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Making sense of postcolonial theory: a response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

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Making sense of postcolonial theory: a response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

I will respond as best I can to Gayatri Spivak's criticisms of *Postcolonial theory and the specter of capital* (Chibber 2013) (hereafter PTSC), though, as I will suggest below, the task is not an easy one, owing to Spivak's peculiar style of engagement.¹

Spivak begins by castigating me for focusing narrowly on Subaltern Studies, even while I claim to critique postcolonial theory. Why do I leave out so much of what has been produced in the field? In reality, I offered an explanation in the book's opening chapter, but, since Spivak does not address my reasons, please allow me to repeat them. The decision to focus on Subaltern Studies was not arbitrary. I was fully aware that postcolonial studies has generated a wide and varied universe of scholarship, expanding across many disciplines. My goal was to assess its contributions in the more empirically oriented fields such as history and anthropology, where it has exercised considerable influence. Hence, right at the outset, I signalled that the focus of the book was a somewhat delimited portion of what the field has to offer. I chose to focus on these areas because my interest was in what postcolonial scholarship has to say about the social structure, politics, and historical evolution of the Global South, since its claims about these phenomena are of considerable interest, and they have been extremely influential across the academic universe.

To examine postcolonial studies in the empirical disciplines, the next challenge was to locate a central cluster of arguments that are associated with it and could be taken to embody a *theory*, or a research programme. In other words, I had to see if postcolonial studies has generated a theory that explains the specific dynamics and evolution of colonial societies, or of the Global South more generally. The arguments I would focus upon not only had to have some theoretical and empirical content, but also had to have two other characteristics, if the project was to succeed—they would have to resonate with the claims being made in the wider field, even in cultural studies, and they would have to be arguments that wielded actual influence in scholarly work. Hence, focusing on arguments that had little influence, or which could not prove their bona fides as genuinely 'postcolonial', would undermine the project right at the outset. On these criteria, there can be

¹This essay is a author response to a review previously published by this journal (Spivak 2014, 184–198).

little doubt that Subaltern Studies was not only a legitimate target for my project, but the most natural one.

First, it is recognized as a legitimate, even central, current of scholarship within postcolonial studies. Works by its founding members are included or discussed in the most widely used textbooks on postcolonial studies, and, just as importantly, its members routinely describe their work as belonging to the field.

Secondly, Subaltern Studies has remained committed to a stable and remarkably coherent set of propositions about the dynamics of the (post-) colonial world, its evolution over time, and the ways in which that part of the globe differs in its structure and culture from the West. In other words, it has generated a core set of arguments that can be taken as a theory and a research programme. While it is conventional to mark a break of sorts between the 'early' volumes in the series and the later ones, this distinction is misleading in some ways. The real core of the programme—the idea of the bourgeoisie's failure to speak for the nation and hence of the subaltern sphere remaining a domain separate from elite culture—was announced famously in the very first volume, and has continued to serve as the foundation for the rest of the project. Much of the subsequent evolution of Subaltern Studies can be understood as a very ambitious project to tease out the consequences of this momentous fact about colonial history.

Thirdly, the arguments associated with the Subalterns do in fact resonate with much of the larger field. Some of these are:

- An insistence on locating the specificity of the East and on examining how and why its evolution differs from that of the West.
- A focus on culture and forms of consciousness as objects of study and a source of historical difference.
- The insistence that subaltern groups in the East operate with their own political calculus and forms of consciousness, different from that of elite groups and from what is projected on to them by Western theory.
- The insistence on purging social theory of its Eurocentric bias and the claim that Western theories are heavily imbued with this bias, Marxism included.
- A boilerplate scepticism towards universalizing discourse, and hence towards many of the theories emanating from the Enlightenment tradition.
- Scepticism towards modernizing discourses, and their defence of rationality, science, objectivity, etc.

These are all absolutely central themes for Subaltern Studies, and they are also at the very heart of postcolonial studies more generally. Indeed, the Subalternists have probably done the most of any group to give real historical and sociological ballast to postcolonial studies. Rather than just asserting that there is an ontological divide of some kind dividing East from West, they try to provide real historical arguments for its plausibility. And the arguments they have developed have been enormously influential, especially since the late 1990s. By the turn of this century, the Subalternists were widely recognized as being the most influential of all the empirically oriented streams within the field—to the point that many of their arguments achieved the status of being encapsulated in new buzzwords, instantly recognizable—nationalism as a 'derivative discourse', rescuing 'the fragment', the task of 'provincializing Europe'. One could even hazard a guess that certain key concepts, which they borrowed from others, like

'subaltern' or 'dominance without hegemony', are as much associated with them as with the terms' originators.²

In sum, while Subaltern Studies does not itself comprise postcolonial theory, it is one of the best exemplars of the latter's core arguments. In other words, while it does not *exhaust* the field, it is very much *representative* of it. Indeed, it is more than that. I did not randomly select Subaltern Studies as but one of many exemplars of postcolonial theory. I settled on it because it is actually better argued, more coherent and more consistent than much of the rest. Thus, it is hard to find more careful arguments in postcolonial studies explicating *why* capitalism, and hence modernity, in the East is taken to be fundamentally different from the West, or for why the claims of universalizing theories ought to be resisted.

All this was in the introductory chapter of PTSC. Spivak may object to my reasoning, but the decision was not arbitrary, as Spivak seems to suggest. If she feels that it lacked warrant, then she is obliged to at least offer some reason for this judgement, which she does not. The reader is left with a sense that I closed my eyes and plucked a random assortment of theorists out of the basket.

Ranjit Guha and the status of primary texts

A most significant contribution of Subaltern Studies to the development of postcolonial theory is its historical argument for why the political culture of the East is fundamentally different from that of the West. I argue that Ranajit Guha's work is the pivot on which this argument turns, and Spivak seems to agree with my placement of him. Guha argues, famously, that the source of East–West divergence can be found in the divergent characters of the bourgeoisie in the two settings. In the paradigmatic Western experience of England and France, the bourgeoisie led a successful project to capture state power and then create an encompassing, inclusive political culture based on the consent of the dominated classes—it strove, in his words, to 'speak on behalf of all the nation'. In the East, however, it abandoned any such ambitions and chose to sustain its rule by political coercion, perpetuating the division between the elite and subaltern spheres. This historic failure on the part of the bourgeoisie signalled a structural mutation in capitalism as it left Western shores—a stalling of its universalizing drive. Capitalism in the colonial world failed to properly universalize, evidenced in its failure to create a consensual, liberal political order. Other Subalternists derive from this their famous conclusion that this break in capital's universalizing drive is why theories built on the assumption of that universalization—liberalism and Marxism—cannot find purchase in the (post-) colonial world.

The argument for capital's failed universalization is the foundation on which much of the Subalternist project rests. I show in some detail in PTSC—over the course of five chapters—that it is deeply flawed and cannot be sustained in any form. Partha Chatterjee (2013) has responded to my arguments with a quite brazen falsehood—that Guha simply does not say what I attribute to him, even though Guha makes it clear in the first 25 pages of his book that this is exactly

²Both concepts originate in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.

what he is arguing, and then confirms it throughout the course of his text.³ Spivak now joins the fray with an even more novel stratagem, one that I could never have anticipated—she censures my criticism of Guha not because it is mistaken but because Guha's work has the status of a 'primary text', and *one does not criticize primary texts*.

I read and carefully re-read Spivak's argument here, because it seems impossible to imagine that anyone could believe what she so cavalierly announces. But there is no other way to interpret her—Spivak thinks that there is a class of scholarship, which she calls 'primary texts', whose members are to be memorialized and interpreted, but never assessed. The task of criticism is to be reserved for something called 'secondary texts'. What the difference is between them we are never told. But, whatever it is, Guha falls on the protected side of it. To drive the point home, Spivak asks us rhetorically, 'Would Chibber correct Rosa Luxemburg and DD Kosambi? No, because he knows they are primary texts' (Spivak 2014, 190). I am not sure what to say here. Not only would I feel free to criticize Luxemburg and Kosambi, but I would be *obligated* to do so if their theories or their scholarship were flawed. And not only would I respect this obligation, but so have generations of scholars and activists the world over. The distinction that Spivak urges upon us, and the attitude to it endorsed by her, would shut down most of the academy. It is an essentially theological mindset, properly belonging in a church or temple, not a university.

Spivak does propose one other justification for why my criticisms of Guha are misplaced, which needs to be taken seriously. She suggests that my criticism rests on a category mistake. I criticize Guha's argument for being empirically and theoretically flawed—his historical account of the bourgeois revolutions is unsustainable, and his understanding of capital's universalizing mission is mistaken. Because of this, his explanation for the colonial world's political dynamics also largely fails. Spivak offers that this is like criticizing Du Bois for calling the exodus of slaves a 'general strike', or criticizing Aristotle's *Poetics* as 'illogical' (2014, 186). The Aristotle example suggests that certain kinds of criticisms are misplaced because they misunderstand the very nature of the text they interrogate. The text is not vulnerable to the criticism being levelled at it because of the nature of its project. Spivak is right that criticism of this kind is jejune. But it should be self-evident that such is not the case in my treatment of Guha. Guha's arguments are eminently subject to both empirical and theoretical assessment, because they are claims about how the world works, and about the character of historical events. Hence, this defence is no more successful than the call for deference to primary texts.

Capital and capitalism, bourgeoisie and capitalists

Spivak further contends that my criticism of Guha elides the difference between capital and capitalism, and erroneously equates capitalists with the bourgeoisie. Let me start with the claim that capitalists cannot be identified with 'the bourgeoisie'. This is the same argument that Partha Chatterjee used in his riposte,

³ See Chatterjee (2013). For a rebuttal of Chatterjee, see Chibber (2014a) and especially Chibber (2014b), where I provide detailed textual evidence against his claims.

and I will respond to it only briefly, referring the interested reader to my fuller treatment of his argument elsewhere (Chibber 2014a; 2014b).

Here is what is at stake. Guha castigates the Indian bourgeoisie for failing to integrate the subaltern domain with that of the elites, and, in this, falling short of the historic achievements of the bourgeoisie in Western Europe. I show that the bourgeoisie in England and France never aspired to, or strove for, the goals that Guha ascribes to them, and that, in fact, they were as contemptuous of subaltern interests as their later Indian counterparts. The question here is: what does Guha mean by 'bourgeoisie'? I show in PTSC that he means 'capitalists', and I offer more evidence for this in subsequent work (Chibber 2014a). Spivak now claims that 'bourgeoisie' means lawyers, and intellectuals, not capitalists. But, however Spivak may wish to define the concept, it is abundantly clear that when Guha uses it he simply refers to capitalists. Spivak is creating an entirely fictitious Guha here, one who only exists in her imagination.

As to my elision of the difference between capital and capitalism, let me start by cautioning the reader that, pace Spivak, there is no established convention regarding the distinction. Usually, 'capital' is taken to mean 'capitalists', people whose actions propel the accumulation process, whereas 'capitalism' is used to denote the properties of the social structure in which these actors are located. But there is plenty of room for theorists to take some licence with how they use these terms. So when scholars intend to deploy the two as distinct concepts, they usually alert the reader to what each one is supposed to convey. Otherwise, one usually has to glean the intention of the writer by more indirect means, attending to the context, the apparent intention, the place of the argument, etc. It is not uncommon for the two to be used interchangeably.

Guha nowhere introduces the distinction in a systematic way and hence never tells us what he means by the two terms. The reader has to infer their meaning by attending to the context. What we do know is that the entity that is supposed to have had its universalizing mission derailed is 'capital'. But, depending on the context, this expression can mean either capitalists or capitalism. So, for example, it can mean, 'When capitalists came to India they did not pursue the same goals as they did in England'; or it can mean, 'The capitalism that took root in India did not expand in the same way that it had in England.' Guha usually has in mind the first claim when he makes his argument—he is usually referring to political or economic aspirations of the capitalist class. But sometimes he means the second. More importantly, since the two are closely related, the gap between them is not that large. None of this is either very deep or mysterious.

If Spivak feels that I have misunderstood Guha because I elide the distinction, she needs to show that such is the case. In normal academic discourse, when such an accusation is made, the critic offers some evidence to substantiate it by adducing key passages that have been misunderstood, showing how the argument has been distorted through the elision. Spivak clearly acknowledges that I am aware of the distinction between capital and capitalism, so she cannot think that I am blind to it (2014, 191). Which of its subtleties, then, do I miss? I confess that her argument here is almost impossible to understand. The only clear instance she adduces of an apparent elision is when she quotes me as asking: what does *capitalism* universalize? She then quotes me answering it with reference to capital, not *capitalism* (Spivak 2014, 187). So apparently I have substituted one for the other. But I am not doing any such thing. What I say is: capitalism imposes a

certain logic upon capital, and by 'capital' I mean *capitalists*. Hence, the structural location of certain actors forces a particular strategy of economic reproduction upon them. I am not ignoring a distinction here; I am in fact utilizing it. The only confusion here is on Spivak's part.

'Little Britain Marxism'

Spivak's only other significant accusation is that my book is a defence of a narrow, boxed-set kind of Marxism which refuses to budge from its orthodoxies. This has become a quite common refrain from postcolonial critics of the book. It is not unusual to see my case against the Subalternists as being that they 'are not Marxist enough', or that they are wrong because they have the 'wrong kind of Marxism'. The idea is that I simply hold up their arguments to a fixed set of orthodoxies, and in instances where they deviate from the latter I reject them out of hand. So the battle is apparently between open-ended, creative Subalternists, trying to expand received theory to make sense of a complex reality, and the stolid, unyielding Marxists who cast out anyone who dares to question Holy Writ.

But the accusation is nonsense. In *PTSC*, I do not make a *single* criticism of the Subalternists on the grounds that their work is a deviation from Marxist orthodoxy. Nor do I defend any of my own by proving its closer fidelity to Marx. Each and every argument I make—whether against the Subalternists or in defence of my own views—is defended on independent grounds, whether empirical or conceptual. There is only one chapter that takes up Marx directly, chapter 6, where I take up the question of abstract labour. Even in this case, I *apologize* for having to descend into Marxology (see Chibber 2013, 130), and then try to show that it is worthwhile, not because it was developed by Marx, but because it captures some interesting facts about capitalism. The only other instance in which I bring up Marxology is in chapter 4, where I *criticize* Marx for his credulousness towards liberal historiography. Every other argument I make is developed by reference to facts about the world, or conceptual clarification. And every criticism of the Subalternists issues from the same criteria. The arguments offered by Subaltern Studies are to be rejected because they are wrong, not because they stray from orthodoxy.

Spivak knows this, and it is why she is worried enough to write her long attack. If the book had just been a Marxist screed against the heretics, it would have died a quiet death. The reason it has attracted attention is precisely because it is not the 'Little Britain Marxism' that Spivak accuses it of being, but an examination of Subalternist arguments on their own terms—by attending to the empirical and theoretical strength of their claims. As for Marxism, there is in fact plenty in the received orthodoxy that is either mistaken or questionable. To give some examples:

- The orthodox theory of historical materialism is almost certainly wrong (Chibber 2011).
- The labour theory of value may very well be wrong, and if it is not, it can only be defended in modified form.
- The traditional theory of bourgeois revolutions is definitely wrong, as I explain in great detail in *PTSC*.

- Marxism still has a poorly developed moral theory, though that situation is now greatly remedied.

There is quite an extensive literature on these subjects, and I have contributed to some of it, all of which acknowledges and seeks to remedy deep flaws in orthodox formulation. There are plenty of other weaknesses in the theory but I have listed these only because they are considered to be at the very heart of Marxist orthodoxy. So it is not that Marxist theory is not in need of serious modification, or that it does not have severe weaknesses. *It is just that, whatever weaknesses it has, they are not the ones targeted by postcolonial theorists.* The biggest problem with postcolonial theory is that it seeks to undermine the very areas of Marxist theory that ought to be retained, that are in fact its strengths—the reality of capitalist constraints, regardless of culture; the reality of human nature; the centrality of certain universal aspirations on the part of the oppressed, which issue from this human nature; the need for abstract, universal concepts that are valid across cultures; the necessity of rational, reasoned discourse, etc. And the reason these propositions need to be defended is not that they comprise a doctrine that Marxists seek to uphold, but because they are defensible on their own merits. It has long been a tactic of postcolonial theorists to offer their framework as not only a direct lineal descendant of Marxist theory—which it is not—but also as the only sustainable version of Marxism—which it is emphatically not. Any criticism of their arguments is thereby impugned as an unthinking adherence to orthodoxy, or a search for doctrinal purity. Spivak's characterization of PTSC as 'Little Britain Marxism' is but the latest incarnation of this, and readers should not be misled by it.

Conclusion

The sad fact is that, apart from the few points that I have taken up above, there is very little in Spivak's essay to which one can respond. To be sure, there is no shortage of accusations, some pertaining to exegesis, others to logic or theory. Spivak certainly seems to feel strongly that PTSC is guilty of many sins. But this makes it all the more curious that she expends little or no effort doing what any honest critic would do—taking the time to read the text carefully, locate its flaws, demonstrate to the reader that the argument is indeed guilty of the mistakes of which it is accused.

Indeed, what stands out most about the essay is how it eschews the normal protocols of scholarship in favour of other, less savoury tactics. And I would be remiss to say nothing about it, since it is so egregious. There is a very powerful authoritarian thrust in Spivak's essay. It is not just the deferential attitude that one is supposed to display towards certain texts and authorities. It is not just the exalted status of 'primary texts'. A required genuflection to authority pervades the text. It is surprising to find repeated references to someone's age—the fact that Guha is 90 years old—or to their storied past, or to their fame in the intellectual world, or to their social work during the summer. These are not random facts that Spivak offers the reader; they are bits of information doled out to contrast the worthiness of some people—Guha and Spivak in this case—in contrast to the brash, 'boyish' critic who is obsessed with 'correcting everybody', a 'correct-fetishist', as she refers to me. Spivak seems genuinely perturbed, not by the substance of my criticism, but by the very act of it. I am upbraided for not being

sufficiently awestruck by the distinction of those whom I have targeted for criticism. The imperious tone, the constant reminder of status, whether based on age or of academic and social standing, is quite shocking to witness in an academic paper. The only place I have ever seen it before was while growing up in India, where it was used with servants and children to remind them of their place in the order of things.

Perhaps this may explain why Spivak does not bother to base her arguments on evidence or logic. Evidence matters if you are trying to persuade someone through argument, not appeals to authority. Spivak, however, writes in the manner of someone long accustomed to treating those around her as supplicants, not colleagues. One would not be much concerned with this, were it not for the fact that at least two generations of students have been socialized into this kind of practice. I doubt that Spivak's style of engagement would be tolerated in any other discipline. So much the worse for postcolonial studies.

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