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# The “Universal” After Subaltern Studies: Vivek Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*

A revival of the old Enlightenment category of the Universal as a positive project has raised some hackles in academia of late. It is the Universal (in particular) that is the object of a recuperation effort, as opposed to the proliferation of slightly more qualified terms from an already bloated lexicon—terms like *globalization* (a ubiquitous and by now pejorative term), *empire* (a critical term for the same), [1] *commonwealth* (its positive alternative), [2] and Sloterdijk’s still novel *planetaries*, *interiors*, *bubbles*, and *foams* [3]—all of which have been topped off by the “new” diachronic dimension of the *anthropocene*. [4] Each carries with it slightly different baggage, but none as heavy as the Universal and its supposedly Western provenance.

One attempt to revive the category comes from Vivek Chibber, in the form of a critique of postcolonial theory. Chibber’s objection is simple: Postcolonial theory, especially as manifest in the work of the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG), has overstepped its boundaries and remains most relevant as a practice limited to literary and cultural criticism. Throwing postcolonial theory a proverbial bone, Chibber, a professor of sociology at New York University, applauds what he feels to be postcolonial theory’s greatest accomplishment—the expansion of the literary canon. In the context of his larger argument, however, this seems nothing more than a nod to a token inclusivity.

As a loosely affiliated group, the SSG (just one branch of the

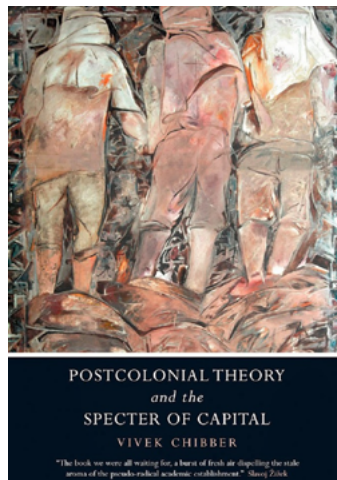
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[1] See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[2] See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2009).

[3] See Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2013) and the three volumes of *Spheres: Vol 1: Bubbles* (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2011), *Vol 2: Globes* (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2014), and *Vol 3: Foams* (Cambridge: Semiotext(e), forthcoming).

[4] This term was first introduced by the ecologist Eugene F. Stoermer and was taken up by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, who regards the influence of human behavior on the Earth’s atmosphere in recent centuries as so significant as to constitute a new geological epoch for its lithosphere. It has since been written about by several scholars in the humanities including Dipesh Chakrabarty in “The Climate of History: Four Theses” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2009), 197-222. The term was widely popularized in a *New York Times* article by op-ed ecologist Roger Bradbury “A World Without Coral Reefs” in July of 2013.



Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 2013.

rather nebulous category of postcolonial theory) has, according to Chibber, committed the crime of abetting the fragmentation of the radical left into isolated cabals of pet political projects by aiming to supplant the Marxist tradition with a new, subaltern, and particularist ideology. It thereby leaves its followers (both academic and political) without recourse to what he believes have historically been more effective political tools—namely, working-class organizations and political parties.

Many of Chibber’s finer points have merit, and there are certainly some insightful moments that have already pushed members of the SSG to clarify their intentions. More problematic is the call for what he terms a “positive account of how capital, power, and agency *actually* work.” [5] This account is undergirded by what Chibber calls the “two universalisms”—the first being the universal logic of capital (though he reiterates time and again that this universalism does account for and, in fact, creates heterogeneity), the second universalism being some basic facts of human psychology, specifically social agents’ universal interest in their well-being—a fact that impels them to resist capital’s expansionary drive. Chibber claims that most of the efforts of the SSG have failed because they refuse to accept these two universalisms. Putting aside his claims regarding the first universalism, I would like to more deeply consider the second, as it seems this is where Chibber makes his most egregious generalizations, and where he refuses to come to terms with some of the foundational and unifying principles of the SSG.

Chibber’s conflation of political consciousness with “some universal facts of human psychology” is one place to start. Here, political consciousness is treated as a *de facto* condition—as something already realized and, in fact, inherent to the human psyche (a point that he defends elsewhere by citing anthropological studies that prove a desire for certain minimum conditions of living). [6] Humans do indeed share certain basic psychological traits, but that has never been the only prerequisite to the organization of the working classes toward political action, nor has it ever been its sole basis. It would be difficult for Chibber to deny the historical persistence of other and perhaps not so basic psychological forces like group loyalty, but these are precisely the forces that present themselves as *conflicts* within the human psyche. He might agree that certain cultural practices do not or did not preclude economic liberation or a desire for it, but the persistence of religious or communal ties is not extinguished by a higher call to “rationality.” For Chibber, the SSG’s supposed denial of peasant rationality is only the first infraction. An even worse offense is the idea that cultural practices may actually be a source of tactical resistance—this, he writes, is the point at which the SSG begins to devolve into particularism and even slips into a habit of Orientalism. [7] If one were to ignore the power dynamics of the gaze, the SSG is sometimes “guilty” of something like Orientalism in that difference is sometimes mobilized as a political tool—which is admittedly problematic, and sometimes abused—as was the case when Gayatri Spivak introduced the idea of strategic essentialism, a position that she disavows because it has too often been used to justify actual essentialist practices. This is all to say that this particular discourse is one that must acknowledge complexity, and that those who contribute to it must be vigilant

[5] Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2013), 285 (emphasis is mine).

[6] In what can only be described as an academic showdown, Chibber and Partha Chatterjee faced off at the Historical Materialism conference in May 2013. Chibber defends “basic human psychology” by casually citing an anthropological study. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbM8HJrxSj4>.

[7] Chibber levies this accusation numerous times throughout the book, though it seems that Dipesh Chakrabarty is the most guilty of this offense. “Chakrabarty et al.... (n)ot only end up with conclusions that their own evidence undermines, but they promote some of the most objectionable canards that Orientalism ever produced—all in the guise of “High Theory” (Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 206).

in their self-critique.

The limits of Chibber's argument do not rule out the Universal as a productive concept. In *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History*—another frequently maligned volume—Susan Buck-Morss offers what I believe to be a more complex account of both subaltern consciousness and Universalism. [8] To reduce her argument to a sentence is to oversimplify it, but in broad terms she does this by first exposing epistemic violence (the exclusion of specific mention of the Haitian revolution in Hegel's oeuvre despite its prominent coverage in Hegel's newspaper of choice, *Minerva*), and then by looking carefully at certain voodoo practices (which she argues borrow from the ritualistic and quasi-mystical practices of the liberty-loving freemasonry). What at first seems highly idiosyncratic is reframed as a praxis of universal solidarity. Voodoo becomes a channel of communication—an extra-linguistic means of building solidarity between slaves belonging to different and sometimes historically antagonistic tribal and linguistic groups.

What Buck-Morss has done is address some channels through which the Universal is communicated. In other words, a *general will* (psychic or otherwise) does not simply exist. This is one of the problems (i.e., reification) to which the rich tradition of Western Marxism is dedicated. To accept political consciousness as a fact would be to ignore the complex psychology of all human subjects, not only of the subaltern.

It is the endurance of these complexities that grounds Gramsci's most important theoretical contributions. [9] That human subjects act seemingly in conflict with their own economic self-interest is a central problem of Gramsci's notes regarding the subaltern classes, and it is this observation that is the basis of his (and the SSG's) interest in culture, epistemology, and education. These issues, according to Gramsci, center around organization as a practical problem, a problem to be taken up by both "organic intellectuals" and traditional intellectuals (those hailing from an intellectual elite) recruited to the cause of developing a counter-hegemony representative of the working classes. For Gramsci, culture, synonymous with hegemonic power, is a central object of theorization because it is the ideological vehicle through which social reality is produced and reproduced through everyday experience. It is this simple observation and its complex outcomes that impel the SSG to step out of postcolonial studies' disciplinary ghetto.

To be fair, Chibber is explicit about why he avoids "the task of tracing the theoretical lineage of the Subalternists' arguments" (i.e., Gramsci). His claim is that he simply does not have the time or space in this book to complete the task. [10] Furthermore, Chibber claims that "what matters most is not whether they are true to this or that theoretical tradition but whether they have produced sound arguments." [11] That is to say, their argument must be "rational" and internally consistent. The category of the subaltern, however is a strange thing to avoid considering Chibber is determined to demonstrate the SSG's "ideological" consistency—what *better* place to start than the very idea that holds the SSG together? To measure the SSG's work against Gramsci's own concerns would not be, as Chibber implies, a test of the SSG's fidelity to Gramsci but would rather be an attempt to understand what the SSG has identified as a problem shared with

[8] For example, see review by Anders Stephenson, "Philosopher's Island" in *New Left Review* 61 (January-February 2010). See also Philip Culliffe review in *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*, <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2010/160>.

[9] On the formation of political consciousness of various social groups, see Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971). See especially "The Modern Prince."

[10] Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 27.

[11] Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, 26.

Gramsci—one that led and continues to lead both Gramsci and those affiliated with the SSG into a minefield of aporias and double binds. This is not intended as a criticism of the SSG's failure to use "rational" tools of analysis, nor is it a failure of the SSG to recognize peasant rationality. Rather, members of the SSG simply acknowledge the failure of rationality to serve as an infallible analytical frame.

Another aspect of Chibber's discussion of the SSG warrants focus—the issue of disciplinarity. The debate between Chibber and the three central figures of the SSG that he chooses to criticize is one borne out on what is today a highly contested territory, the academy. It would not surprise Chibber to find out that the work of the SSG has found its way onto the syllabi of graduates and undergraduates in my own chosen field of study, architecture. The broad influence of the work of the SSG, it seems, is exactly what worries Chibber, because it grafts knowledge developed in the literary and cultural fields onto his own field, situated firmly in the social sciences. This transgression occurs once the SSG dares to operate in the field of *reality*, in the realm of the *actual*, and under pressing political circumstances (i.e., the purview of the social sciences and seemingly off limits to scholars in the humanities).

This brings me to my own particular issue with, and interest in, Chibber's criticism of the SSG. As an academic discipline, architecture not only has a long history of involvement with other fields—it is itself an aggregate discipline that sits uncomfortably between the humanities and the sciences—both the social sciences and the hard sciences. It is undoubtedly a cultural production, but one that also undeniably operates under the constraints of economic reality. In addition to this there has been a move (warranted on account of the increasingly global nature of professional practice, and mandated by the National Architecture Accrediting Board) toward a global architecture history curriculum. Questions about the broad validity of Enlightenment ideals (the Enlightenment being the naturalized starting point of most modern architecture history surveys) have, perhaps inevitably, cropped up, bringing the universalizing tendencies of the canon in contact with a far broader terrain of architectural practice.

One obvious toehold in this debate for the architect and architecture historian is the planning and realization of Le Corbusier and Jawarhalal Nehru's Chandigarh. As one of Le Corbusier's most important executed projects, it already fits comfortably within the canon of architectural history. Le Corbusier arrived in India as a sort of standard bearer of universalist, rationalist, Enlightenment ideals as made manifest in architecture—an image in keeping with Nehru's vision for a new India built upon the development of a "scientific temper." [12] Chandigarh (the shared capital of the Punjab and Haryana provinces) would therefore be an important showcase for Nehru, who would be unable to justify the replanning of Lutyens' newly completed capitol complex in Delhi—a costly project that the newly Independent Indian government would rather appropriate than rebuild. Accordingly, Nehru threw his energies behind the creation of a fresh and positive symbolism, representative of India's new scientific ethos that would exceed the obvious limitations of a negation-minded postcolonial mentality. [13] Ironically, on account of the fact that it was at around this time that Le Corbusier moves

[12] Jawarhalal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Calcutta: Signet Press, 1946). See also the constitution of India where "to develop a scientific temper" is listed as one of the "fundamental duties" of Indian citizens.

[13] The process of Partition divided the former British province of Punjab into East (Indian) and West (Pakistani) Punjab. The former capital of the province, Lahore, lay in West Pakistan. Thus, there was a need to replace Indian Punjab's capital. To justify the large planned capital expenditure, the capital of the Haryana province (also once part of Punjab) was to be located in Chandigarh.

away from designing with platonic volumes to what is sometimes described as a more “sensuous” formal language, Chandigarh is representative (along with projects like Ronchamp and La Tourette) of Corbusier’s poetic and even personal turn away from a more “rationally” based abstraction. [14]

Setting these stylistic qualifications aside, arguments have been raging since the ’70s over whether Le Corbusier (who here stands in for foreign and modernist ideals) was an appropriate choice to build the new symbol for India, or whether modernism was even “appropriate” for India. These simplistic dichotomies indeed slip into a traditionalist essentialism or even, as Chibber might put it, a sort of Orientalism. There is nothing inherently contradictory between India and modernity or India and modernism. Discussions of this nature tend to steer us head on into a misleading opposition between cultural specificity and the drive to modernize. This is the dangerous territory where many ostensibly critical discussions regarding Chandigarh land. Chibber’s critique of the SSG offers an opportunity to reevaluate the stakes.

Take Chibber’s critique of Partha Chatterjee, mostly directed at his argument in *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Chibber claims that the state’s imperative to modernize was induced both by “pressures from above” (competition with other nation-states) and “pressures from below” (the political mobilization of the masses). As he points out, there are no state solutions that satisfy Chatterjee, but as a follower of Gramsci this makes all too much sense since the imperative of the subaltern classes is to arrest the power of the state—a difficult if not nearly impossible task if one is to take seriously Gayatri Spivak’s challenging conclusion that “the subaltern cannot speak.” [15] But this is precisely the task of the SSG, to labor under nearly impossible conditions.

If we can set aside that real and daunting challenge, we may still ask: Can the state respond to both pressures fairly and effectively? This would not be a question posed by the SSG, which privileges those pressures coming from below. Nevertheless, Arundhati Roy passionately delivers a case study that challenges some of Chibber’s premises. In *The Cost of Living*, we witness the constant conflicts between the realization of state modernization projects (not unlike Chandigarh) and the disruption of the everyday lives of villagers. Particularly convincing is her examination of the construction of Nehru’s ambitious dam-building campaign and the communal activism that formed around it. These conflicts caused Nehru to reexamine the effectiveness of his large-scale TVA-style projects, the awesome power of which both Le Corbusier and initially Nehru were beholden. [16] There are hints of Gandhi [17] in a speech delivered in November of 1958, only four years after Nehru famously called large dams “the temples of modern India”:   
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I have been beginning to think that we are suffering from what we may call “the disease of gigantism.” We want to show that we can build big dams and do big things. This is a dangerous outlook developing in India... the idea of big—having big undertakings and doing big things—is not a good outlook at all.... [It is] the small irrigation projects, the small industries and the small plants for electric power, which will change the face of the country far more than a half a dozen big projects in half a dozen places.” [18]

[14] See, for example James Stirling, “Ronchamp: Le Corbusier’s Chapel and the Crisis of Rationalism” in *Architectural Review* (March 1956), 155–161. In this article (which does not directly address Chandigarh), James Stirling concludes that “Le Corbusier, (having) proceed(ed) from the general to the particular, has produced a masterpiece of a unique but most personal order.”

[15] Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

[16] Nehru’s own visit to the TVA occurred only months after Corbusier’s wide-eyed visit. Of his own visit, Corbusier recalls in glowing terms his interactions with David Lillenthal, chairman of the TVA, which he writes about at length in his 1947 publication *Modular* and also in his reflections upon American architecture, *When the Cathedrals Were White*.

[17] Gandhi was quoted in a talk with Manu Gandhi in 1947: “I will have no regrets if the money invested in these machines is reduced to dust. True India lies in its seven lakh [1 lakh = 100,000] villages. Do you know that big cities like London have exploited India and the big cities of India in turn have exploited its villages? ... I want to infuse new life into these villages.... We should stop exploiting the villages and should closely examine the injustice done to the villages and strengthen their economic structure.”

[18] Jawarhalal Nehru, quoted in Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living* (New York: Modern Library, 1999).



Jawarhalal Nehru and Indira Gandhi visiting the TVA headquarters in Knoxville. Courtesy of the Truman Library.

Though this was clearly his response to both the violent dislocations of entire villages and rampant corruption that were the direct outcome of the dam campaign, he did little to stop their relentless construction (and one may question if he even had the power to do so). The momentum gained in the first big push led to hundreds of dam projects that would make India the third largest dam-building nation in the world. As Roy illustrates, many of the political tools used to address the dam's construction [19] were formed well outside of the context of democratic institutions and factory floors in order to directly address the machinery of the state, for which Chibber's book sometimes acts as an all too convenient apology. Nehru, as a representative of that machine, was also powerless to address these voices as he was similarly incapable of easing the difficult construction conditions experienced by thousands of workers in Chandigarh. The question is not whether or not Nehru was capable of responding to pressures from below, but whether there are (or ever were) the political tools to make that pressure both *real* and *effective*. These questions remain, and the need for the voices of the SSG has not been exhausted.

[19] This included, among other action, the refusal to leave the villages as they were submerged by water, as was the case with the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam.