

Interview

# **How Does the Subaltern Speak? Postcolonial theory discounts the enduring value of Enlightenment universalism at its own peril**

Tuesday 23 April 2013, by [BIRCH Jonah](#), [CHIBBER Vivek](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2013).

**In recent decades, postcolonial theory has largely displaced Marxism as the dominant perspective among intellectuals engaged in the project of critically examining the relationship between the Western and non-Western worlds. Originating in the humanities, postcolonial theory has subsequently become increasingly influential in history, anthropology, and the social sciences. Its rejection of the universalisms and meta-narratives associated with Enlightenment thought dovetailed with the broader turn of the intellectual left during the 1980s and 1990s.**

**Vivek Chibber's new book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, represents a wide-ranging challenge to many of the core tenets of postcolonial theory. Focusing particularly on the strain of postcolonial theory known as subaltern studies, Chibber makes a strong case for why we can — and must — conceptualize the non-Western world through the same analytical lens that we use to understand developments in the West. He offers a sustained defense of theoretical approaches that emphasize universal categories like capitalism and class. His work constitutes an argument for the continued relevance of Marxism in the face of some of its most trenchant critics.**

**Chibber was interviewed for Jacobin by Jonah Birch, a graduate student in sociology at New York University.**

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**Jonah Birch: At the core of postcolonial theory is the notion that Western categories can't be applied to postcolonial societies like India. On what basis is this claim made?**

Vivek Chibber: This is probably the single most important argument coming out of postcolonial studies, and this is also what makes it so important to engage them. There has been no really prominent body of thought associated with the Left in the last hundred and fifty years or so that has insisted on denying the scientific ethos and the applicability of categories coming out of the liberal enlightenment and the radical enlightenment — categories like capital, democracy, liberalism, rationality, and objectivity. There have been philosophers who have criticized these orientations, but they've rarely achieved any significant traction on the Left. Postcolonial theorists are the first to do so.

The argument really comes out of a background sociological assumption: for the categories of political economy and the Enlightenment to have any purchase, capitalism must spread across the world. This is called the “universalization of capital.”

The argument goes like this: the universalizing categories associated with Enlightenment thought are only as legitimate as the universalizing tendency of capital. And postcolonial theorists deny that capital has in fact universalized — or more importantly, that it ever could universalize around the globe. Since capitalism has not and cannot universalize, the categories that people like Marx developed for understanding capitalism also cannot be universalized.

What this means for postcolonial theory is that the parts of the globe where the universalization of capital has failed need to generate their own local categories. And more importantly, it means that theories like Marxism, which try to utilize the categories of political economy, are not only wrong, but they’re Eurocentric, and not only Eurocentric, but they’re part of the colonial and imperial drive of the West. And so they’re implicated in imperialism. Again, this is a pretty novel argument on the Left.

**JB: What made you decide to focus on subaltern studies as a way of critiquing postcolonial theory more generally?**

VC: Postcolonial theory is a very diffuse body of ideas. It really comes out of literary and cultural studies, and had its initial influence there. It then spread out through area studies, history, and anthropology. It spread into those fields because of the influence of culture and cultural theory from the 1980s onwards. So, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, disciplines such as history, anthropology, Middle Eastern studies, and South Asian studies were infused with a heavy turn toward what we now know as postcolonial theory.

To engage the theory, you run up against a basic problem: because it’s so diffuse, it’s hard to pin down what its core propositions are, so first of all, it’s hard to know exactly what to criticize. Also, its defenders are able to easily rebut any criticisms by pointing to other aspects that you might have missed in the theory, saying that you’ve honed in on the wrong aspects. Because of this, I had to find some core components of the theory — some stream of theorizing inside postcolonial studies — that is consistent, coherent, and highly influential.

I also wanted to focus on those dimensions of the theory centered on history, historical development, and social structures, and not the literary criticism. Subaltern studies fits all of these molds: it’s been extremely influential in area studies; it’s fairly internally consistent, and it focuses on history and social structure. As a strand of theorizing, it’s been highly influential partly because of this internal consistency, but also partly because its main proponents come out of a Marxist background and they were all based in India or parts of the Third World. This gave them a great deal of legitimacy and credibility, both as critics of Marxism and as exponents of a new way of understanding the Global South. It’s through the work of the Subalternists that these notions about capital’s failed universalization and the need for indigenous categories have become respectable.

**JB: Why is it, according to the subaltern studies theorists, that capitalism’s universalizing tendencies broke down in the postcolonial world? What is it about these societies that impeded capitalism’s progress?**

VC: Subaltern studies offers two distinct arguments for how and why the universalizing drive of capital was blocked. One argument comes from Ranajit Guha. Guha located the universalizing drive of capital in the ability of a particular agent — namely, the bourgeoisie, the capitalist class — to overthrow the feudal order and construct a coalition of classes that includes not only capitalists and

merchants, but also workers and peasants. And through the alliance that is cobbled together, capital is supposed to erect a new political order, which is not only pro-capitalist in terms of defending the property rights of capitalists, but also a liberal, encompassing, and consensual order.

So for the universalizing drive of capital to be real, Guha says, it must be experienced as the emergence of a capitalist class that constructs a consensual, liberal order. This order replaces the ancien régime, and is universalizing in that it expresses the interests of capitalists as universal interests. Capital, as Guha says, achieves the ability to speak for all of society: it is not only dominant as a class, but also hegemonic in that it doesn't need to use coercion to maintain its power.

So Guha locates the universalizing drive in the construction of an encompassing political culture. The key point for Guha is that the bourgeoisie in the West was able to achieve such an order while the bourgeoisie in the East failed to do so. Instead of overthrowing feudalism, it made some sort of compact with the feudal classes; instead of becoming a hegemonic force with a broad, cross-class coalition, it tried its best to suppress the involvement of peasants and the working class. Instead of erecting a consensual and encompassing political order, it put into place highly unstable and fairly authoritarian political orders. It maintained the rift between the class culture of the subaltern and that of the elite.

So for Guha, whereas in the West the bourgeoisie was able to speak for all the various classes, in the East it failed in this goal, making it dominant but not hegemonic. This in turn makes modernity in the two parts of the world fundamentally different by generating very different political dynamics in the East and West, and this is the significance of capital's universalizing drive having failed.

**JB: So their argument rests on a claim about the role of the bourgeoisie in the West, and the failure of its counterpart in postcolonial societies?**

VC: For Guha, absolutely, and the subaltern studies group accepts these arguments, largely without qualification. They describe the situation — the condition of the East — as a condition in which the bourgeoisie dominates but lacks hegemony, whereas the West has both dominance and hegemony.

Now the problem with this is, as you said, that the core of the argument is a certain description of the achievements of the Western bourgeoisie. The argument, unfortunately, has very little historical purchase. There was a time, in the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century, even into the 1950s, when many historians accepted this picture of the rise of the bourgeoisie in the West. Over the last thirty or forty years, though, it has been largely rejected, even among Marxists.

What's strange is that Guha's book and his articles were written as though the criticisms of this approach were never made. And what's even stranger is that the historical profession — within which subaltern studies has been so influential — has never questioned this foundation of the subaltern studies project, even though they all announce that it's the foundation. The bourgeoisie in the West never strove for the goals that Guha ascribes to it: it never tried to bring about a consensual political culture or represent working-class interests. In fact, it fought tooth and nail against them for centuries after the so-called bourgeois revolutions. When those freedoms were finally achieved, it was through very intense struggle by the dispossessed, waged against the heroes of Guha's narrative, the bourgeoisie. So the irony is that Guha really works with an incredibly naïve, even ideological notion of the Western experience. He doesn't see that capitalists have everywhere and always been hostile to the extension of political rights to working people.

**JB: Okay, so that's one argument about the radical specificity of the colonial and postcolonial worlds. But you said before that there's another one?**

VC: Yeah, the second argument comes primarily in Dipesh Chakrabarty's work. His doubts about the universalization of capital are quite distinct from Guha's. Guha locates capital's universalizing tendency in a particular agent: the bourgeoisie. Chakrabarty locates it in capitalism's ability to transform all social relations wherever it goes. And he concludes that it fails this test because he finds that there are various cultural, social, and political practices in the East that don't conform to his model of what a capitalist culture and political system should look like.

So, in his view, the test for a successful universalization of capital is that all social practices must be immersed in the logic of capital. He never clearly specifies what the logic of capital is, but there are some broad parameters that he has in mind.

**JB: That strikes me as a pretty high bar.**

VC: Yeah, that's the point; the bar is an impossible one. So if you find in India that marriage practices still use ancient rituals; if you find in Africa that people still tend to pray while they're at work — those kinds of practices make for a failure of capital's universalization.

What I say in the book is that this is kind of bizarre: all capital's universalization requires is that the economic logic of capitalism be implanted in various parts of the world and that it be successfully reproduced over time. This will, of course, generate a certain degree of cultural and political change as well. However, it doesn't require that all, or even most, of the cultural practices of a region be transformed along some kind of identifiable capitalist lines.

**JB: This is the theoretical argument you make in the book about why capitalism's universalization doesn't require erasing all social diversity.**

VC: Right. A typical maneuver of postcolonial theorists is to say something like this: Marxism relies on abstract, universalizing categories. But for these categories to have traction, reality should look exactly like the abstract descriptions of capital, of workers, of the state, etc. But, say the postcolonial theorists, reality is so much more diverse. Workers wear such colorful clothes; they say prayers while working; capitalists consult astrologers — this doesn't look like anything what Marx describes in *Capital*. So it must mean that the categories of capital aren't really applicable here. The argument ends up being that any departure of concrete reality from the abstract descriptions of theory is a problem for the theory. But this is silly beyond words: it means that you can't have theory. Why should it matter if capitalists consult astrologers as long as they are driven to make profits? Similarly, it doesn't matter if workers pray on the shop floor as long as they work. This is all that the theory requires. It doesn't say that cultural differences will disappear; it says that these differences don't matter for the spread of capitalism, as long as agents obey the compulsions that capitalist structures place on them. I go to considerable lengths to explain this in the book.

**JB: A lot of the appeal of postcolonial theory reflects a widespread desire to avoid Eurocentrism and to understand the importance of locally specific cultural categories, forms, identities, and what have you: to understand people as they were, or are, not just as abstractions. But I wonder if there's also a danger with the way they understand the cultural specificity of non-Western societies, and if that is a form of cultural essentialism.**

VC: Absolutely, that is the danger. And it's not only a danger; it's something to which Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory consistently fall prey. You see it most often in their arguments about social agency and resistance. It's perfectly fine to say that people draw on local cultures and practices when they resist capitalism, or when they resist various agents of capital. But it's quite another to say that there are no universal aspirations, or no universal interests, that people might have.

In fact, one of the things I show in my book is that when the Subaltern Studies historians do empirical work on peasant resistance, they show pretty clearly that peasants [in India], when they engage in collective action, are more or less acting on the same aspirations and the same drives as Western peasants were. What separates them from the West are the cultural forms in which these aspirations are expressed, but the aspirations themselves tend to be pretty consistent.

And when you think about it, is it really outlandish to say that Indian peasants are anxious to defend their wellbeing; that they don't like to be pushed around; that they'd like to be able to meet certain basic nutritional requirements; that when they give up rents to the landlords they try to keep as much as they can for themselves because they don't like to give up their crops? Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this is actually what these peasant struggles have been about.

When Subalternist theorists put up this gigantic wall separating East from West, and when they insist that Western agents are not driven by the same kinds of concerns as Eastern agents, what they're doing is endorsing the kind of essentialism that colonial authorities used to justify their depredations in the nineteenth century. It's the same kind of essentialism that American military apologists used when they were bombing Vietnam or when they were going into the Middle East. Nobody on the Left can be at ease with these sorts of arguments.

**JB: But couldn't someone respond by saying that you're endorsing some form of essentialism by ascribing a common rationality to actors in very different contexts?**

VC: Well, it isn't exactly essentialism, but I am endorsing the view that there are some common interests and needs that people have across cultures. There are some aspects of our human nature that are not culturally constructed: they are shaped by culture, but not created by it. My view is that even though there are enormous cultural differences between people in the East and the West, there's also a core set of concerns that people have in common, whether they're born in Egypt, or India, or Manchester, or New York. These aren't many, but we can enumerate at least two or three of them: there's a concern for your physical wellbeing; there's probably a concern for a degree of autonomy and self-determination; there's a concern for those practices that directly pertain to your welfare. This isn't much, but you'd be amazed how far it gets you in explaining really important historical transformations.

For two hundred years, anybody who called herself progressive embraced this kind of universalism. It was simply understood that the reason workers or peasants could unite across national boundaries is because they shared certain material interests. This is now being called into question by subaltern studies, and it's quite remarkable that so many people on the Left have accepted it. It's even more remarkable that it's still accepted when over the last fifteen or twenty years we've seen global movements across cultures and national boundaries against neoliberalism, against capitalism. Yet in the university, to dare to say that people share common concerns across cultures is somehow seen as being Eurocentric. This shows how far the political and intellectual culture has fallen in the last twenty years.

**JB: If you're arguing that capitalism doesn't require bourgeois liberalism, and that the bourgeoisie didn't play the historical role of leading this popular struggle for democracy in the West, how do you explain the fact that we did get liberalism and democracy in the West, and we didn't get those outcomes in the same way in a lot of the postcolonial world?**

VC: That's a great question. The interesting thing is that when Guha wrote his original essay announcing the agenda of subaltern studies, he ascribed the failure of liberalism in the East to the failure of its bourgeoisie. But he also suggested that there was another historical possibility, namely that the independence movement in India and other colonial countries might have been led by

popular classes, which might have pushed things in a different direction and perhaps created a different kind of political order. He brings this up and then he forgets it, and it's never brought up again in any of his work.

This is the road that, if he had taken it — and if he had taken it more seriously — could have led him to a more accurate understanding of what happened in the West and not just in the East. The fact is that in the West, when a consensual, democratic, encompassing order did finally slowly emerge in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was not a gift bestowed by capitalists. It was in fact a product of very long, concerted struggles on the part of workers, farmers, and peasants. In other words, it was brought forth by struggles from below.

Guha and the Subalternists miss this entirely, because they insist that the rise of the liberal order was an achievement of capitalists. Because they misdescribe it in the West, they misdiagnose its failure in the East. In the East, they wrongly ascribe its failure to the shortcomings of the bourgeoisie.

Now, if you want an accurate historical research project explaining the tenuousness of democratic institutions in the East and their veering towards authoritarianism, the answer does not have to do with the shortcomings of the bourgeoisie, but with the weakness of the labor movement and peasant organizations, and with the parties representing these classes. The weakness of these political forces in bringing some sort of discipline to the capitalist class is the answer the question subaltern studies poses. That question is: "Why are the political cultures in the Global South so different from the Global North?" This is where they ought to be looking: at the dynamics of popular organizations and the parties of popular organizations; not at some putative failure of the capitalist class, which in the East was no more oligarchic and authoritarian than it had been in the West.

**JB: You're obviously very critical of postcolonial theory. But isn't there something valid and valuable in its indictment of the postcolonial order?**

VC: Yeah, there's some value, especially if you look at Guha's work. In all of his work, especially in *Dominance Without Hegemony*, I think there's a very salutary criticism of and general contempt toward the powers-that-be in a country like India. And that's a tremendously positive alternative to the kind of nationalist historiography that had been in place for decades in a country like India, in which the leaders of the independence movement were seen as something akin to saviors. Guha's insistence that not only was this leadership not a salvation, but that it was in fact responsible for so many of the shortcomings of the postcolonial order, is to be lauded and endorsed.

The problem is not his description of the postcolonial order; the problem is his diagnosis of where those failings come from and how they might be fixed. I am entirely on board with Guha's general attitude toward the Indian elite and its henchmen. The problem is that his analysis of its causes is so wrongheaded that it gets in the way of an appropriate response and criticism of that order.

**JB: What about Partha Chatterjee? Doesn't his work offer a serious critique of the postcolonial state in India?**

VC: Some aspects of it, yes. On a purely descriptive level, Chatterjee's work on nationalism, like Guha's, does show the narrowness of the nationalist leadership's concerns, their fidelity to elite interests and their suspiciousness of popular mobilization. All that is to be lauded.

The problem, again, is with the diagnosis. In Chatterjee's case, the failings of the Indian nationalist movement are ascribed to its leadership having internalized a particular ethos, and this is the ethos and orientation that comes with modernization and modernism. So for Chatterjee, the problem with

Nehru is that he very quickly adopted a modernizing stance towards the political economy. In other words, he placed great value on a scientific approach to industrialization, to rational planning and organization — and that's at the heart of why, to Chatterjee, India is locked in a position of "continued subjection" in the global order.

It's fine to say that Nehru abided by a narrow set of interests, but to locate the deep sources of his conservatism in his adoption of a modernizing, scientific worldview seriously mistakes what the problem is. If the problem with the postcolonial elite is that they adopted a scientific and rational worldview, the question arises: how do postcolonial theorists plan to get out of the current crises — not only economic and political, but also environmental — if they're saying that science, objectivity, evidence, concerns with development, are to be ditched?

Chatterjee has no way out of this. In my view, the problem with Nehru's leadership, and with the Indian National Congress's leadership, was not that they were scientific and modernizing, but that they linked their program to the interests of the Indian elites — of the Indian capitalist class, and the Indian landlord class — and that they abandoned their commitment to popular mobilization and tried to keep the popular classes under very tight control.

Chatterjee's approach, while it has the trappings of a radical critique, is actually quite conservative, because it locates science and rationality in the West, and in doing so describes the East much as colonial ideologues did. It's also conservative because it leaves us with no means through which we might construct a more humane and more rational order, because no matter which way you try to move — whether you try to move out of capitalism towards socialism, whether you try to humanize capitalism through some kind of social democracy, whether you try to mitigate environmental disasters through some more rational use of resources — all of it is going to require those things which Chatterjee impugns: science, rationality, and planning of some kind. Locating these as the source of the East's marginalization is not only mistaken, I think it's also quite conservative.

**JB: But is there nothing to the critique that postcolonial theorists make of Marxism, as well as other forms of Western thought rooted in the Enlightenment; that they're Eurocentric?**

VC: Well, we have to distinguish between two forms of Eurocentrism: one is kind of neutral and benign, which says that a theory is Eurocentric insofar as its evidentiary base has come mostly from a study of Europe. In this sense, of course, all the Western theories we know of up to the late nineteenth century overwhelmingly drew their evidence and their data from Europe, because the scholarship and the anthropological and historical literature on the East was so underdeveloped. In this sense, they were Eurocentric.

I think this kind of Eurocentrism is natural, though it's going to come with all sorts of problems, but it can't really be indicted. The most pernicious form of Eurocentrism — the one that postcolonial theorists go after — is where knowledge based on particular facts about the West is projected onto the East and might be misleading. Indeed, postcolonial theorists have indicted Western theorists because they not only illicitly project onto the East concepts and categories that might be inapplicable; they systematically ignore evidence that is available and might generate better theory.

If it's Eurocentrism of the second kind that we're talking about, then there have been elements in the history of Marxist thought that fall prey to this kind of Eurocentrism. However, if you look at the actual history of the theory's development, those instances have been pretty rare.

Since the early twentieth century, I think it's accurate to say that Marxism is maybe the only theory of historical change coming out of Europe that has systematically grappled with the specificity of the

East. One of the most curious facts about subaltern studies and postcolonial theory is that they ignore this. Starting with the Russian Revolution of 1905 and on to the Revolution of 1917, then the Chinese Revolution, then the African decolonization movements, then the guerilla movements in Latin America — all of these social upheavals generated attempts to grapple with the specificity of capitalism in countries outside of Europe.

You can rattle off several specific theories that came out of Marxism that not only addressed the specificity of the East, but explicitly denied the teleology and the determinism that subaltern studies says is central to Marxism: Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development, Lenin's theory of imperialism, the articulation of modes of production, etc. Every one of these theories was an acknowledgement that developing societies don't look like European societies.

So if you want to score points, you can bring up instances here and there of some sort of lingering Eurocentrism in Marxism. But if you look at the balance sheet, not only is the overall score pretty positive, but if you compare it to the orientalism that subaltern studies has revived, it seems to me that the more natural framework for understanding the specificity of the East comes out of Marxism and the Enlightenment tradition, not postcolonial theory.

The lasting contribution of postcolonial theory — what it will be known for, in my view, if it is remembered fifty years from now — will be its revival of cultural essentialism and its acting as an endorsement of orientalism, rather than being an antidote to it.

**JB: All of this begs the question: why has postcolonial theory gained such prominence in the past few decades? Indeed, why has it been able to supersede the sorts of ideas you're defending in your book? Clearly, postcolonial theory has come to fill a space once occupied by various forms of Marxist and Marxist-influenced thought, and has especially influenced large swathes of the Anglophone intellectual left.**

VC: In my view, the prominence is strictly for social and historical reasons; it doesn't express the value or worth of the theory, and that's why I decided to write the book. I think postcolonial theory rose to prominence for a couple of reasons. One is that after the decline of the labor movement and the crushing of the Left in the 1970s, there wasn't going to be any kind of prominent theory in academia that focused on capitalism, the working class, or class struggle. Many people have pointed this out: in university settings, it's just unrealistic to imagine that any critique of capitalism from a class perspective is going to have much currency except in periods when there's massive social turmoil and social upheaval.

So the interesting question is why there's any kind of theory calling itself radical at all, since it's not a classical anticapitalist theory. I think this has to do with two things: first, with changes in universities over the last thirty years or so, in which they're no longer ivory towers like they used to be. They're mass institutions, and these institutions have been opened up to groups that, historically, were kept outside: racial minorities, women, immigrants from developing countries. These are all people who experience various kinds of oppression, but not necessarily class exploitation. So there is, as it were, a mass base for what we might call oppression studies, which is a kind of radicalism — and it's important, and it's real. However, it's not a base that's very interested in questions of class struggle or class formation, the kinds of things that Marxists used to talk about.

Complementing this has been the trajectory of the intelligentsia. The generation of '68 didn't become mainstream as it aged. Some wanted to keep its moral and ethical commitments to radicalism. But like everyone else, it too steered away from class-oriented radicalism. So you had a movement from the bottom, which was a kind of demand for theories focusing on oppression, and a movement on top, which was among professors offering to supply theories focusing on oppression.



What made them converge wasn't just a focus on oppression, but the excision of class oppression and class exploitation from the story. And postcolonial theory, because of its own excision of capitalism and class — because it downplays the dynamics of exploitation — is a very healthy fit.

**JB: What do you think about the prospects for postcolonial theory? Do you expect that it will be eclipsed within the academy and within the Left anytime soon?**

VC: No, I don't. I don't think postcolonial theory is in any danger of being displaced, at least not anytime soon. Academic trends come and go, not based on the validity of their claims or the value of their propositions, but because of their relation to the broader social and political environment. The general disorganization of labor and the Left, which created the conditions for postcolonial theory to flourish, is still very much in place. Plus, postcolonial theory now has at least two generations of academics who have staked their entire careers on it; they have half a dozen journals dedicated to it; there's an army of graduate students pursuing research agendas that come out of it. Their material interests are tied up directly with the theory's success.

You can criticize it all you want, but until we get the kind of movements that buoyed Marxism in the early years after World War I, or in the late 1960s and early 1970s, you won't see a change. In fact, what you'll see is a pretty swift and vicious response to whatever criticisms might emerge. My sad, but — I think — realistic prognosis is that it's going to be around for quite a while.

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## **P.S.**

\* From Jacobin. Issue 10: Assembly Required:

<http://jacobinmag.com/2013/04/how-does-the-subaltern-speak/>

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