Postcolonial theory and the specter of capital

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Published online: 25 Mar 2014.

To cite this article: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2014) Postcolonial theory and the specter of capital, Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 27:1, 184-198, DOI: 10.1080/09557571.2014.877262

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2014.877262

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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’ (276), 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 (1978), and to the phenomenon of cultural studies in Birmingham under the auspices of Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall (Thompson 1985).

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

¹Cry of the children as the effigy of Guy Fawkes, the guardian of the gunpowder, was burnt on 5 November, the anniversary of the Gunpowder Plot (1605) to blow up the English House of Lords with King James I of England in it. Since Ranajit Guha, at 90, is our ‘old guy’, and Vivek Chibber burns him for misreading the English Revolution, this child’s cry seemed an appropriate title.

²I have long wanted to admit that I forgot this lesson when I was in my thirties twice (with reference to Jürgen Habermas and James Wolfensohn) and have bitterly regretted it. For consciousness-raised ideologically bound feminist readers of this review, of a book that has no feminist concern, I mention that part of this forgetfulness was because I felt unselﬁsciously obliged to prove to my then partner that I was not a ‘bourgeois proto-fascist’ (his repeated phrase). This book is by a resolutely non-identitarian South-Asian-American. The personal may be political.
at the beginning of the book, and assumes this to be sufficient proof of the pernicious effect of ‘poststructuralism’, 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 (Guha and Spivak 1988). 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 towards the preservation of ‘Little Britain Marxism’, shared to some degree by the journal Race and class. Aijaz Ahmad’s In theory (1992) 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:

[I]n 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 … [T]his inexact world … of dreams and illusions … [C]ritical viewpoint reveals that [a political revolution] … at the same time, and in fundamental ways, is not a revolution. (Chatterjee 1993, vii)

Writing as a member of the Subaltern Studies collective, I should say that we could no 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’ (80).
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’ (101).

In 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’ (81), when the entire deep background of Guha’s work lies there. The thing to do is to read A rule of property for Bengal (1963) side by side with The small voice of history (2009) to 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 Chibber 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 WEB 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’.3

I will look at the way in which Guha establishes his premises and alliances in Dominance without hegemony (1998). I will begin with a longish quote 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. (Guha 1998, 6, emphasis added)

To read this citation correctly, Chibber has to be able to understand the difference between ‘ideology’ and ‘psychology’. (This is also true in the case of his unproductive misreading of Chakrabrty and Chatterjee.) He uses ‘ideology’ in the

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3 Compare Kirti Chaudhuri’s impatience: ‘While it is possible to criticize Braudel’s works on matters of factual detail or interpretation, to do so is rather like standing in front of Michelangelo’s statue of David in Piazza Signoria in Florence or looking up at his paintings in the Sistine Chapel in Rome and saying that the artist’s grasp of the human anatomy was all wrong’ (Chaudhuri 1991, 6, emphasis mine).
uncritical colloquial US sense of ‘ideas held by a particular group’. The
subalternists, including, of course, Guha, use it in the Marxian tradition,
beginning with The German ideology (Marx 1976) and continuing through a long
critical tradition of debate, which Chibber 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, QED. 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/behaviourist 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).

Chibber cannot distinguish between ‘capital’ and ‘capitalism’. Here are some
elements. ‘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?’ (109). 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 under-
standing 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 behaviour becomes
different. Capital-ism finesses this by talking ‘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’ (280) is itself mistaken because Chibber is focused on a ‘correct’ reading
of the French and English revolutions.

Chakrabarty gets it in the rear because Chibber 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 capitalism’—how did ‘History 1’ become ‘capitalism’?—‘is
to undermine its universalization,’ writes Chibber (217). 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 postcolonial theorists inveigh. (233)

Investigating the absence of internationalism in the rank and file of the labour movement and its relationship to colonialism has to be forgone in a brief review; as must the pre-critical notion that capital’s universalization is ‘market dependence’ (125). Any effort with labour worldwide immediately brings up the issue of outsourcing. There is also the gender politics within established organized labour which encourages the cynical concept of ‘permanent casuals’.

The main problem, however, is not labour 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’ (250). 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’-y, he dismisses Gramsci’s influence as a trend (6). 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 gurumahashay’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’ (6). (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 Risorgimento 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 WEB 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’ (Du Bois 1968, 385–414). 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 évoluté) 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 (Guha 2009) 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 (8), 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, who 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* (2006). 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/goon 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 re-discover that southern Italy has a conjuncture comparable (of course not identical) to Central Asia—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’ (200–202). 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* [1998]). 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’ (Said 1984, 27–48). For example, the mother thinks honour, 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 honourably dated.) Indeed, there is no point in Marx’s (1990) 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 labour 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* (2007) is a part, and the new thinking started by DD Kosambi, whom Guha cites at the very beginning of *Dominance without hegemony* (35). This is like justifying war or peace through the

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4 Sen (1981). His work was enriched by Esther Bostrup’s work on famines since the ‘60s.
Christ story (a different permissible narrative. No psychological essentialism here, especially since polymath Kosambi, whose polymath father became a Buddhist under BR Ambedkar’s influence, is speaking of how the converted Buddhist Emperor Asoka’s new imperial-universal notion of *dhamma*, not to be found in the classic *Arthasastra*, was in its turn miscast into *dharma*, both instruments of class reconciliation between sovereign and subject. Historical change, class accommodation, not psychological essence. Just *dhamma*, *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 (119). To say that ‘Guha does not consider that the shift to capitalist social structures might actually fit quite well with the idiom of traditional politics’ (52), or that ‘postcolonial theory … portray[s] the East as an unchanging miasma of tradition’ (291), is astonishing.

Would Professor Chibber correct Rosa Luxemburg and DD 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 disciplinarization 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 vigour. I therefore guess that, if I remind Chibber of the famous first paragraph of Kosambi’s *An introduction to the study of Indian history* (1975), he will perhaps say that, although this is acceptable in a dated classic, his own general idea that Indian colonial and postcolonial history ‘are subject to the same basic forces and are therefore part of the same basic history’ (291). 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. (Kosambi 1975, 1)

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’ (286, emphasis original).

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, finesses 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 in 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 labour’s agency of capital, once again I would recommend consulting WEB Du Bois’s Black reconstruction in America (1998).

Chibber’s confusion of the bourgeois 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: ‘[I]n the era of decolonization parts of the Global South have dramatically improved their material conditions’ (275). Kosambi could have told him that many on the left thought Nehru was selling capitalism in the name of democratic socialism. And Ranajit 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’’” (Guha 1998, 37). Professor Chibber 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 Chibber, 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’\(^5\) (here our generation understood ‘development’ as ‘exploitation’).

It is also clear that Chibber has not read the Subaltern Studies material clearly. One of their research undertakings was to point at Gandhi’s separation from peasant movements.\(^6\) If Chibber wants to get a sense of this, he may also want to look at the exchange between Sumanta Banerjee (2013) and David Hardiman (2013) 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 Chibber 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’ (287). 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 labour’, or labour-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’ (140, emphasis original). It is the product of what today we call ‘quantification’. In order for the capitalist to progress, labour must be put in the form of value (‘contentless’, says Marx [1990] in *Capital*, volume 1), so that calculations can be made. It is as simple as that. Since Chibber 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 (2012) and others. 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 Chibber is located in the tendency among Little Britain Marxists patronized by the now defunct British new left, which produces, periodically, 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, Chibber shows us that capitalism does indeed create social difference. But of course. This is the double bind of capital that Marx pointed out in a spectacular passage quoted by Guha towards 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’.

Chibber 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

\(^5\) Unpublished conversation, 1989; I cannot reproduce his persuasive and thunderous accent, alas.

\(^6\) Amin (1984); Chatterjee (1984).
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 proletariat. 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, Gramsci (1971) 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 assent of 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. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework; 6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy … etc. (Gramsci 1971, 52)

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. Chibber, 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’ (268) 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 Chibber 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—Chibber 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 (2008). 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 towards 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 Verso 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’ (75). If, on the other hand, instead of ‘exam[ining] the British and French experience in far greater depth than does Guha’ (54), Chibber 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, multi-ethnic, 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 colonial era, and continuing into the postcolonial era—organizations of the popular classes have pushed in much the same direction as did their counterparts in Europe’ (152–153). What ‘counterparts’? In Peru, Guatemala? In Egypt? Bangladesh? Sri Lanka?

This is not a ‘critique of Eurocentrism’. In the elementary schools for the rural landless where Spivak has trained students and teachers to learn and teach the state curriculum for nearly three decades now she tries to make her groups friendly with the wretched map of the world on the back cover of the geography book. She points at the northwestern corner of the huge Eurasian continent and tells them that that is Europe and that, though so small, they still won. She discusses with them how they won and even uses such mid-Victorian examples as James Watt watching the lid dance on the pot of boiling water. She reminds herself not to be an ‘improver’, and discusses with her increasingly more aware co-workers (male and female teachers and supervisors) from the community the fact that she is not drawing profits from the work for and with them. Although they are not well acquainted with the world map and know nothing about colonialism, and have not seen any factories of any significant size, they do understand what profit or *munafa* is. They are subaltern, they have no special psychological essence, they are not ‘the East’, or ‘the Non-West’, they can be examples of a general argument that notices that they vote in a postcolonial nation that they do not know as such.) A limiting concept of ‘Europe’ must come to terms with the fact that Europe is part of a much larger world now. Europe’s moment was historically important but not all-consumingly determining. Not everyone has to have a correct interpretation of the English and French revolutions. It is enough to think of the relationship between the Chartists and the Reform Bills, even Labour and
New Labour; of the 18th Brumaire; even Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon versus Valéry Giscard d’Estaing. The sun rises at different times upon the globe today. Paying good attention to England and France is not going to ‘place[e] Indian modernity in a global context’ (79). When the stock exchange closes in London, it must wait for Tokyo and then Mumbai, and in-between opens the turbulent and wildly unstable speculative ‘marriage of socialism and capitalism’, where the ‘turnover rates are ten times higher’ (Wong 2006), where the rules are much different from Professor Chibber’s boutades about capital/capitalism equated, yet uniformization/universalization is raring to break through (like the steam in the steam engines that we travelled by in my childhood and adolescence): Shanghai and Shenzen.

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?’ (220). 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’ (1968), 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 influence. The present is a vanishing relationship, constituted by its vanishing. 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. (Benjamin 1968, 255, 261)

Here too I comment on Little Britain Marxism, as follows:

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. (Spivak forthcoming)

When Chakrabarty suggests that there should not be a ‘simple application of the analytics of capital and nationalism available to Western Marxism’ (17), he is

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7 Anderson (1982); Bhabha (1994).
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’ (89; 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’ (178)—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’ (Guha 1998, 3). 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 (2009) 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 insurrectionists’ way beyond mere personal suffering towards ‘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’ (Guha 1983). 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’ (98). 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 sex education class) and women who still make use of it would be diagnosed by the most relentlessly honest philosopher of the Enlightenment as keeping women enclosed within an absence of ‘civil personality’, with ‘tradesmen, servants ... minors’ (Kant 1991, 139). I told her we must learn to disprove this. I must repeat this at the end of my review because there must be a feminist consideration of Chibber’s emphasis on the heroism of the subaltern classes misunderstood as simply part of the world’s disenfranchised existing within ‘the same history as Europe’, supporting his desire to dismiss Subaltern Studies as a part of postcolonial studies. That desire I should have liked to contest in terms of my own conflictual but instructive experience with this group. But since I have no foothold in this book except as an object of mockery, I think that would be, to quote the language understood by Chibber and his cohorts, bad form.

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Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (forthcoming) Readings, ed Lara Choksey (Calcutta: Seagull)


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Columbia University

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2014.877262

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Ideological conflict and confrontational behaviour have become distinctive features of contemporary United States (US) politics. The debate on Obama’s