

# The Politics of (Postcolonial) History: the case of *Provincializing Europe*

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**Abstract:** The critique of what is called postcolonial-studies in the Anglophone metropolitan academy that is elaborated in this paper, takes place via a detailed engagement with one of its most important recent texts, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000). It is intended to enable fresh critical thinking about the claims of postcolonial-studies to represent a subversive approach to history, politics, etc. It also engages the claims of postcolonial-studies regarding the limits of *Eurocentrism*, i.e. the tendency to view world history through the lens of European developments. The essay is only incidentally about India, or indeed about Asia. It is more about the ways in which the gravitational sphere of the metropolitan, particularly US/UK, academy has significantly affected, even skewed, critical thought from the margins. *Provincializing Europe* derives its inspiration from the work of the Indian Subaltern-Studies historical collective, of which Chakrabarty was a founding member<sup>1</sup>. Subaltern-Studies began life as an attempt to correct the bureaucratic, stifling conformism of the Stalinist parties. Its intention was to bring history, culture, the actual lived textures of life in a country like India to speak to the potentialities and, indeed, limitations of strategies of mobilization, revolutionary politics, etc, of the political parties in question. The result, judging by the post-1989 output of Chakrabarty and his cohort group, has been quite different<sup>2</sup>. In its 'post-colonial' moment, under the pressure of post-1989 developments – including the triumphalism of Western mainstream thought, the turning away from Marxism of a metropolitan (mainly US/UK) variety of postmodernist thought and the like – the original impetus has been lost, more or less entirely. At best, what began as critical Marxist thought from the margins has become a branch of left-liberal multiculturalist thought in its scholarly directions and even its political orientations. More often, it is a reprise of a kind of existential phenomenology one associates with the

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1 The first six volumes of *Subaltern-Studies* were published under the editorship of Ranajit Guha. The series continues under other editors and the geographic coverage encompasses much of what was referred to as the *Third World*.

2 For a more inclusive and detailed critique of the postcolonial impact on Subaltern-Studies, see my book, *The Postcolonial Orient* (2014).

reactionary-romantic side of Orientalism, trotting out clichés about *Eastern* difference and the hollow pretensions of *Western* epistemology. It is a postmodernist reprise of one of the many curious afterlives of Orientalism, as Samir Amin (see the first epigraph above) was aware. I call this afterlife a form of self-Orientalization. What began as a thrust in the direction of subversive thought has become part of a liberal, *multiculturalist* mainstream. Its readership largely sits comfortably in the precincts of the multiculturalist environment of elite US and UK universities. The irony of the situation cannot be lost. As the second epigraph (above), a quote from Jameson, encapsulates this is one of those moments when the forces of history impose their own logic «refus[ing] desire and set[ting] inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis».

**Keywords:** Eurocentrism; Orientalism; Postcolonialism; Subaltern-Studies; Identity Politics.

*At one pole are the literatures of religious fundamentalism of every kind [...] and of provincialisms which extol the supposed superiority of folklore, all of them founded on the hypothesis of the incommensurability of different cultures. At the other pole is the insipid revival of bourgeois praise for capitalist society, completely incontinent of its fundamental Eurocentrism.*

Samir Amin (1989, 147)

*History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its 'ruses' turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention [...]. We may be sure that its alienating necessities will not forget us, however much we might prefer to ignore them.*

Fredric Jameson (1981, 102)

## 1. Introduction

The development of postcolonial-studies from *the margins* in the post-Cold War metropolitan academy of the Anglophone world marks an important development. It signals the arrival in the Anglophone metropolitan academy of significant theoretical and political concerns – if not intellectuals themselves<sup>3</sup> – from the ex-colonies; and represents a concerted effort to engage postmodernist thought, in particular the issue of space in a supposedly globalized world, and the thorny issue of the spatialization

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3 Dirlik (1994, 328-329).

of time<sup>4</sup>, from the point of view of the formerly colonized. Combined with the issues of social justice in the context of past and present debates about global inequalities, postcolonial thought had the potential to pose a significant challenge to the triumphalism of much current thinking in the metropolitan academy and beyond. The extent to which it can indeed do so is taken up in this essay via an in-depth critique of Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* [henceforth *PE*]. Published in the year 2000 to much critical acclaim it is a significant intervention in the field of postcolonial studies, as it brought to the latter the insights of arguably the foremost historian of the Subaltern Studies group in India<sup>5</sup>. The iconic status this work has acquired since its publication and the increasing density of citation of it by Europeanists and others, who do not work in the field of postcolonial studies and may therefore not be cognizant of earlier critiques of it<sup>6</sup>, necessitates revisiting it, prompted by the ideas expressed in the two epigraphs to this essay.

In what follows, I shall discuss some of the important issues raised by this work as a way of engaging postcolonial thought. Of course, it goes without saying that such an engagement cannot be comprehensive – neither with every aspect of *PE* nor with postcolonial thought as a whole. What this essay will try to do is investigate the possibilities and limits of thinking through issues of social justice and indeed difference within the framework developed by *PE*.

The place to begin, I suppose, is at the end, where after over two-hundred-and-fifty pages Chakrabarty summarizes his argument thus:

This book is not committed to either Marx or Heidegger in any doctrinaire or dogmatic way, the spirit of their thinking and their guiding concepts preside over the two poles of thought [the analytic and the hermeneutic as Chakrabarty presents them] that direct the movements of this book.<sup>7</sup>

The analytic heritage, the practice of abstraction helps us to universalize and we do need universals, Chakrabarty argues, to produce critical readings of social justice. Yet, he maintains, this critical analytic tradition «evacuate[s] the place of the local» and such thought tends to «sever the relationship between thought and modes of human belonging». To restore this latter, Chakrabarty has recourse to the thought of Heidegger, rein-

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4 Jameson (1998, 62).

5 Chakrabarty (2000).

6 See, for example, Kaiwar 2004.

7 Chakrabarty (2000, 254).

stituting in the process the relationship «within thought itself between thought and dwelling»<sup>8</sup>.

Three aspects of the larger agenda developed in the work are important to note right away: (1) the apparent neutrality between Marx and Heidegger is something of a ruse; nowhere is the critique of Marxist thought for evacuating the local and the many ways of being-in-the-world paralleled in the book by an exploration of the limits of Heideggerian thought for developing a project of social justice adequate to the challenges of our time; (2) the act of «writing some very particular ways of being-in-the-world» (Chakrabarty's vignettes of Bengali life, which I shall examine below) «into some of the universal, abstract, and European categories of capitalist/political modernity»<sup>9</sup> has no counterpart in *writing* the abstract categories of Enlightenment thought in ways that might have a meaning for a third-world person of the subaltern classes facing injustice; (3) the invocation of a capitalist/political modernity – and its implicit and problematic equation with Europe – remains curiously disembodied, despite its evident centrality to constituting the very fabric of life in colonial India. The ways in which some colonial subjects themselves shaped colonial capitalism and profited at the expense of those most proximate to them is the subject of considerable amnesia in Chakrabarty's tale. When we are told that what is needed is a way to create «conjoined and disjunctive genealogies for European categories of political modernity as we contemplate the *necessarily fragmentary histories* of human belonging» [my emphasis] the politics of provincializing Europe begins to surface.

*PE* appears to have seamlessly incorporated some aspects of American academic and political life that are quite seriously disabling for any kind of project of social justice, or for that matter even the more limited objective of really provincializing Europe. In the wake of a series of recent political disasters, not to mention the hammering the poor have taken in Latin America, Asia and Africa, and in the United States itself, projects for social justice need to do more than engage in polite chatter about provincializing Europe or rescuing from oblivion «different ways of being-in-the-world»<sup>10</sup>. Celebrating difference would have some meaning in a world in which the basic needs of all humans were met, really democratic institutions were able to safeguard precisely different ways of being-in-the-world without pushing many of those into dire poverty and catastrophic crises, and in which difference was not tied to primordialized ascriptive identities that

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8 Ivi, 255.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

the many who suffer under them did not choose and would not perpetuate. Oddly, for a historian of the subaltern, Chakrabarty's project appears to be a somewhat top-down history, unable to develop even a rudimentary agenda of what needs redress in this world, of what a properly subaltern history might look like, and *what history's cruel ruses have done to projects of social emancipation*. As for the hypothetically many ways of being-in-the-world, some have been and are being lost now – even as others are being generated – under the iron discipline of neoliberalism, structural adjustment, new age crusades of the imperialist powers, and so on. Separating the question of being-in-the-world from capital appears a curious way of combating Eurocentrism, much less posing the question of transformative politics under late capitalism when capital is intent on colonizing every hitherto autonomous sphere of life, when it has all-but obliterated the last vestiges of pre-capitalist social forms, harnessed every wilderness in a world «abluted of nature», a world in which the economy has expanded to become «virtually co-extensive» with culture itself, where every pore of the world is saturated in the «serum of capital»<sup>11</sup>.

What is deeply ironic, of course, is that Subaltern Studies at its inception was informed by concerns specific to Marxist thought and praxis, even as it challenged the bureaucratized, mechanical and, dare one say, brutal aspects of what one used to call really existing communism and its epigones in the South Asian subcontinent. This distinguished and, in the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty, still distinguishes Subaltern Studies from other varieties of postcolonial thought which are indifferent if not actually quite hostile to Marxism. Since many postcolonial theorists have known Marxism only in its Stalinist version and can be dismissive if not contemptuous of it, one must I suppose be somewhat grateful that Chakrabarty is still able to present the indispensable, if limited, value of Marx to his enterprise of keeping alive some notion of projects for social justice and simultaneously provincializing Europe by showing the hollow pretenses of European universalism. As he puts it, the place of the universal is but a place holder into which steps a proxy which usurps its position in a gesture of «pretension and domination»<sup>12</sup>.

Provincializing Europe cannot, however, *pace* Chakrabarty, just be a matter of elaborating difference as it reveals itself in middle-class Bengali (or Chinese or Senegalese, for that matter) writing. It has to be the task of politics based on some new concept of universalism that creates higher ground than the limited, and Eurocentric, universalism of our day. This

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11 Anderson (1998, 55).

12 Chakrabarty (2000, 70-71).

requires thinking and writing in an altogether more militant register. The task of theory is to map the terrain that needs to be transformed and the struggles that contribute, however inchoately to this process. Perhaps only when the present unjust world order is transformed can one even conceive of its gestures of pretension and domination dying with it. *PE* does not have much to say about this need, the injustices of the current world, or even the injustices endemic to the world that Chakrabarty writes about with great familiarity – the world of colonial middle-class Bengal. It is apologist in that sense.

*PE* also seems to pull on some familiar Orientalist strings, exemplified by the fatuity of quoting Jarava Lal Mehta's work on Heidegger to the effect that:

There is no way open, to us in the East, but to go through this Europeanization and to go through it. Only through this voyage into the *foreign and the strange* can we win back *our own self-hood*; here as elsewhere, the way to what is closest to us is the longest way back.<sup>13</sup>

This piece of pseudo-philosophizing that so unproblematically assumes the truth of the spatial geography and categories of Orientalism is central to the kind of postcolonial thought that we are being treated to in the safe spaces of the Euro-American academy. Lurking beneath this fairly banal surface though is something of greater political significance that I will come back to in my concluding thoughts on this paper. Chakrabarty's neo-Orientalism is perhaps a decoy drawing us into the unspoken logic of a post-McCarthyite academy that allows us to invoke Marx if we are careful to distance ourselves from his relentlessly revolutionary thought and acerbic critique of capital. Anodyne formulae about different ways of being-in-the-world are likely to be better received in this academic world than a head-on confrontation with the immense suffering, cruelty and injustices so casually and thoughtlessly inflicted on the exploited and oppressed poor by the increasingly destructive course of late capitalism. If one can point to the use of abstractions, transition narratives or something else – anything but capital – as the source of the inequalities and distress from which the many actually existing ways of being-in-the-world must be rescued then the project of social justice is already a quixotic enterprise, where it is

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13 Mehta (1976, 466). The quote is on p. 298 of *Provincializing Europe*. I've added the emphases to the quotes to underline the Orientalist categories of Mehta's thought, so naturally reproduced by Chakrabarty.

not slyly and knowingly self-co-opted into the project of capital's devastating production of difference.

## 2. Chakrabarty's Provincializing Europe: The Project Outlined

Chakrabarty proposes an account that can include both the global development of capitalism and the affective narratives of belonging that seemingly resist the invincible tide of «progress» and «modernity» and give us «conjoined and disjunctive» genealogies of modernity, the better to resist the blithely superficial division of societies into the modern and the traditional<sup>14</sup>. It also proposes to challenge the still widespread notion whereby those arbitrarily declared «ancestral in time» are also considered «lower in scale»<sup>15</sup>? To this end, he puts forward a scheme whereby subaltern histories will have a split running through them: the split captured by his use of the terms *History 1* and *History 2*. *History 1* is what he calls «the history of the becoming of capital», the «past as posited by capital itself». Under this rubric, one might include «transition narratives» and modernization theory. However, there is something else, much more vital to Chakrabarty's scheme: that is, *History 2*, which he describes as history whose antecedents are not established by capital, not «forms of its life process», but the «still partially unconquered» remnants of «vanished social formations»<sup>16</sup>. This is the history that resists vast abstractions, and where the politics of human belonging posits limits to capital's triumphalism. This is life itself in its «biological/conscious capacity for willful activity [...] the *excess* that capital [...] always needs but can never quite control or domesticate»<sup>17</sup>. Capital takes over antecedent social forms but just as surely posits limits to its subsumption of those forms. Difference, then, is not external to capital, but lives in «intimate and plural relationships to [it], ranging from opposition to neutrality». *History 2* is charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of *History 1*<sup>18</sup>.

Subaltern histories will, thus, have a split running through them. On the one hand, they are histories written within the «master code of secular history» (modernization, progress, use of abstractions, and homogeneous, empty time) but they cannot give this master code the claim of being a

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14 Chakrabarty (2000, 255).

15 This is a phrase used by Raymond Schwab (1984, 403, 477). I think it captures, via graphic imagery, the idea that Chakrabarty wishes to convey.

16 Chakrabarty (2000, 63-64).

17 Ivi, 58-60.

18 Ivi, 66.

mode of thought that «comes naturally to all, or even treat it as something that exists in nature itself»<sup>19</sup>. Subaltern history remembers history as an imperious code, part of the *civilizing mission* of the Enlightenment and colonialism; the point is to deploy this code so as to allow a glimpse of its own finitude, to make its unworking visible. This is a past in which the time of gods and spirits is quite as real, and requiring no translation, as our more familiar notions of time. Subaltern pasts, in this context, act as a supplement to historian's pasts, reminding us of a modernity shared with those who might live with radically different notions of agency, time, and place; it is about the contemporaneousness of the non-contemporaneous, so to speak. Subaltern pasts are thus an intimation of a «shared, unhistoricizable and ontological now»<sup>20</sup>.

Chakrabarty is critical of nationalist narratives that are captive to capitalist-triumphalist and modernization imperatives in which peasants and workers need to be educated out of their ignorance, parochialism, or even their false consciousness. Even today, he notes, the Anglo-Indian word *communalism* refers to those who fail to measure up to «the secular ideals of citizenship». Historicism subsumes a variety of works not produced from a «modern subject position» into narratives that bear approximation to that of a [bourgeois] private citizen, erasing in the process the multiplicity and contradictory themes of, for example, Indian writing. The attempt to write Indian history as a «chapter in European history» has the effect of making it an inferior laggard and renders our understanding of the modern merely into the production of «a known history [...] with a local content»<sup>21</sup>. Quoting Meaghan Morris, he calls this «a project of positive unoriginality»<sup>22</sup>. Chakrabarty wants to rescue subaltern pasts from the stigma of *lack* and *inadequacy*, substituting other terms like *plenitude* and *creativity*, which will at least restore some sense of their originality and difference. Indian political culture was neither a replica of Europe's nor was it a carry-over of an archaic past, but a specificity of its own in which capitalist dominance existed without a hegemonic bourgeois culture<sup>23</sup>. Further, the understanding that we all *do* European history with our different and often non-European archive opens up the possibility of a politics and a project of alliances between dominant metropolitan histories and modern subaltern pasts. Let us call this, Chakrabarty says, the

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19 Ivi, 93.

20 Ivi, 93-94; 112-113.

21 Ivi, 33, 35.

22 Ivi, 38, 39.

23 This is the burden of Ranajit Guha's argument (Guha 1997).

«project of provincializing Europe», the Europe that modern imperialism and third-world nationalism have, by their «collaborative venture and violence» made universal<sup>24</sup>.

### **3. Can Provincializing Europe Deal with Projects of Social Justice?**

Can this framework deal with projects of social justice? To ask this question might seem a bit daft considering that Chakrabarty states quite clearly that he wishes neither to give up Marx nor difference, Marx predictably standing in for projects of social justice. However, the question must be asked and answered if the claims of *PE* are to be sustained. In the first place, Chakrabarty's tendency to associate Marx with a tradition that elevated the abstract Human or the equally abstract Reason as the fit subject for projects of social transformation is questionable. If anything, I have always believed that Marx ridiculed the notion of the abstract Human. He might have called upon workers to solidarize and fight together against capital's numerous mystifications that bound them to the latter's oppressive rule; he certainly saw through ruling-class blandishments whereby wage differences, racial arguments, phony advances were offered as sops against real hardships. As Marx argued in *Capital*, «labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded», a statement as relevant in today's globalized world as it was in the period of slavery<sup>25</sup>. In circumstances like this, hiding behind the figure of difference might be construed as a convenient piece of forgetfulness about exploitation. If you wish to contribute to «destabilizing» working-class solidarity, weak enough as it is, or work to prevent its emergence, then you must at least have the decency to declare your class allegiances.

Chakrabarty attacks the analytic tradition of which again he considers Marx a proponent for evacuating the local, by assimilating it to some abstract universal and for its desire to «demystify ideology in order to produce a critique that looks forward to a just social order». He expresses a clear preference for the hermeneutic tradition (associated with Heidegger) for its intimate connections to «places and particular forms of life» and for being «innately critical of that which is purely nihilistic»<sup>26</sup>. I confess to being a little mystified by the associations that Chakrabarty's argument conjures up. For instance, why should a program that looks forward to

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24 Chakrabarty (2000, 15; 42).

25 Marx (1996, 305).

26 Chakrabarty (2000, 18).

a just social order be considered innately nihilistic? Further, I would say in defense of Marx that ideologies associated with capitalism – even such soothing phrases as «a fair day's wage for a fair day's labor» – do stand in need of demystification. If, in the process, some abstractions have to be used, then that is a necessary analytic device for getting to some important, and probably subversive, results. I am also not entirely clear why thought tied to local places and particular forms of life should not be associated with injustices and tyrannies of all kinds from the point of view of workers, peasants, women, and other subaltern groups. A cynic might see this as cleverly disguised support for ruling-class positions that take advantage precisely of place-bound notions of superiority and inferiority that are absolute and categorical.

Chakrabarty is surely being extremely economical with the truth when he suggests that the Anglo-Indian word «communalism» is applied to workers and peasants as a sign of their failure to measure up to modern secular ideals. In fact, the Indian discourse on communalism has gone out of its way to indict the bourgeoisie and petite-bourgeoisie while absolving workers and peasants. Communalism, leading to violence inflicted on lower-ranked castes, Untouchables and Muslims in India, is *a failure* – there can be no question about it – but it is the failure of the upper classes of society. As for the replacement of words like *lack and inadequacy* with *plenitude and creativity*, this kind of rhetorical inversion might reveal something about middle-class Indian sensitivities or the self-deception of a Western multicultural academy. However, for someone who lives and dies on the streets of Calcutta, it must be surely one more cruel joke at their expense. Some of the latter might even wish to see development projects succeed occasionally, if that would lift them out of dire and life-degrading poverty. As for the time of the gods and spirits vis-à-vis abstract, homogeneous, empty time, are these the only alternatives? How about something more imaginative, perhaps even Utopian, a time beyond *socially necessary labor*, a time beyond that of the dull compulsion of value-positing, value-producing labor, a time that places capitalist exploitation at the heart of an exploration of an alternative temporality, a time for which we don't yet have a proper name?

Perhaps what we need is the vision that Jameson suggests is offered by Marx in which a politics of revolt is combined with the «poetry of the future», in which socialism will be «more modern than capitalism and more productive», and more properly global in its reach and appeal<sup>27</sup>. Overall,

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27 Jameson (2011, 90) continues: «To recover that futurism and that excitement is surely the fundamental task of any left 'discursive struggle' today».

the spurious organicism of local places in Chakrabarty's narrative has the effect of spiriting projects of social justice out of sight.

#### 4. Subversive History versus Good History

It is in chapters 5-8 of *PE* where Chakrabarty develops his claims about subversive history versus good history that this effect is most clearly visible. Broadly, these chapters deal with different aspects of the social and cultural history of colonial Bengal and are written *under the sign of Heidegger* and are thus essays purporting to engage the histories of difference, narratives of affective local belonging. But since, one would imagine, social justice issues do not simply disappear when these histories are being considered, one wonders how, if at all, Chakrabarty proposes to discuss those issues in the context of affective narratives of belonging.

Perhaps it is appropriate that Chakrabarty should call on J.L. Mehta, once again, to help him with this part of his enterprise. Mehta notes: «The appropriation of what is our very own occurs only as a homecoming, as a return from a journey into the alien and the other; this is the law of being at home, as a making oneself at home»<sup>28</sup>. Leaving aside for the moment what *our very own* might signify – the sort of appropriation involved and the dubious essentialism on offer – he quote signifies the way in which Chakrabarty proposes to go about dealing with the conjoined and disjunctive genealogies of Bengali modernity. The comparative-contrastive study of European and Bengali approaches to issues of domestic cruelty, familial fraternity, the larger fraternity of nation, or urban culture is meant to illustrate precisely this homecoming process. That is, we all *do* modern European history with our provincial archives; ironically, this is chosen as the method of provincializing Europe. It seems on the face of it more like the presentation of a petition to a European power rather than a particularly militant struggle against Eurocentric diffusionism.

Chapter 8 (*Family, Fraternity, and Salaried Labor*) is an example of what Chakrabarty has in mind when he writes about the inextricably conjoined but disjunctive nature of colonial modernity and calls into dispute historicist (evolutionist) notions of modernity. Among other things this chapter

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<sup>28</sup> Mehta (1976, 481, n.101), quoted in *PE*, 180.

deals with the idealization by the nineteenth-century Bengali middle-class of the *grihalakshmi* figure (the idealized housewife, member of a clan and indeed its savior, so to speak, against the ravages of modern life) and *griha-karma* (the disinterested work of maintaining the familial collective) versus the denigration of office work as routinized, soul-killing stuff and perhaps also as individualistic and utilitarian! Perhaps we are meant to conclude from this that Indian (or, more specifically, Bengali) patriarchy wasn't as oppressive as its European counterpart. Along the way, Chakrabarty also examines differences in the ways conceptions and practices of fraternity were developed in Europe versus Bengal. The history of Bengali nationalism, he informs us, gives us a glimpse into a colonial modernity intimately tied to European modernity but one that avoided reproducing the latter's autonomous individual as a figure of its own desire. This problematizes, for Chakrabarty, the place of liberalism in Bengali modernity while avoiding the temptation to think of the more collective (familial) fraternal bonds that accompanied it as somehow incomplete, compensatory or an ideological cover for the grosser forms of exploitation of women and younger siblings.

Citing an 1823 text (*Kalikata kamalalaya*, Calcutta the abode of Kamala) to make the point about difference, Chakrabarty argues that the author of that text displayed a steadfast desire to maintain a critical symbolic boundary between the realms of gods and ancestors on the one hand and that of the public secular domain on the other, and resisted disciplining the time of the household to that of *civil society*, which is conceived of as the site of compulsion and unfreedom, a forced interruption of higher duties to one's gods and ancestors. However, and this is the point Chakrabarty wishes to emphasize, the author himself was a member of a voluntary association that followed European rules and was dedicated to *improvement*<sup>29</sup>. If the story were to end there, perhaps it would neatly illustrate one of the points Chakrabarty wishes to make, though it is very doubtful that office work as such was ever the subject of sustained poetic rapture by a salariat anywhere. It is also certain that symbolic inversions of gender hierarchies do nothing to reduce the oppression of women.

Be that as it may, within a few pages, another story starts to emerge. For instance, he notes that by the late nineteenth century, in contrast to the world of *Kalikata kamalalaya*, «Victorian fetishes of discipline, routine, and order had become some of the most privileged and desired elements in Bengali imaginings of domestic and personal arrangements».

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29 Chakrabarty (2000, 220-222).

Time, it seems, had become the essence of this reconfigured Bengali bourgeois life<sup>30</sup>. There is certainly the making of transition narrative here but Chakrabarty neither follows this through, nor does he inquire into its materialist coordinates with the level of historical detail that he devotes to *difference*. Instead, we are offered a rather dubious conclusion. Quoting Sudipto Kaviraj to the effect that

The more modernity unfolds [the more] it seems to appear inescapably plural [...] [t]ransition narratives [creating] the untenable illusion that given all the right conditions [...] the Bengali rich and poor would 'understand' the principles of being private and public in the right ways<sup>31</sup>

– an extremely platitudinous statement, to put it mildly – Chakrabarty asks, can we make room for reason, even as we acknowledge the plural ways of being human that we ourselves posit? Of course, it goes without saying that modernity is inescapably plural but can it be subjected to good historical analysis or do we take refuge in vague generalizations, verging on essentialization, of an East-West dichotomy?

One certainly ought to be able to track the development of notions of time and space in colonial modernity without necessarily giving into hard notions of transition, whereby every society is bound to follow a rigid sequence of social and economic forms and arrive at more or less the same end point. This would be more the approach of a rigidly bureaucratized and Stalinist version of Marxism, captured or recuperated for neoclassical economics in the Cold War period by people like W.W. Rostow and latterly at least in claims about the end point by Francis Fukuyama – impeccably bourgeois thinkers – than of any critical school of Marxism<sup>32</sup>. It might be far more useful to ask how and in what forms older cultural themes survived and were modified as a new regime of time and space emerged in the urbanism of Calcutta during the colonial period under the sheer pressures of capital accumulation, class differentiation, economic marginalization, the prospects of unemployment, and so on.

In that context, I would posit three overlapping moments of modernity:

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30 Ivi, 224-225.

31 Kaviraj (1997).

32 See, for example, Rostow (1960) and Fukuyama (1992). Much recent Marxism has been critical of Stalinist theory and has thereby problematized the notion of transition altogether. See, for example, Mészáros (1995), Jameson (1988, 155) and Jameson (2002).

(I) a pre-colonial moment, in which ritual, religion and economy are inextricably imbricated;

(II) a moment when colonial rules of socio-economic reproduction are being institutionalized, a moment of genuine tension when ritual, religion and economy are being pulled apart, largely through the initiatives of a self-consciously *superior* and alien power; ritual and religion achieve significant autonomy and become associated with an agenda of purity and authenticity over against the foreign rulers;

(III) and finally, a moment in which the cleavage is far advanced and the economy begins to exert its gravitational power over the symbolic arenas of identity and culture.

The antinomies generated in the process and the contradictions they signal would tell us something significant about the ways Bengalis themselves mobilized old and new ideas for their projects, and take us beyond a substantialized aesthetic agency acting behind the backs, and seemingly above the control, of social agents. But, of course, this would take us well beyond the rather facile genealogies that Chakrabarty wants to develop.

This is not a trivial consideration, especially when examining the issue of patriarchy that recurs in several registers in chapters 5-8 in considering, for example, the idealized figure of the housewife (*grihalakshmi*), the Hindu widow, and even *Adda*, a supposedly non-end-oriented practice of orality that Bengalis came to prize as part of their adaptation to the exigencies of urban living. How does Chakrabarty's brand of subversive history cope with patriarchy?

Chakrabarty is uneasy about a purely historicized explanation of the emergence of the idealization/romance around the figure of *grihalakshmi* and *grihakarma*. He dismisses the tendency in Indian historiography to see this as the particular way in which a middle class constructed new patriarchal norms in the face of colonial exclusions and racism and the shock of being subjected to *foreign* norms in the public domain, not to mention the anxieties accompanying this situation. There are two major shortcomings to this approach, according to Chakrabarty: *one*, that it effectively reduces the aesthetic to its mere ideological functions; *two*, that it foreshortens historical inquiry. To reduce the categories of a nationalist aesthetic to its ideological function alone would be to miss out on the histories of contesting desires contained in them. Imagination and desire are «always more than rationalizations of interests and power»<sup>33</sup>. From Chakrabarty's point of view, it is crucial that we investigate the proposition that Bengali

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33 Chakrabarty (2000, 216-217; 218).

modernity may have imagined life-worlds in ways that never aimed to replicate the political or domestic ideals of modern European thought, that instead of the contractual individualism of European fraternity, a conception of fraternity based on *the solidarity of brothers* in an extended family developed in which *bhakti* was mobilized as a «modern political sentiment». And in keeping with the emphasis on difference, one ought to resist the temptation to see this as a lack, a deficiency among middle-class Bengalis<sup>34</sup>.

However, as we well know, there was a ferocious amount of litigation between family members, including brothers, over inheritance matters. Occasional instances of solidarity were massively undercut by a near-constant sense of grievance and mutual suspicion. This suggests, if nothing else, that individualistic tendencies existed in tension, perhaps contradiction, with the male familial solidarities that normative ideology emphasized. Chakrabarty might respond by saying that one must not confuse the actual situation on the ground for the idealizations involved in this aesthetic practice. If we were to follow this approach, we could do nothing much more than a side-by-side narration of how different civilizations moved by high-textual aesthetic/philosophical traditions gave voice to those *traditions*. Difference could be spun out to the *n*<sup>th</sup> degree and description would displace explanation altogether. This could easily lead to a variety of historicism that Chakrabarty would not wish to deal with.

Lest we see this patriarchal culture as singularly oppressive of women, Chakrabarty assures us that women did not necessarily view it as an «iron cage of unfreedom». He cites the example of a book entitled *Patibrata Dharma* (English subtitle: *A Treatise on Female Chastity*) by Dayamayi Das which goes on to celebrate the land blessed with women devoted to their husbands, and which celebrates women as goddesses. The book also gave its author an opportunity to celebrate her eroticism and individuality and express her exhilaration at becoming literate<sup>35</sup>. Depending on what the baseline is, this might indeed be construed as bringing out the «creative side» of this nonliberal patriarchy. But, should this be a surprise? After all, bourgeois women are given some space – as patriarchy becomes less private and more civic-national – to exercise a degree of power over the proletariat (male and female) and to develop a social role. As we know, this sense of power and the exhilaration that goes with it – confined to a very few women, even of the dominant classes – is something that women of the Hindu

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34 Ivi, 235; 217.

35 Ivi, 232-234.

Right now experience<sup>36</sup>. After all, they can participate, if only vicariously, in the blood-rites of Hindutva. Fascism offered *Aryan* women some sense of mission and accomplishment. This may be creative but hardly something to celebrate.

What is the idealization of housewife and housework, grihalakshmi and grihakarma, but a local statement of the widespread tendency to develop and institutionalize a cult of domesticity, to build in sanctions against those women who would stray from rather narrowly stated norms of behavior, and to accompany the idealization of the female figure of virtue with a denigration of the male world of work and sordid compromise? This kind of inversion of the symbolic and socio-economic hierarchies is common to patriarchal structures everywhere. Bengali patriarchy may have idealized the extended family as the unit of solidarity, but even so it did not violate rather wider norms of controlling female sexuality, branding and punishing those women whose personal desires may have driven them to violate those norms – the figure of Alakshmi, the malevolent counterpart of Lakshmi, has its likeness in other cultures.

What larger solidarities and anxieties were being expressed in this dialectical counterpositioning of Lakshmi/Alakshmi? On the one hand, the mobilization of an indigenous idiom is one way of limiting the assimilation of the Bengali bourgeois woman to alien, e.g. European, norms even if that alien figure was also bound by the limits of Victorian patriarchy. On the other, there is the anxiety of upper-caste, not necessarily upper class, men thrown into the maelstrom of capital and into an indifferent public sphere by a foreign power that professed contempt for them. Conceivably that could lead to a leveling down of their pretensions to those of people below them in the caste hierarchy, whose values in matters of sexuality might be more distinctly liberated. If the role of grihalakshmi was to maintain the «integrity of the kula»<sup>37</sup>, this may well have been because that integrity was always fragile, under threat from within and without.

In this context, one would have to reconsider Chakrabarty's contention that Bengali modernity rejected the agonistic individualism of modern Europe in favor of a «natural solidarity». In the first place, rejection implies active consideration before a decision is made. Arguably, colonial rule itself – for reasons of economical governance, among others – may not have encouraged and may actually have actively restrained the emergence of agonistic individualism, not that it could contain all countervailing tendencies in that regard. Overall, colonial rule, and not only in India, was

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36 Mazumdar (1995).

37 Chakrabarty (2000, 227-228).

decidedly conservative. The historic conditions may have played a significant – if undiscussed in *PE* – part in the ways in which an older aesthetic/philosophical tradition gained the effectivity it did, if only in a limited historical conjuncture. Aesthetics and high-textual traditions cannot be made into a self-moving force in history. This is precisely how a civilization-narrative model short-circuits historical investigation.

But it is the larger – in this case, nationalist – significance of solidarities based on kinship or pseudo-kinship that we must sift through. Whatever the actualities of family solidarities on the ground, it is clear that ethno-nationalism in India mobilized religious solidarities even as they were being crafted<sup>38</sup>. Nationalism operates simultaneously in the civic-universal and ethnic-particularist registers and membership of the imagined community of a nation modifies and qualifies unmarked universal individualism. Individuality is historically conditional on membership of the group<sup>39</sup>. Chakrabarty deals with this rather complex development of nationalism using his by-now formulaic invocation of the idioms of family solidarity that mark a crucial difference with Europe. He informs us that an assumed fraternal compact underlay the tendency – pervasive in *Bengali* and *Indian* nationalism – to think of the country as Mother. *Hindu nationalists* portrayed themselves as children of the mother. Popular nationalist songs capture the affective side of the brotherly unity on which this «patriarchal nationalism» is based and the myth of fraternity is «one crucial difference between the patriarchal assumptions of nationalist politics in Bengal and the classical themes of European political thought»<sup>40</sup>.

A similar notion of difference underlies the argument in Chapter 6 (*Nation and Imagination*). Chakrabarty argues that India was not imagined according to some European conception alone, but owed a lot to the mobilization of an «ancient» Indian tradition (*darshan*), a «subjectless practice» which implies the cessation of the world – the ordinary historical world, *samsara* – and its sudden replacement by a new dimension of reality. To enjoy the essence [*rasa*] of Indian nationalism requires going beyond an Enlightenment notion of the imagination and entering into the world of Sanskrit aesthetics. Chakrabarty is further interested in linking the peasant mode of imagining and seeing with the ancient (and undoubtedly elite) tradition of Sanskrit aesthetics. Thus, he asserts, the «Bharat Mata» of the peasants – as opposed to the «India» of the deracinated in-

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38 For a critical study of this topic, see Kaiwar (2003) and also Kaiwar and Mazumdar (2003).

39 Kaiwar and Mazumdar (2003, 278-285).

40 Chakrabarty (2000, 229).

telligentsia – is imbued with this age-old practice of darshan, and refers to «practices, aesthetic and spiritual, sedimented into language itself and not referring to concepts that the mind elaborates or that contain experiential truths», and that such practices were the «legitimate ground of peasant nationalism»<sup>41</sup>. Chakrabarty insists that «plural and heterogeneous ways of seeing [...] raise questions about the analytical reach of the European category ‘imagination’»<sup>42</sup>.

The suggestion of an ancient Indian tradition shared by the subcontinent’s elite and plebeians alike and forming the basis of a perduring distinction between *India* and *Europe* might rightly evoke some skepticism. Where do the subcontinent’s Muslims, for example, fit in this xenology? According to Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, one of Chakrabarty’s oft-quoted sources, a Maratha leader is made to say:

Even though India is truly the motherland of the Hindus alone [...] still the Muslims are no longer alien to her for long has she held them to her heart and nourished them. Therefore the Muslims are his [sic] foster children. If a child is born to his mother’s womb and another child is breastfed [...] by her, are not the two siblings? <sup>43</sup>

And so on, in this somewhat inane vein. Who can doubt that this is an anticipation of the sentimental streak in present-day Hindutva, a racist, xenophobic and patronizing communal discourse surely as damaging as its violent, exterminationist side. This kind of kinship-based ethno-nationalist discourse was, and is, not the essence of Indian nationalism. It was as contested by a civic-universal nationalism (no less Indian than the communalism that Chakrabarty gives so much play to) as ethno-nationalism in modern Europe challenged the Lockean vision of agonistic individualism<sup>44</sup>.

It is worth noting the implication of the slide that Chakrabarty executes – from Sanskrit aesthetics to Bengali and Indian nationalism and on to Hindu nationalism – suggesting quite clearly that such aesthetics constituted an important component of right-wing Indian political discourse, as end-oriented and instrumental as any other modern-day political theory. Sanskrit aesthetics, valorized by colonial rulers and Hindu elites alike, each for their own ends, was thus fully implicated in the construction of patriarchy, the surveillance of female sexuality, and boundary marking between

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41 Ivi, 176-177.

42 Ivi, 174, citing Raniero Gnoli; Chari (1990, 59-63); Mishra (1964, 412-415).

43 Chakrabarty (2000, 232).

44 The ethno-nationalism of Edmund Burke and more generally the kind of organicist conservatism that he and others like Carlyle represented come to mind.

Hindus and Muslims. It was an instrument for the construction of patriarchy and communalism, a world of *insiders* (e.g., the *kulastree* married into a kula and protected by it; and the upper-caste Hindu householder) and *outsiders* (e.g., the *kulata* unprotected by the kula, a prostitute, in effect, who could be subjected to unspeakable cruelties rather like the Hindu widow, the subject of another of Chakrabarty's unfortunate excursions into difference<sup>45</sup>; and India's Muslims *en masse* declared outsiders, therefore without rights and protections).

## **5. Anti-Colonial Spirit of Gratitude or Post-Colonial Spirit of Surrender?**

I find Chakrabarty's discussion of what he calls colonial modernity curiously incomplete and ahistorical. We must remind ourselves that modernity emerges at, and draws its energies from, the conjunction of two sets of circumstances: the legacy of a still-living pre-industrial past and a situation in which a global (capitalist/colonial) system inscribes its imperatives at the very heart of human experience, those two circumstances, in turn, affecting artistic and political endeavors<sup>46</sup>. This context in which both European and Indian modernity emerged enabled the creation of «remarkable new languages and forms», «haunted by the exotic» and «tattooed with foreign place names»<sup>47</sup>. The historian of colonial modernity might wish to consider that the foreign and the exotic lie not on the other side of the globe, but in the intimate proximity of the colony itself. Chakrabarty betrays a misunderstanding of colonial – in his case, Bengali – modernity when he suggests that subaltern pasts act as a supplement to the historian's pasts, ironically ending up with the kinds of self-exoticizing and self-Orientalizing moves that a *good* history might have enabled him to resist.

Indeed, by the end I was left wondering exactly who the oft-invoked subaltern might be. In Chapter 3 of *PE* Chakrabarty more or less tears up any lingering sentimental illusion that the subalterns in Subaltern Studies refer to members of a particular, and oppressed, social group. Presumably anyone, including a professor of history at Chicago who worlds the earth in ways that challenge the universalizing tyranny of Enlightenment-derived abstractions could be considered a subaltern. On the other hand, a worker or peasant who wholeheartedly embraced Marxism might cease to

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45 See Kaiwar (2004: 527-528).

46 Anderson (1998, 55-56).

47 Jameson (1991, 411).

be a subaltern and become part of the universalizing tyranny of the Enlightenment. *PE* has accomplished the not-inconsiderable feat of replacing a socio-political understanding of the subaltern with an aesthetico-ideological one. The politics of this maneuver invite careful scrutiny<sup>48</sup>.

A book that supposedly leans on both Marx and Heidegger, but in which the former is progressively hobbled with the help of the latter, cannot contribute to provincializing Europe. It only succeeds in obliterating the former's radical critique of capitalism, rendering one's understanding of economics, culture and politics vague, if not downright vapid and reactionary. So does a method in which an idealized European modernity serves as the fixed point for variable others, whose variance from this idealized norm is precisely the measure of their subalternity. Overall, the result is a more complete universalization of Europe than any variant of modernization theory has managed to achieve. The more complete the political paralysis into which *PE* sinks the more comprehensive is the triumph of bourgeois capitalist Europe. The modernity that Chakrabarty speaks of so blithely is an example of that triumph. The Bengali stories merely add a dash of exoticism to European proceedings, just as the world's fairs of an earlier time used to bring in artifacts and people from the colonies to illustrate Europe's pre-eminent stature. The anti-colonial spirit of gratitude to Europe with which Chakrabarty concludes his book might be more accurately seen as a postcolonial spirit of surrender. Perhaps, this is an example of what Jameson has in mind when he writes of history's «grisly and ironic reversals».

There is a more imaginative approach to provincializing Europe that does not require the dubious recourse to *History 1* and *History 2*, or subaltern pasts that live on in the present, or rambling discussions of Sanskrit aesthetics. This alternative approach might take as its point of departure what Jameson calls the «growing contradiction between lived experience and structure», or between «a phenomenological description of the life of an individual», as in the chapters from *PE* discussed above, and «a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of that experience». While in older societies or earlier moments in the development of capital, the immediate and limited experience of individuals was still able to encompass and coincide with the economic and social form that governed that experience, at a later moment these two levels drift ever further apart and «really begin to constitute themselves into an opposi-

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48 Brennan (2006, 260) points out that the subaltern has become a personification of the «essential resistance of the voiceless», an example of «jumbled, useless, noble suffering, revelatory excess».

tion», «essence and appearance, structure and lived experience»<sup>49</sup>. During the nineteenth century and thereafter, the phenomenological experience of an individual becomes limited to a tiny corner of the socio-economic world, while the «truth of that experience» no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of the «limited, daily experience» of someone in London may lie, Jameson points out, in India, Jamaica or Hong Kong, bound up with the whole colonial system of the British empire. The latter determines the very quality of the individual's «subjective life» and yet the «structural coordinates are no longer accessible to the individual's lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people»<sup>50</sup>. The experience of the metropolis is no longer a universal referent. Global capitalism scrambles the relatively stable geographies of «core» and «periphery». A stage theory of politics loses all meaning. It is this materiality of advanced capitalism that affords the objective basis of provincializing Europe, while keeping in full view the need for a universal discourse of rights and justice. It may, of course, be historicist in one of the ways in which Chakrabarty defines historicism, but it is a much more promising line of inquiry, not only to explain the contours of modernity but also to create a politics adequate to countering capital's relentless drive to planetary dominance.

## **6. Social Justice and the Limits of Difference**

One can grasp the nettle by outlining the ways in which a radical critique of political economy has sometimes been used to launch a devastating attack on European dominance and finding ways to deploy it at the margins of world capitalism. This was integral to the political projects of decolonization, national liberation, and communist revolutions in the world that Europe had colonized. Their objective was – in addition to political emancipation from formal colonialism – a resolute resistance to the «seemingly blind and natural laws of socio-economic fatality»<sup>51</sup>, the infamous TINA doctrine of Margaret Thatcher anticipated by generations of her predecessors. From the late-1970s the tide of Marxism-inspired resistance and combat began to ebb. Almost certainly from 1989 onwards it has more or less completely gone out, taking with it those who call themselves postcolonial critics. The spirit of the postcolonial history that

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49 Jameson (1991, 410-411).

50 Ivi, 411.

51 Jameson (1998, 35).

Chakrabarty aims to tell us is a sign of this post-1989 moment of world history. His vignettes of Bengali life come across as a polite cover for the exploitation, cruelty, indifference, if not downright resistance to projects of social and economic justice in the various ranks of Bengali society.

I couldn't resist the feeling that the author of *PE* is as charmed by Hindu nationalism as he is by the version of Sanskrit aesthetics that Bengali intellectuals mobilized in the course of constructing their modern identities and agenda. Both, after all, have in common a patriarchal, if not a communalist, outlook. For the postcolonial critic to forgo the opportunity to subject the cultural politics of middle-class Bengal to a good historical analysis *en route* to a serious political critique is egregious in its implicit silence about the violence of communalism and patriarchy. An emphasis on difference, it seems, leads inevitably in the direction of complicity<sup>52</sup>. If this is *History 2*, then perhaps it is a sign of some deeper impasse in the world of postcolonial thought.

The irony of this situation is that there were plenty of Utopian, indeed transformative, impulses in the culture of colonial Calcutta that could have been the focus of Chakrabarty's study of urbanism. He himself cites in Chapter 7 (*Adda: A History of Sociality*) the case of the Four Arts Club, founded by two men of modest background: one, Dineshranjan Das who worked at a pharmacy and the other Gokulchandra Nag who worked at a florist's. A transformative vision informed their outlook on the «redemptive role of art»:

I imagine a resting-house where people tired by the burden of their lives can come and rest, where *nationality, sex and position* will not be barriers, [where] men will make their own work joyful and by freely mixing with others will find themselves fulfilled in the easy working out of their own desires.<sup>53</sup>

Further, the same chapter quotes Nripendrkrishna Chattopadhyay who points out that the import of books to Calcutta's burgeoning reading culture had acquainted young Bengalis with «trends in world literature and thinking». He also quotes an anonymous source to the effect that behind all the seeming disorder of meter and rhyme in the poetry being published in Europe of the late 1910s and 1920s there is «a very big tragedy.

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52 It has been over eighteen years since David Hardiman (1986) declared Subaltern Studies to be at a crossroads. In the meantime, the variety that has found its home in the postcolonial-studies niche in the US academy – with *PE* at its masthead – seems to have taken a decisively wrong turn.

53 Chakrabarty (2000, 198-199), emphasis added.

The Great War came and destroyed all the old-world beliefs in the minds of their young; their restless minds are seeking a new refuge [...]»<sup>54</sup>.

What does Chakrabarty make of this? That the *market* and the *taste* in the consumption of literature are all mediated by the conversation of the *adda*, whose non-end-orientation we have already been told was a distinctive feature of Bengali modernity! The irony of coupling the market to a supposedly non-transactional activity seems to have escaped Chakrabarty altogether. His *subversive* move here is unfortunately quite banal, not to mention conservative. He does nothing to explore what might have given impetus to the kind of Utopian impulses behind the founding of the Four Arts Club and the interest in world literature. So much of it at this period seems to reflect Marshall Berman's understanding of modernity as a «flaring up of the most radical hopes in the midst of their radical negations» and people's desire to «explode [their world] from within» even if at another level they were at home, or tried to make themselves at home, in it<sup>55</sup>. How did the churning of the world by war, revolution and emergent fascism generate at the same time a deep desire to transform it?

In this context of revolution and counter-revolution, it is imperative to question the project of provincializing Europe. Which Europe is being provincialized and to what ends? What does it mean when a global circulation of books and news media (not as totally contained and asphyxiated by corporate control then as now) helped to carry radical impulses across different domains? What relationships developed between print media and orality in the construction of movements against fascism and colonial rule? The mediations are, one would imagine, too complex to be contained in Chakrabarty's superficial formula.

Is it a sign of some profound difference that people adapted world events to their local place-bound lives? In the modern period, the universal not only arises out of the most particular but the universal also creates, in turn, new senses of locality. How did the responses to war, colonialism and imperialism differ among the radical reading public of London and Calcutta, and is this sufficient to qualify as *Difference*? I can only say that the term *Adda* itself – used variously to refer to conversations about tigers in zoos and to more momentous concerns – is too indiscriminate at one level and too homogenizing at another to be useful. In Chakrabarty's usage it is also much too self-exoticizing to yield insights about the contours of the urban culture of colonial Calcutta.

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54 Ivi, 200.

55 Berman (1982, 19; 121).

The challenge now is to think about difference without falling over into exoticism and about identity without concluding that it refers to sameness. After all, the history of capital in its planetary extension gives us the opportunity to do so, to see beneath all the most «astonishing mutations and expansions» the operation of some basic, persistent structure<sup>56</sup>. Perhaps, too, some hypertrophied concern with historicism – as implying an evolutionary scale of cultures – ought not to prod us into a historicism-in-reverse whereby cultures are but extrusions of some putatively indigenous theology or aesthetics, ultimately linked to some deeper ecological exchange between socialized humans and the life of the land, a kind of *ecological racism* in fact. The end result will be nothing more than the reinvention of Orientalism, albeit in a romantic-reactionary register rather than a Utilitarian-administrative one.

To go beyond the antinomies of East and West, Europe and India (or whatever the poles of the antinomy, always Europe or the West at one end, however), we might begin to work at a different level, whereby we recognize that Difference becomes the keyword of a period in which the easy promises of development and social justice through economic growth no longer obtain. Distancing oneself from thinking about a transition to a better world order, and the hopes that go with it, is a sign of something else: the exhaustion of the hope and the promise of social justice for all. Postcolonial thought becomes an intervention from a postmodern position that both registers this pessimistic moment and a turning away from the very possibility of some larger concept of justice<sup>57</sup>. It is, for all practical purposes, an intervention from the Right. The strategy of containment represented by these developments, and the likely audience for it, cannot be separated from the corporatization of the academy and the commodification of knowledge. As it is, I imagine if corporate capitalists had the time to read texts like *PE*, they would be very happy to support its underlying desire to promote the ‘many ways of being-in-the-world’ while limiting the focus to the ways in which people try to make themselves at home amidst the detritus left in the wake of precisely the operations of capital. A program that steadfastly refuses to ask what that making-oneself-at-home signifies in a world of profound socio-economic and regional inequalities is hardly subversive of capitalist interests.

We could, I expect, read texts for the buried and repressed histories of class struggles, to look beyond the ideological antinomies for systemic social and historical contradictions. We could also, as Jameson suggests,

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<sup>56</sup> Jameson (1998, 171).

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Dirlik (1994, 342-347).

recognize the simultaneously ideological and Utopian functions of literary texts and evaluate their potentialities for a radical political praxis<sup>58</sup>. But this would take us too far into the territory of Marxism for the comfort of postcolonial thought.

## 7. History, Historicism and Questions of Social Justice

Postcolonial theory in its late subaltern-studies version seems to be a settling of accounts with Marxism, leaving it behind as if it were no more than a youthful enthusiasm. What we now have is Difference axialized along the old Orientalist divide. East is East and West is West.... I have tried to put some of the rationalizations provided for this reversion to Orientalism, and settling comfortably into a neoconservative, post-McCarthyite metropolitan academy into some critical perspective. It remains briefly to deal with the issues of historicism and abstraction – one accused of being evolutionist and the other of doing violence to the many ways of being-in-the-world, both of which we are told post-Enlightenment thought is guilty of and both allegedly brought to a fine point in Marx and post-Marx Marxism<sup>59</sup>.

It should be noted that what might be called *genetic historicism*, a kind of evolutionary pathway for human social life with identifiable beginnings and an unfolding process was, as Jameson points out, characteristic of but a brief moment when a single lifespan could see a shift from small-scale, face-to-face agrarian communities to urban/imagined industrial communities. Or, at any rate, it signifies a moment when one was confronted by their simultaneity, the former appearing to disintegrate in the face of the onslaught of the latter<sup>60</sup>. Certainly this cannot be said to have affected Marx's writings, particularly in *Capital*, which do not trace elements of the precapitalist system – commerce or merchant capital, for example – as evolutionary forerunners of the modern-day capital system. Arguably, Marx's method is synchronic; it *artificially* isolates, from the vantage point of a fully established capital system, those entirely autonomous phenomena as the

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58 Jameson (1981, 20; 229).

59 There is a grain of truth in thinking of some post-Marx Marxist writings as being guilty of both tendencies in their more ethnocentric and discriminatory forms but it is possible, and necessary, to use the tools of Marxism for a globally emancipatory project. Marx's writings, as also that of many Marxists still constitute the best means of challenging the rule of capital, itself the single greatest obstacle to the realization of a world of plenitude and justice.

60 Jameson (1988, 156).

latter's objective preconditions<sup>61</sup>. In and of themselves, neither merchant's capital nor commerce have any tendency to debouch into modern-day capitalism, that is, they were not in a feudal system anticipatory of anything<sup>62</sup>. By the same token, this anti-genetic method does not predict an evolutionary pathway to the future, however one wishes to name it. Transition debates are not necessarily metanarratives with progress as the key motif nor for that matter are they evolutionary in some simplistic sense. They enable us at best to historicize, rather than naturalize, the workings of the capital system. The transformative potentials of that approach ought to be reasonably apparent<sup>63</sup>.

Abstraction, Chakrabarty argues, essentially creates a global history out of European experience and often finds non-European societies inadequate in comparison. In other words, comparison is implicit in abstraction but its terms are often hierarchical. There is some truth to this argument, but again it can become rather simplistic. For a start, to refuse abstraction is to invite a multiplication of exotic details, a meaningless empiricism. Marx's development of a «value theory of labor»<sup>64</sup>, for example, involved the use of historically determinate abstractions, but it is an invaluable contribution to understanding the exploitation of labor under capitalism, rescuing it from ahistorical, sentimental, and disempowering notions of a fair remuneration for labor, while also serving as the lynchpin for an elaboration of crises of overproduction and the massively counterproductive dynamic of a system that requires a disproportionately vast consumption of natural resources and human labor for dubious returns in terms of human welfare<sup>65</sup>.

The moment of colonial modernity was, in some ways, also the moment of comparative social sciences, and a study of colonial and postcolonial society still seems inevitably to lead in that direction: difference is profoundly implicated in that method. Difference from what, or whom? Bringing in comparison without proper theorizing is to compare anything and everything, not as in *transition* narratives but as in casual gossip (*Adda*). Comparison can become, as does in modernization theory, merely a numerical exercise: literacy rates, GDP figures, and so on, quantitative exercises from which all notions of a systematically and systemically unequal world system

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61 Jameson (1981, 139).

62 Robert Brenner's work may be seen as perhaps the most extensive demonstration of this anti-genetic tendency in the *transition* debates. See, for example, Ashton and Philip, eds. (1985) and Brenner (1986).

63 See, for example, Daniel Bensaid's (2002) exposition, 3 ff., 28-29, 323.

64 The title of an important essay by Diane Elson (1979). See also, Rubin (1973).

65 Marx (1975); Burkett (1999, 192); Postone (1996, 352); Kaiwar (2004, 537-543).

are removed, but one which provides a seemingly scientific rank-ordering of nations and regions. Chakrabarty implicitly conflates the method of comparative history – which progressive thinkers have used and continue to use – and that of modernization theory. As such, Chakrabarty's approach makes it difficult to understand why so many Indian and, it should be added, British critics of British colonialism found it so productive to develop a comparative approach based on a critique of political economy to enlarge on the vastly different economic trajectories of Britain/Europe on the one hand and India on the other: for example, Romesh Chunder Dutt's devastating analysis of colonial economic policies, or even the latter-day modes-of-production debates in India<sup>66</sup>. To think of these latter as somehow examples of evolutionist or modernization discourses rather than progressive, even radical, interventions in politics is to miss a rather key point about the politics of knowledge.

What then are the uses of history, even if we disagree on the abuses of historicism? The «irreplaceable will of the Marxist heritage», Jameson argues, is to «master» history in whatever ways that turns out to be possible, to escape the nightmare of the seemingly blind and natural *laws* of socioeconomic fatality – a prospect that can hold no attraction for those uninterested in seizing control of their own destinies<sup>67</sup>. Could it be that to *master* history is to let history speak critically to us of our alienated, monadic life and thus to open a way to the «Utopian impulse» that can suggest alternatives to a dehistoricized and decontextualized existence in an eternal ethnographic present? This cannot take the form of a spatialized antinomy but must make room for the past to speak to us of «our own virtual and unrealized human potentialities' calling into question our commodified daily life, the reified spectacles» and so on, a perspective in which we also hold open the possibility of being able to hear the faint glimmers of «anticipatory expression(s) of a future society»<sup>68</sup>.

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All *PE*'s stock critiques of historicism and metanarratives, of Marx's myopia about difference, the advocacy of fragments, different ways of being-in-the-world, and so on, strike one as a celebration of diversity as *a secret*

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<sup>66</sup> Dutt (1897); on the mode-of-production debates in India, there are too many entries to list here but two useful collections are: Ashok *et al.* (1978) and Patnaik (1990).

<sup>67</sup> Jameson (1998, 37).

<sup>68</sup> Ivi, 175-176. If this is a Marxian historicism, as Jameson suggests, then it is far from being evolutionary and homogenizing.

*analogue of the marketplace*. It is about making oneself at home in the market economy, now implicitly naturalized as the human condition. What is ruled out – a systematic study of systemic oppression that equalizes as it were the Bolivian miner with the Filipino fishworker and the Indian peasant and many, many others – is indicative of what *PE* seeks to avoid bringing to the level of theoretical scrutiny and transformative action.

Let me end with an observation or two: first to the reinvention of Orientalism by postcolonial thought. It is certainly not the Utilitarian Orientalism of colonial rule or post-war modernization theory, though it does draw abundantly on Romantic Orientalism, and sometimes on a kind of Narodnik Romanticism. I would call it neo-Orientalism partly because it has been developed within a multiculturalist academic environment. Within this environment, it is acceptable to engage in a sentimental essentialization of your favorite slice of the *Orient* – especially if you happen to have some direct or ancestral connection to that society or if you have been credentialized by someone from that society – while deflecting charges of Ontological-Orientalism-in-reverse by calling it «strategic essentialism», or some rough-and-ready equivalent<sup>69</sup>. I find «strategic essentialism» a rather clumsy self-concocted vaccine to immunize oneself from criticism. I'm also left wondering what strategy this kind of essentialism might serve. A reading of *PE* suggests that the strategy is conservative if not downright reactionary. Reinforcing this point is the seamless fit in the substance and texture of *PE* with the conventional anti-Marxism of what I alluded to earlier as the conventions of a post-McCarthyite US academia.

The very onward march of global capital may have succeeded in provincializing Europe in some respects but this very process has seen the rise of the United States as the apotheosis and safeguard of *Western Civilization*. This second coming of the West is a phenomenon of a different order to Eurocentrism in that it has allowed for a regrouping of global power relations in ways that make those relations quite impervious to what we used to think of as the emancipatory potentialities of anti-colonial nationalism and/or piecemeal detachments from the status quo. This has created challenges of a very different order to which theory must respond, so as to play

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69 As Sadik Al-Azm (1981, 18-19) explains the vast and readily discernible differences between Islamic societies and cultures on the one hand and European ones on the other are portrayed not a matter of complex historical processes, empirical facts to be acknowledged and dealt with accordingly, but, above all, «a matter of emanations from a certain enduring Oriental (or Islamic) cultural, psychic, or racial essence, as the case may be, bearing identifiable fundamental unchanging attributes. This ahistorical [...] and even anti-historical Orientalist doctrine, I shall call Ontological Orientalism». Applying these methods to one's own society, Al-Azm calls «Ontological Orientalism-in-reverse» .

a vital part – in conjunction with the many forms of resistance to global capital now in evidence – in the transformation of the unjust world that capital has generated and perpetuates. Arguably, it is only when the world order that gave birth to the gestures of pretension and domination of Eurocentric universalism is transformed that the invidious gestures that accompanied it will become largely a matter of historical interest. If *Provincializing Europe* is an example of the ways in which postcolonial thought proposes to address those challenges it is, at best, simply inadequate and, at worst, complicit in the very order it purports to criticize.

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