

Interview

# Marxism, postcolonial studies, and the tasks of radical theory

Sunday 21 July 2013, by [CHIBBER Vivek](#), [FARBMAN Jason](#) (Date first published: 1 July 2013).

OVER THE past few decades postcolonial theory has risen to prominence in the academy, becoming the dominant intellectual current of self-identified radicals. Drawing from poststructural currents, early postcolonial theory emerged from literature told from the point of view of the colonized. What originated as a response to the cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism eventually became cultural theory, which insisted that attributing to colonized peoples the ways European colonialists understood the world was a form of colonization.

Much of postcolonial theory argues that the concepts of Western social theory are inapplicable outside of Europe; that projecting European thought and history onto the rest of the world ignores the real history of the world outside the West. Much of this work has put Marxism and Marxists in the crosshairs, holding it as just another form of Eurocentric thought, incapable of analyzing or contributing to the liberation of postcolonial societies. In *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* Vivek Chibber takes up these claims and systematically critiques what has to this point become accepted wisdom for a large section of the academic left.

Jason Farbman spoke with Vivek Chibber, an associate professor of Sociology at New York University, about Marxism and postcolonial theory, their different approaches to explaining capitalism and anti-capitalist strategy, engaging with the nonwestern world, and the role of radical intellectuals.

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## Jason Farbman - WHY SHOULD socialists care about postcolonial studies?

Vivek Chibber - IN THE last twenty to twenty-five years, postcolonial theory has taken its place as the replacement for Marxist theory in university settings and among intellectuals. Throughout the twentieth century, Marxism was the theory that socialists relied upon to explain the world, and to make sense of how to organize against capitalism. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the decline of movements, with Marxism becoming marginal in intellectual life, and with a socialist left being kicked out of the labor movement, this is the first time in the modern era when you find an absence of Marxist intellectuals both within the labor movement and within the intelligentsia. What's taken its place now is postcolonial theory, which purports to do two things: to explain how capitalism works, and to criticize the injustices of capitalism. Socialists have a lot at stake in putting that theory to the test and seeing whether it's worthwhile or not.

**YOUR NEW book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, offers harsh criticisms of postcolonial theory. Why do you think it falls short as a radical theory?**

I'M CRITICAL because postcolonial theory tries to do what Marxism does, which is both to explain the world and tell us how to change it. I think it fails in both those respects.

In terms of explaining the world, even though the theory talks about capitalism a lot, it's conception of capitalism is one that either obscures how it works or presents a mythologized, sanitized version of it. The kind of version the bourgeois apologists tend to put forward.

With regard to its role as a critical theory; well, first of all, as Marx said, you can't criticize something if you don't understand it. If they don't understand how capitalism works, they can't really help us criticize it.

Postcolonial theory presents itself as being not just anticapitalist, but antiimperialist and anticolonial. In fact, as I show in my book, it's a theory that resurrected and made respectable what we now call orientalism—that is, ideas that the East is different from the West in some deep, unchanging way. In my view, the theory not only fails, but has some pretty conservative implications.

### **POSTCOLONIAL THEORISTS often criticize the “universalism” of Marxism. What do they mean by that?**

SOCIALISTS HAVE always held on to the belief that capitalism—wherever it is—submits people to what Marx called “the dull compulsion” of economic relations. It forces people into highly exploitative relations; and it does so regardless of their culture, their background. All it is interested in is profits.

So as capitalism spreads around the world, it spreads these properties into every community, every culture, every society. Capitalism doesn't care if those societies are Hindu, Muslim, or Christian. In so doing it submits the entire world to one set of structural and economic forces—the same forces. And it brings the entire world into a common struggle against those forces.

Postcolonial theory often denies this. It often insists that when capitalism is implanting itself in Calcutta, or in Nairobi, you can't understand it the way you understand the capitalism in Detroit or Manchester. You need an entirely different theory, a theory that looks nothing like what Marx's theory was. Well, okay, maybe you do. So what is that theory?

### **WHAT IS that theory? What do postcolonial theorists propose as a replacement?**

I HAVEN'T seen them provide one. The argument is typically pitched in the negative—to the effect that existing theories have to be rethought. But what the alternative theory is, about how capitalism actually works, is hard to find.

BUT IT'S not hard to observe clear cultural differences in various parts of the world. How do we account for these differences?

WE CAN admit what is clearly true: that most people are governed by their habits, by norms, by custom, by others' expectations of them, in much of what they do. That amounts to admitting that socialization and cultural orientation have a huge bearing on people's choices and behavior. I don't wish to dispute that at all. And if that is what postcolonial theorists claimed, one would have no disagreement with them.

But their claim is stronger. It is not that people are influenced by their culture; their claim is that people are constituted by their culture—all the way down. That means their socialization is so strong, their culture and cultural indoctrination so overriding, that it can even erase their understanding of their basic needs and interests, like the importance of physical well-being or

individual harm.

There's a lot at stake in accepting this. If it is true, there is a lot that goes out the window, like any conception of human rights.

### **HOW DO you get from explanations based on culture to the impossibility of human rights?**

YOU CANNOT assign rights if you don't have interests. Culture has a lot of importance. But is it so important that it can get people to ignore their own well-being? If the cultural relativism of postcolonial studies is right, it undermines our motivation to oppose the expropriation of peasants in Bolivia, the exploitation of workers in Nigeria, the immiseration of rickshaw drivers in Calcutta. Because for all you know their cultures might value these things, think these things are good for them. Who gave you the right to say that these things are bad? On what grounds would you say they would ever oppose them?

### **AND THIS is distinctly different than socialist theory?**

SOCIALISTS, ALONG with saying that capitalism submits the whole world to a common set of forces, have also held that working people all around the world have a common interest against capitalism. Again, regardless of whether they are Hindu, Muslim or Christian, or Black or white. Regardless of these makeups, they all have certain common interests. And that's why the struggle against capitalism is an international and universal struggle.

Here too, postcolonial theory often undermines this. Its calling card has been to say that laboring people in non-western societies are not motivated by the same concerns as those in the West; they don't even think in terms of their interests. They have a whole different consciousness than people in the West do. This is very reminiscent of what colonizing and imperial countries said when they denied rights to Asians and to Africans.

### **THERE IS an important distinction between the way Marxism and postcolonial studies theorizes difference. What's at stake here?**

WHAT'S AT stake is whether we think that when a worker or a poor person is bossed around in Calcutta, that he has the right to the same grievances and redress that somebody in Manchester or Detroit does. That when a woman in Nigeria is the victim of gender oppression she ought to have the same recourse as a woman in Los Angeles.

It comes down to this: If you think people in post-colonial cultures deserve the same rights as people in rich countries do, you can only make that argument if you also believe they have the same needs and interests as the latter. To deny this is to insist that Easterners and Westerners live in different worlds. Such a theory can't possibly sustain and support international movements and internationalism within the working class.

### **ARE YOU saying there's no difference between the East and the West?**

NO! IN fact the differences between them are huge, and what's interesting is that the Marxist tradition from at least 1905 has been dedicated to nothing other than explaining those differences.

THE CLAIM made by postcolonial theorists—to the point of becoming common sense in some corners—is that Marxism is Eurocentric. That Marxism focuses on European culture or history to the exclusion of the nonwestern world, or attempts to superimpose "European" theories onto the nonwestern world.

THIS IS sort of what sets postcolonial theory apart from other radicalisms. Across the twentieth century, in most of what we now call the global South, people who were on the left and who were progressives took Marxism to be a natural framework for them to engage. Some of them rejected it, a lot of them accepted it, but the ones who rejected it didn't do so because it was "Western" or "Eurocentric." they just thought it was wrong.

Postcolonial theory is the first theory claiming to be anticapitalist, from the global South, that attacks Marxism as being no different from colonial ideology in that it is as Eurocentric as colonial ideology was. This is an unusual claim; it is also false.

### **THIS IS great news for young Marxists who've been bombarded by accusations of Eurocentricism. Can you elaborate?**

IF YOU look at the history of Marxism in the twentieth century, it's actually a history of an unceasing engagement with the realities of the nonwestern world. If you think about it, how could it be otherwise? Starting with the revolution in Russia in 1905, the experience of socialism in the twentieth century has been that the countries where revolutionary movements became the most powerful oftentimes were countries that were not advanced capitalist.

There's Russia 1905; Germany (which was an industrializing but still predominantly peasant country) in 1918; China in the 1930s; India in the 1930s; Latin American in the 1940s and 50s; Vietnam; the entire spectrum of decolonizing countries. Everywhere movements took off which had a powerful anticapitalist thrust, they were in the nonwestern and less-developed world.

It was of necessity then, that the leaders of these movements and the intellectuals associated with them, had to make sense of realities that didn't conform to the central pillars of Marxist theory. It is true that Marx developed his theory focusing on the most advanced countries. But throughout the twentieth century, as revolutionary movements took off in less-developed countries, Marxists right from the start had to try and modify the theory to make sense of realities that departed from the predictions of the theory.

In fact, Marxism is the only theory on the left that has relentlessly and unceasingly engaged with the nonwestern world. The idea that it is a theory that ignores the nonwest or that it imposes western categories artificially, or that it is blind to the realities of the nonwestern world, is pretty far-fetched.

### **THIS CONCEPTION of Marxism is so different from how we're constantly told it is. Can you give some examples of a "relentless and unceasing engagement with the nonwestern world"?**

WHAT IS Trotsky's theory of combined and uneven development? It's a theory about what happens when capitalism comes late to a less-developed country. What is Mao's theory of new democracy? Now you may agree or disagree with it, but it's a theory about what to do in a peasant country.

What was Lenin's first contribution to Marxist theory, before anything else? It was a theory of late-developing capitalism in his first book, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. What is Lenin's major contribution to agrarian sociology? It's his theory of classes within agrarian capitalism, which Mao developed. What was Amilcar Cabral's contribution to revolutionary theory? It was the notion of the revolutionary proletariat in backwards settings. What about Che Guevara? Or Walter Rodney's pathbreaking work on colonial Africa, or C.L.R James' analysis of the Black Jacobins? These were all attempts to concretize and modify Marxist theories in the South. What is odd is that people like Rodney and James are now being presented as post-colonial theorists. That's really quite wrong. They thought of themselves as belonging to the Marxist tradition.

One can just add to this list unceasingly. From as early as 1905 to as late as the 1980s, if there was one thing Marxists have done, it is to focus on the nonwestern world.

### **IF CLAIMS of Eurocentricism are so baseless, why do postcolonial theorists accuse Marxism of this all the time?**

IT'S CREDENTIAL building. If you want to establish yourself as a radical in academia, and you don't want any of the hits to your career that come with being a "Marxist," the first thing you have to do is say something negative about Marxism. It establishes that even though you're on the left you're not "one of them."

### **SO MARXISTS have nothing to be embarrassed about on this score?**

IT'S EXACTLY the opposite. If what I'm saying is right, then the reality is that some of the most important insights into the modernization of the global south have come out of Marxist theories or theories inspired by Marxism. In the 1950s and 60s even the mainstream theories that were coming out, trying to explain development, political modernization, they all drew upon Marx's theories even if they weren't themselves Marxists. Alexander Gerschenkron's theory; Albert Fishlow's work on Latin America; Albert Hirschman's work, all these people were drawing on Marxist theory. That was true into the 1980s.

The theories they generated might have been wrong, but all of these intellectuals were dedicated to asking the question, "How do you explain the divergent experiences of the East and West?" The accusation that a commitment to universalizing theories blinds you to social difference is just false.

Not only is there nothing to be embarrassed about, Marxists should in fact turn the tables. In settings when you're in a political debate or in a seminar or something and someone tries to make these accusations, just ask them what they make of all these half dozen to a dozen theoretical contributions that came out of the Marxist tradition. Ask them to explain exactly—exactly—how they're Eurocentric.

### **AS YOU pointed out earlier, for most of the modern era Marxism was the driving force in radical intellectual thought. How do you explain its disappearance over the past two or three decades?**

THE DISAPPEARANCE of Marxism is not that hard to explain. Marxism was only around as long as Marxist parties and an organized, anticapitalist layer of the working class was around. The defeats of the past twenty-five years are unprecedented in modern history: there was never a time when there wasn't a really powerful current of socialists within the working class, where there were not parties that at least in their rhetoric were anticapitalist. Now we have neither.

In a situation like that, it's just not very realistic that Marxism as an intellectual current would survive. Once you take Marxist intellectuals out of the labor movement, the only institution that's left that might be creating intellectual work is the university. Universities are just not a hospitable place for Marxism. Universities are places where upwardly mobile professionals do what they have to do to move up on the career ladder. They are middle class, and they have the same aspirations as any middle-class person. Mostly, they succeed if they fall into line with power and power structures.

So you're going to find a downsizing/downscaling of Marxists in the intellectual world once they are taken out of the labor movement, and once anticapitalist political parties become as tiny as they are right now.

### **WHERE DOES postcolonial theory come from?**

THAT'S A good question. What you could have had once Marxism declined was just liberalism and conservatism, a return to those two doctrines. Why do you get something like postcolonial theory? I think you get it for two reasons. One is the aging lefties from the 1960s, who gave up being anticapitalist, still saw themselves as radicals. And still do. Starting from the late 1980s and early 1990s, they're radicals, but they don't want to talk about capitalism. So they turn towards other issues. They're antiracist, antisexist. They turn to what's called oppression studies.

Secondly, universities have changed a lot. They're a lot more heterogeneous, a lot more diverse than they used to be. Students coming into those universities are very keen on having the same chances as students who are more privileged. A lot of the students in these universities face difficulties because of the sexism and racism they encounter. So there's a supply factor pushing towards oppression studies, but without any attention to capitalism. And there's a demand factor, from these students who want to understand why they don't fit in as well with the other kids and why they don't have the same chances.

What's left out of this whole equation is the issue of capitalism, precisely because in universities you have people who are either themselves upwardly mobile and comfortable like professors or who aspire to be upwardly mobile, like most of the students. What you get, therefore, is a setting in which you're going to have people interested in being critical of the dominant order but without being anticapitalist. And that's what postcolonial theory gives you.

**YOU PRESENT a pretty damning account of postcolonial theory. Have postcolonial theorists made any positive contributions?**

YES, THERE'S some positive work empirically. And they have kept alive the idea that colonialism was highly destructive and generated a baleful ideology. But when we turn to the culture of the Left, I think postcolonial theory has been very debilitating.

What is the mission of any radical intellectual? By "intellectual" I don't mean someone who works in a university and has a pointy head. An intellectual is just someone who helps articulate ideas. Professors sometimes do that. They usually don't. But organizers always do. Without fail. If you can't do that you're not an organizer.

How has postcolonial studies affected the culture of intellectual work in the way I've just defined it? It's been pretty negative. Postcolonial studies has imbibed some of the worst aspects of academic culture, because it's a product of the academy. It is not a product of movements. They say they are a product of movements and are linked up to them, but that is not true. Postcolonial studies comes right out of the academy. What it has internalized and spread across the left is a culture in which valuing a simple and direct and clear presentation of ideas has simply been pushed off the table.

**WHY IS this?**

IN ACADEMIA, a simple and clear presentation of ideas oftentimes is the best way to get yourself booted out. It's easier to criticize you when you're clear, and concise, and you present your views in a way that makes them amenable to criticism.

Academics oftentimes couch their ideas in impenetrable prose, indecipherable jargon, at a level of complexity that is so dense nobody can penetrate it. This often is a substitute for complexity of thought. What you get with postcolonial studies is complexity of expression substituting for complexity of thought.

**IF YOUR goal is to organize mass numbers of working people, a strategy that presents**

## **simple ideas in confounding ways seems counterproductive.**

HISTORICALLY ON the left, intellectuals always took it as their duty to take complex matters and present them in a simple and clear way. That's how you organize people. The reality of capitalism seems to be overwhelming and complicated, which people from the Right keep saying is not accessible to ordinary people. They insist you need experts to understand the world and should therefore leave the governing of society to managers and experts. The Right has always said that. Intellectuals of the Left have always tried to show that in fact, realities can be grasped by anybody with a reasonable intelligence, whether or not they are in college, as long as they think hard about it. And they've tried to exemplify that by taking highly complex ideas and making them simple.

Noam Chomsky likes to say that back in the 1930s, Communist intellectuals wrote books like *Mathematics for the Millions* and *Physics Made Simple*. That was a good expression of the mission that intellectuals saw themselves on when they were on the Left.

What postcolonial studies has done is reverse this. You could forgive all of its sins, all of its intellectual mistakes. You could forgive all of its grandstanding and its ignorance about what radical theory does. But what you cannot forgive is importing into the culture of the Left the pretentious, empty verbosity that you find in the seminar room. And it's really in the last twenty years that you've seen activist meetings turning into graduate student seminars. I think it's pretty destructive.

## **WHAT IS the outcome when activist meetings turn into graduate seminars?**

IT TAKES confidence away from activists. It allows a few people to dominate meetings. Typically its people who don't fully understand what they've said, but who really enjoy dominating meetings. And of course it drives sensible people out of activism. The people who are left are people who either don't mind this speaking in tongues or people who care so little about understanding the world they don't care about what the discourse is that's being presented to them. Imagine what this does to the culture of the Left.

## **POSTCOLONIAL THEORY is now well established in the academy. What are the prospects of repelling these attacks on Marxism, or at least chipping away at some of the more pernicious assumptions made commonsense by postcolonial theory?**

IF YOU look back over the last twenty-five to thirty years, this is probably the best time to push back against some of the silliness and obscurantism that has been propagated by postcolonial theory. I say this for a couple of reasons.

One is the economic crisis that swept across the world starting in 2007. It brought the concept of capitalism back into political debates. Everybody now understands two things: we're living in a world in which the structural compulsion of capitalism is still the driving force; and that its global, because it wasn't just the US or China or Germany or Greece that got caught in this maelstrom but it was the entire world. It's shown in a very stark way that the category of capitalism that postcolonial theory has done so much to obscure or make invisible, that it's still a real force in the world around us.

The second reason I think it's a good time is because of the massive mobilizations and social struggle that have erupted over the past few years. Again, all around the world, showing that it's not just that capitalism is a reality across the world but also our common humanity and our common interest in fighting against it.

If postcolonial theory was right, there should not have been the explosion in Egypt, in Tahrir Square,

that there was a year and a half ago. If it were right, even if there was an explosion they should not have been demanding jobs, better, democracy, these basic things that workers in the West do. And if postcolonial theory were right, it should not be the case that activists in Madison and Detroit, or in Occupy, take inspiration from activists in Cairo, and come together on the same demands. Because if postcolonial theory were right, they should have fundamentally different psychologies, different aspirations, different needs. What these movements have shown us is that the needs and aspirations, even though they might have some differences, also share certain crucial commonalities. So I think that this is the best time we've seen in some time.

**WHAT DO you think it will take before we see the assumptions of postcolonial theory in retreat?**

I DON'T think postcolonial theory is going to go away any time soon. Despite the global upsurge we're still in a period of virtually unchallenged bourgeois hegemony. In fact the Right is getting stronger, not weaker, as we speak. Also, within academia, the retreat of Marxism is complete. If you were to look at postcolonial theory and its chances for sticking around, just based on its attractiveness to academics. . . Well, I don't think there's ever been a theory which is tailor-made for academic grandstanding the way postcolonial theory is.

It will take social movements of the scale that we saw in the late 1960s and early 1970s and a resurgence of some kind of left anticapitalist political organization that becomes a mass organization. It'll take something of that weight and scale to draw professional academics back towards Marxism in anything like a mass scale. You'll have individuals here and there, but I think it's going to take a lot of work.

Now there is an opening. And I think the best thing we can do is to try to take advantage of that opening, but with a sober appreciation of what the reality is.

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**P.S.**

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