
Vivek Chibber. *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. London: Verso, 2013. Pp. xii, 306. US \$29.95.

The call of the Subaltern Studies Project, formed by Ranajit Guha in 1982 and influenced by Marxist historical practice, to recover a “bottom up” historiography or “history from below” has had an important influence on postcolonial studies. In his *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, Vivek Chibber recognises that “[t]he truly innovative dimension of Subaltern Studies, then, was to marry popular history to the analysis of colonial and postcolonial capitalism” (6). Indeed, the focus on how individuals and groups “on the ground” rather than their political and social elites have experienced capitalism has moved beyond India and other parts of South Asia to the postcolonial world more broadly. Chibber opens with the assertion that “my central concern in this book is to examine the framework that postcolonial studies has generated for *historical analysis* and, in particular, the analysis of what was once called the Third World” (5; emphasis in original).

Taken as a whole, the study argues that “Subalternist theorists do not answer the very question they raise—namely, how the entry of capitalism into the colonial world affected the evolution of its cultural and political institutions” (25). The first chapter sets out the main argument of *Postcolonial*, which is that the non-West should be conceptualised and understood through an application of the same analysis and evaluation that is used to understand the

West. (I use the terms “the West” and “the non-West” throughout this review because they are the ones Chibber himself uses.) Chibber asserts:

[i]nstead of being entirely different forms of society, the West and the non-West . . . turn out to be variants of the same species. Further, if they are indeed variations of the same basic form, the theories generated by the European experience would not have to be overhauled or jettisoned, but simply modified. (23)

Chibber draws on and disputes the works of Subaltern Studies theorists, primarily Ranajit Guha’s *Dominance without Hegemony* (1997), Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2000), and Partha Chatterjee’s *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (1986).

Although Subaltern Studies has been criticised since its establishment over thirty years ago, *Postcolonial* “departs from existing treatments” (20) of Subaltern Studies because “the claims for a fundamental difference with reference to capital, power, and agency are all irredeemably flawed. . . . The main thrust of the book, then, is to elucidate the failure of the arguments from difference, so central to postcolonial theory” (22). As such, Chibber challenges what he perceives to be the two principal claims of Subaltern Studies, claims widely accepted and deployed throughout postcolonial theory. First is the claim of difference, the idea that there are very profound disparities in the culture, politics, and sociology of the West and the non-West during the colonial and the postcolonial periods. Second is the critique of Eurocentrism, the claim that theories originating from the West complicate and confuse instead of illuminate the non-West by conveying onto it models that are inaccurate and misleading.

Calling into question this “critique of Eurocentrism, nationalism, colonial ideology, and economic determinism” (4), Chibber argues that such a critique has led to the view that an unbridgeable difference separates the West from the non-West. Theorists of Subaltern Studies “take one form of consciousness to be peculiar to the West—the capacity to separate one’s own identity and interests from those of the social group to which one belongs” (176) and consequently insist on difference. Chibber concludes that this distrust of universalism means that “there is nothing to justify Subalternist historians’ seemingly endless fascination with religion, ritual, spirits, indigeneity, and so on. We are free to criticize it for what it seems to be—a revival and celebration of Orientalist discourse” (238).

Chibber studies the social and economic characteristics of capitalist development from a theoretical framework that is widely applicable yet responsive to the diverse cultural and political practices of the non-West and the West.

But one of his book's major drawbacks is that he treats Subaltern Studies as if it were postcolonial theory. His assertion that Subaltern Studies is "the most successful exemplar of postcolonial theorizing in historical and social analysis" (284) is one example of that conflation. He mentions Edward Said and his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (1978) only in passing (8) even though he relies on this major postcolonial theorist's key concepts of Orientalism and Eurocentrism. Yet Said wrote the foreword to the tenth edited collection of the journal *Subaltern Studies*, a volume that also began Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's involvement with the project. Chibber's failure to engage with Said and Spivak is all the more glaring because these postcolonial theorists directly influenced the development of postcolonial studies in the United States. Moreover, he also refers only perfunctorily in a footnote to critics like Benita Parry and Neil Lazarus (5) who, from the outset of postcolonial studies scholarship to the present day, stress the importance of engaging with capitalism by taking a more materialist approach to the field. It seems like folly to neglect these critics who have been instrumental in putting the role of capitalist relations on a global scale firmly on the agenda of postcolonial studies. Nevertheless, while this study will most immediately interest those engaged in research on South Asia, its valuable new methodology represents an impressive achievement in postcolonial scholarship.

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Works Cited

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