civilization is further distinguished from every other by the presence of men with a rational ethic for the conduct of life.\textsuperscript{31}

When we read this, nothing about the postcolonial turn should be surprising; no wonder they all look for the nearest carpet to gnaw. So should we.

CHAPTER 10

On the Articulation of Marxist and Non-Marxist Theory in Colonial Historiography

George Steinmetz

Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital is an important book on a topic of major importance for all of the human and social sciences. The book’s implications reach far beyond Chibber’s critique of Subaltern Studies, which is his most obvious focus. Chibber’s overarching argument is twofold: capitalism does universalize itself to the colonial and postcolonial world, but at the same time, capitalism does not permeate or encompass all other aspects of social practice. As it stands, this is already an important argument for social theory generally and not just for analysts working on former colonies like India. The crisis of what used to be called western Marxism led to two main responses among Marxists. While many simply abandoned Marxism, becoming “post-Marxist,” others became “neo-orthodox,” refusing to acknowledge the autonomy of any social practices from capitalism.\textsuperscript{4} Chibber’s position is closer to the more nuanced positions of the “regulationist” school;\textsuperscript{5} it is also compatible with a neo-historicist critical realism\textsuperscript{6} that combines an ontology of emergent causal powers with an anti-essentialist epistemology according to which historically varying conjunctures of causal mechanisms interact in contingent, often unpredictable ways to produce empirical events. The fact that Chibber’s book’s packaging suggests an all-out assault on anyone who would dare to deviate from Marxist orthodoxy does not square with the actual content of the book.

Chibber’s book is also framed as a critique of Subaltern colonial historiography. Here again, the book’s framing does not provide an accurate sense of the directions in which Chibber’s thinking takes him.
Many of Chibber's specific arguments are broadly consistent with the pathbreaking work of the founder of Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha.

CHIBBER'S ARGUMENT RESTATE

Chibber's book is presented as a critique of postcolonial theory. This is very misleading. The leading postcolonial theorists, including Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Leela Gandhi, are barely mentioned here. Also missing are postcolonial theory's adopted predecessors, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Albert Memmi, or its philosophical antecedents, including Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger. Postcolonial theory started and remains most firmly embedded in the humanities, not the social sciences or history. The two main strands of postcolonial theory have focused on questions of the colonial presence within ostensibly noncolonial cultural texts and practices, on the ambivalences of colonized subjectivity and colonial forms of rule, and on the ways colonizing ideas have prepared the ground for conquest and foreign rule. None of these themes show up in Chibber's book. Instead the book's exclusive focus is the Subaltern school of history, which has very different origins even if there has been a subsequent rapprochement. A more accurate title for this book would be something like *The Subaltern School of History and the Specter of Capital*.

That said, Chibber does make a highly coherent argument, one that can be restated in four main theses:

- Capitalism universalizes itself both geospatially and within a given social formation.
- Capitalism is entirely compatible with political despotism, labor coercion, and the production and reproduction of cultural difference and diversity.
- Although capital may "spread[] to all corners of the world... this does not mean that it manages to subordinate all social relations to its particular rules of reproduction."
- Although "it is surely problematic to see capital lurking behind every social phenomenon," it is no less problematic "to deny its salience when it is in fact a relevant causal agent."

CHIBBER'S ANALYSIS OF THE SUBALTERN SCHOOL

In addition to these general theoretical arguments, Chibber shows that there are three key arenas in which the Subaltern school claims that Indian history differs from Western history: first, they claim that the Indian bourgeoisie failed to become hegemonic; second, they argue for a unique form of "power relations" in India; and third, they argue that India has a unique "political psychology." There are three main historians under discussion here: Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. In this section I will present these three main clusters of ideas and arguments.

I. Capital's mythical universalizing mission

The first argument, associated with R. Guha, is that capital abandoned its putative universalizing hegemonic mission in colonial and postcolonial India. Chibber counters that the bourgeoisie is not inherently liberal or modernizing and that capitalism is not the same thing as political and cultural modernization. Since the two key comparison cases for Guha, Britain and France, did not really have bourgeois revolutions of the idealized sort, there is no reason to expect India to have had them. Indeed, Chibber continues, cultural and political forms of modernization were in some respects more readily forthcoming after the relevant comparable revolution, decolonization, in India than in Western Europe.

This is a very familiar debate for a German historian. The thesis of the German Sonderweg, or special path to modernity, asked why Nazism came to power in Germany and not in other advanced industrial countries. The basic answer focused on the deviation of Germany's developmental path from its Western neighbors. German history was seen as having been pushed repeatedly in destructive and antidemocratic directions by a clash between economic modernity and political and cultural backwardness, and this structural disjuncture resulted from the fact that German bourgeois liberalism was underdeveloped in comparison with Britain and France. Like the Indian bourgeoisie, the German bourgeoisie was said to have failed repeatedly to take the lead in promoting its supposed class interest in liberal democracy, in leading other classes toward that goal. Like the Indian
bourgeoisie it failed to suppress the neo-feudal landed nobility, which continued to wield undue influence in politics and culture well into the twentieth century. Another feature of this condition was the so-called “feudalization of the bourgeoisie,” the spread of anti-modern cultural values such as conservative anti-capitalism, anti-urbanism, and “cultural pessimism,” and a non-hegemonic tendency to resort to state violence that is extremely reminiscent of Guha’s diagnosis of the Indian condition. 24 Guha was relying on a version of Marxist political theory and German history that was demolished by the critics of the Sonderweg thesis. Chibber argues convincingly that real capitalism is compatible with a whole range of nondemocratic political and cultural conditions, and that there is no normal set of accompaniments to the spread of capitalism. No historian of fascist Europe, Assad’s Syria, or contemporary China should raise an eyebrow at this claim nowadays.

II. Labor discipline, abstract labor, and cultural homogenization

Chibber argues secondly that capitalism is compatible with physical coercion at the point of production and that it produces and reproduces cultural heterogeneity (or “concrete identities”) among its workers rather than necessarily pushing toward their homogenization. “It is rational for capitalists to dominate labor” in ways that reach far beyond the autonomized “dull compulsion of economic relations,” as long as violence promises profits. 25 In the West as in the East, capitalism has always relied on physical as well as symbolic domination. 26

Chibber also criticizes the idea that abstract labor leads to cultural homogenization, showing how some postcolonial theorists have conflated these two ideas. “Abstract labor comes clothed in concrete identities,” Chibber concludes. 27 Capitalism therefore does not have to dissolve social difference. Even de-skilling is not inevitable: new technologies continually generate new skills, even as old industries may suffer from de-skilling.

III. History 1 and History 2

My favorite section of the book is the discussion of Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe 28 and its critique of Chakrabarty’s concepts of History 1 and History 2. History 1 is the history of modern capital, while History 2 consists of all of the multiple, incommensurable histories that develop according to their own specific logics. Chakrabarty’s implication is that Marxism would collapse all of the multiple histories of different practices into Capital, even though this is true of only the most totalizing, reductionist forms of Marxism. As Chibber notes, “it is surely problematic to see capital lurking behind every social phenomenon.” 29 Chibber argues that the “continued salience of archaic power relations, the resort to traditional symbols, the resilience of caste and kin-based political relations, and so forth—all this can be shown to be consistent with the universalizing tendency” of capital. 30 When Chibber says a practice is “consistent” this does not mean it is entirely subordinated to or determined by capital.

Chibber summarizes his argument against Chakrabarty in four main points:

- The sheer existence of “History 2” does not mean that capital’s universalization (as defined here) is incomplete. 31
- History 2 is not necessarily the main barrier to History 1, and capitalism may be modified by History 2 in ways that are not “type-transforming.” 32
- Instead, History 1 itself is the main barrier to History 1, 33 or in Marx’s words, the “true barrier to capitalist production is capital itself”—due to capitalism’s logics of competition and crisis. Workers will always tend to come into conflict with the logic of capital accumulation. This opposition to capitalism within capitalism itself is “the only real source of opposition to capital’s universalization.” 34
- There is no necessary antagonism between History 1 and 2. 35 The “ensemble of social relations in any region need not be subsumed under one set of rules,” and the various practices that comprise the whole can be governed by very dissimilar logics, even as capital universalizes. 36

SIX CRITIQUES OF CHIBBER

First, in what is overall an admirably clear and sharply argued book, there is a key ambiguity around the question of social crisis or
breakdown. If History 1 does not constitute the whole of the society, as Chhibber has allowed, why can’t there be instability and breakdown in the rest of society (lumped under History 2)? Some examples of instability and breakdown include the death of states, the breakdown of law and order, warfare, terrorism, dictatorship, fascism, and the demise of entire institutions and fields. Fixated as he is on History 1 and the polemic against Subaltern Studies, Chhibber doesn’t pursue his criticism of one of the weakest points in Chakrabarty’s sociology: his lumping of everything but capitalism into a single residual category. Marxism already had a more sophisticated sociology than this in the early 1960s, when Althusser reframed the social totality as a loose congeries of relatively autonomous levels, or ten years later when Bourdieu reframed social space in terms of the field of power and a multiplicity of relatively autonomous fields, each one irreducible to the others.90

Second, contingency is not the opposite of causal determinism. The idea of conjunctural contingent causality is completely compatible with the approach Chhibber has sketched out. If Marxism is construed as a set of underlying powers, tendencies, and structures, then these will combine in contingent ways with one another and with additional causal mechanisms not theorized by Marxism in producing empirical events. Indeed, Marx’s own theory of economic crisis takes this form. There is nothing “fashionable” about the concept of contingency; it is an ontological fact of life in all open systems, natural and social. Repeated patterns or regularities that persist over time and generalize across space are the truly puzzling anomalies.

Third, Chhibber raises the question of the limits of compatibility between History 1 and History 2, but he does not take the next step to ask which cultural and political forms might be incompatible with capitalism. Presumably he thinks this varies historically. But I am not sure. This topic, once a mainstay of Marxist social theory, needs to be revisited.

Fourth, the only weak part of Chhibber’s book concerns the topic of rationality and “political psychology.” Guha claimed that the specific forms of colonial rule led to a bifurcation between cultures and repertoires of peasant mobilization and standard modern forms of politics. Chhibber’s main discomfort with this line of thought has mainly to do

with theories of human culture and subjectivity that take seriously the idea that there are multiple forms of rationality—including irrationality—and that motivations are unconscious as well as conscious. These arguments are by no means limited to Subaltern Studies but are in fact one massive alternative pole to Chhibber’s rationalism in the human sciences. Indeed, sociology even in the United States has tended to lean in the opposite direction from Chhibber. Marxism has made alliances with psychoanalysis for a century. There is no inherent connection between the idea of multiple forms of rationality or subjectivity and postcolonial theory.

I don’t want to say more about this because I think this argument about rationality is not a necessary part of Chhibber’s arguments about the nature of capitalism. All of Chhibber’s arguments about the universalization of capital and its compatibility with non-modern or non-liberal forms of culture and politics are compatible with a less rigid model of culture and psychology. Chhibber accuses Chatterjee of harboring a neo-orientalist vision of the Indian peasant, but the supposed irrationalities of the Indian peasant are easily matched by comparable phenomena in Europe. After all, Freud demonstrated pervasive psychic irrationality at the heart of civilized Europe, and his analysis was proven correct not by the events of the twentieth century but by current evidence in biological and neurological psychology for the existence of unconscious and irrational mental processes.88

In a way this argument doesn’t even hinge on the existence of irrational motives but on the very existence of meaning and culture. Chhibber is fighting a battle on his own terrain of sociology in the guise of a critique of postcolonial theory. But all serious versions of sociology and philosophy of social science agree that causal mechanisms or causal powers in the social sciences are inherently meaningful or invested with cultural meaning. In the social sciences we have theories of unconscious habitual action generated by something like a habitus. If we adopt instead the language of Weber we could say that there is a multiplicity of ultimate value orientations. Chhibber is implicitly defending an entirely unrealistic vision of man as a rational machine.

A fifth point relates to what Chhibber calls political form. Oddly, the discussion of political form focuses mainly on the labor process. There
is no discussion of the political forms proper in colonial societies—states and empires. And this arena of politics in the narrower sense is one where Chatterjee’s analysis has been of exemplary importance. Chibber ignores the ways in which colonial states preserved or created political forms such as tribes, Princely States, and other indirect rulers, putting limited power in the hands of colonized leaders. Mamdani argues that the system of Indirect Rule increased levels of coercion in colonial states while limiting the spread of capitalist universalism—not because of the lack of political liberalism but literally by limiting the spread of capitalist economic forms. The “compulsions of market dependence” were sometimes actively suppressed by colonial policies, from British Tanganyika and Cameroon South Africa to German Polynesia. To put it in more concrete terms: by placing local political power in the hands of chosen tribal leaders, weren’t colonial governments in fact doing something quite different from what governments were doing inside Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? It is as if European revolutions actively propped up the most backwards sectors of the non-capitalist feudal classes. In other words, it is not correct that the “continued salience of archaic power relations and so on... can be shown to be consistent with the universalizing tendency” of capital in all times and places. Some “archaic” modes of life were preserved in ways that were antithetical to capitalism’s expansion. I am not talking about capitalists using traditional ideologies to dominate their workers, but about colonial states withdrawing potential laborers from capitalist labor markets altogether—literally limiting the spread of capitalist economic forms.

Sixth, Chibber sometimes mirrors the postcolonial terminology he is rejecting. For example, for Chibber Marx is an “Enlightenment thinker.” But Marx is more than an Enlightenment thinker. He is also a nineteenth-century social theorist writing in the wake of Hegelian idealism and Romanticism and preserving some aspects of that very different formation. Talcott Parsons, who had studied with Alfred Weber, recognized this, writing that “Marx considered capitalism a definite and specific system of economic organization, marked off sharply in principle from its predecessor and successor in the dialectical process.” Reducing Marx to an Enlightenment thinker is as much of a distortion as Chakrabarty’s definition of historicism as a universalizing teleological social theory, which mirrors Popper’s misleading definition. In nineteenth-century Germany, from Savigny to Ranke, and on to Mannheim, Troeltsch, and Meinecke in the twentieth, historicism meant almost precisely the opposite of what Popper said it did, signaling an emphasis on the unique, singular, non-repeated, and unprecedented—on the “historical individual,” as Rickert and Weber called it.

CONCLUSION

Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital is a highly stimulating book that not only points out some of the analytic and theoretical deficiencies in Subaltern history but also presents a lucid and refreshing take on some classic Marxist issues. Chibber shows how Marx’s model of capitalism’s universalization can be combined with recognition of the autonomy of many realms of social life from that relentless process. The articulation of Marxism as a regional theory of capitalism with equally autonomous theories of cultural, political, social, and psychic processes is a promising path for the historical social sciences.