually has to glean the intention of the writer by more indirect means, attending to the context, the apparent intention, the place of the argument, and so forth. It is not uncommon for the two to be used interchangeably.

Guha nowhere introduces the distinction in a systematic way and hence never tells us what he means by the two terms. The reader has to infer their meaning by attending to the context. What we do know is that the entity that is supposed to have had its universalizing mission derailed is “capital.” But, depending on the context, this expression can mean either capitalists or capitalism. So, for example, it can mean, “When capitalists came to India they did not pursue the same goals as they did in England”; or it can mean, “The capitalism that took root in India did not expand in the same way that it had in England.” Guha usually has in mind the first claim when he makes his argument—he is usually referring to political or economic aspirations of the capitalist class. But sometimes he means the second. More importantly, since the two are closely related, the gap between them is not that large. None of this is either very deep or mysterious.

If Spivak feels that I have misunderstood Guha because I elide the distinction, she needs to show that such is the case. In normal academic discourse, when such an accusation is made, the critic offers some evidence to substantiate it by adducing key passages that have been misunderstood, showing how the argument has been distorted through the elision. Spivak clearly acknowledges that I am aware of the distinction between capital and capitalism, so she cannot think that I am blind to it. Which of its subtleties, then, do I miss? I confess that her argument here is almost impossible to understand. The only clear instance she adduces of an apparent elision is when she quotes me as
asking: what does capitalism universalize? She then quotes me answering it with reference to capital, not capitalism. So apparently I have substituted one for the other. But I am not doing any such thing. What I say is: capitalism imposes a certain logic upon capital, and by “capital” I mean capitalists. Hence, the structural location of certain actors forces a particular strategy of economic reproduction upon them. I am not ignoring a distinction here; I am in fact utilizing it. The only confusion here is on Spivak’s part.

"LITTLE BRITAIN MARXISM"

Spivak’s only other significant accusation is that my book is a defense of a narrow, boxed-set kind of Marxism which refuses to budge from its orthodoxies. This has become a quite common refrain from postcolonial critics of the book. It is not unusual to see my case against the Subalternists rephrased as they “are not Marxist enough,” or that they are wrong because they have the “wrong kind of Marxism.” The idea is that I simply hold up their arguments to a fixed set of orthodoxies, and in instances where they deviate from the latter I reject them out of hand. So the battle is apparently between open-ended, creative Subalternists, trying to expand received theory to make sense of a complex reality, and the stolid, unyielding Marxists who cast out anyone who dares to question Holy Writ.

But the accusation is nonsense. In PTSC, I do not make a single criticism of the Subalternists on the grounds that their work is a deviation from Marxist orthodoxy. Nor do I defend any of my own by proving its closer fidelity to Marx. Each and every argument I make—whether against the Subalternists or in defense of my own views—is defended on independent grounds, whether empirical or conceptual. There is only one chapter that takes up Marx directly, Chapter 6, where I take up the question of abstract labor. Even in this case, I apologize for having to descend into Marxology, and then try to show that it is worthwhile, not because it was developed by Marx, but because it captures some interesting facts about capitalism. The only other instance in which I bring up Marxology is in Chapter 4, where I criticize Marx for his credulousness toward liberal historiography. Every other argument I make is developed by reference to facts about the world, or conceptual clarification. And every criticism of the Subalternists issues from the same criteria. The arguments offered by Subaltern Studies are to be rejected because they are wrong, not because they stray from orthodoxy.

Spivak knows this, and it is why she is worried enough to write her long attack. If the book had just been a Marxist screed against the heretics, it would have died a quiet death. The reason it has attracted attention is precisely because it is not the “Little Britain Marxism” that Spivak accuses it of being, but an examination of Subalternist arguments on their own terms—by attending to the empirical and theoretical strength of their claims. As for Marxism, there is in fact plenty in the received orthodoxy that is either mistaken or questionable. To give some examples:

- The orthodox theory of historical materialism is almost certainly wrong. 11
- The labor theory of value may very well be wrong, and if it is not, it can only be defended in modified form.
- The traditional theory of bourgeois revolutions is definitely wrong, as I explain in great detail in PTSC.
- Marxism still has a poorly developed moral theory, though that situation is now greatly remedied.

There is quite an extensive literature on these subjects, and I have contributed to some of it, all of which acknowledges and seeks to remedy deep flaws in orthodox formulation. There are plenty of other weaknesses in the theory, but I have listed these only because they are considered to be at the very heart of Marxist orthodoxy. So it is not that Marxist theory is not in need of serious modification, or that it does not have severe weaknesses. It is just that, whatever weaknesses it has, they are not the ones targeted by postcolonial theorists. The biggest problem with postcolonial theory is that it seeks to undermine the very areas of Marxist theory that ought to be retained, that are in fact its strengths—the reality of capitalist constraints, regardless of culture; the reality of human nature; the centrality of certain universal aspirations on the part of the oppressed, which issue from this human
nature; the need for abstract, universal concepts that are valid across cultures; the necessity of rational, reasoned discourse, and so forth. And the reason these propositions need to be defended is not that they comprise a doctrine that Marxists seek to uphold, but because they are defensible on their own merits. It has long been a tactic of postcolonial theorists to offer their framework as not only a direct lineal descendant of Marxist theory—which it is not—but also as the only sustainable version of Marxism—which it is emphatically not. Any criticism of their arguments is thereby impugned as an unthinking adherence to orthodoxy, or a search for doctrinal purity. Spivak’s characterization of PTSC as “Little Britain Marxism” is but the latest incarnation of this, and readers should not be misled by it.

CONCLUSION

The sad fact is that, apart from the few points that I have taken up above, there is very little in Spivak’s essay to which one can respond. To be sure, there is no shortage of accusations, some pertaining to exegeesis, others to logic or theory. Spivak certainly seems to feel strongly that PTSC is guilty of many sins. But this makes it all the more curious that she expends little or no effort doing what any honest critic would do—taking the time to read the text carefully, locate its flaws, demonstrate to the reader that the argument is indeed guilty of the mistakes of which it is accused.

Indeed, what stands out most about the essay is how it eschews the normal protocols of scholarship in favor of other, less savory tactics. And I would be remiss to say nothing about it, since it is so egregious. There is a very powerful authoritarian thrust in Spivak’s essay. It is not just the deferential attitude that one is supposed to display toward certain texts and authorities. It is not just the exalted status of “primary texts.” A required genuflection to authority pervades the text. It is surprising to find repeated references to someone’s age—the fact that Guha is ninety years old—or to their storied past, or to their fame in the intellectual world, or to their social work during the summer. These are not random facts that Spivak offers the reader; they are bits of information doled out to contrast the worthiness of some people—Guha and Spivak in this case—with the brash, “boyish” critic who is obsessed with “correcting everybody,” a “correct-fetishist,” as she refers to me. Spivak seems genuinely perturbed, not by the substance of my criticism, but by the very act of it. I am upbraided for not being sufficiently awestruck by the distinction of those whom I have targeted for criticism. The imperious tone, the constant reminder of status, whether based on age or on academic and social standing, is quite shocking to witness in an academic paper. The only place I have ever seen it before was while growing up in India, where it was used with servants and children to remind them of their place in the order of things.

Perhaps this may explain why Spivak does not bother to base her arguments on evidence or logic. Evidence matters if you are trying to persuade someone through argument, not appeals to authority. Spivak, however, writes in the manner of someone long accustomed to treating those around her as supplicants, not colleagues. One would not be much concerned with this, were it not for the fact that at least two generations of students have been socialized into this kind of practice. I doubt that Spivak’s style of engagement would be tolerated in any other discipline. So much the worse for postcolonial studies.