

# **Subaltern Studies Revisited:**

**A Response to Partha Chatterjee**

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**This is a longer version of an article that appears in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, March 1, 2014.**

My intention in *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (hereafter PTSC) was to assess the theoretical framework generated by the *Subaltern Studies* collective. To do so involved three distinct tasks – first, to distill from the key writings what the projects’ essential arguments were; since these arguments were in large measure a critique of Enlightenment and especially Marxist theories, it required, as a second task, to assess the validity of their critique on empirical and conceptual grounds; and lastly, I suggested that their own theoretical innovations were a failure, both as theory and as normative critique. To be sure, my verdict was not kind to the project. But I tried, in the book, to reconstruct the Subalternists’ arguments as clearly and generously as possible, and to base my own alternative formulations on logic and evidence, not by appeals to authority.

In his response, Partha Chatterjee has decided to ignore all of these conventions. Instead of honestly trying to engage the arguments of PTSC, he either ignores them altogether or distorts them beyond recognition. He even managed to extend the same courtesy to the Subalternists’ work, including his own. Both of these problems are remarkable in themselves, but even more so because, as I will show, the distortions are so clumsy that even a cursory reading of the texts is enough to expose them.

### Guha and the Bourgeois Revolutions

Chatterjee starts by taking up my critique of Ranajit Guha’s *Dominance without Hegemony* (hereafter DH). I argue in *Postcolonial Theory* that Guha’s work is both foundational for the entire Subalternist project – hardly a controversial claim, since they insist upon this fact themselves – and that it is fundamentally flawed. Its flaw is that it generates a set of contrastive claims about the Indian bourgeoisie and Indian capitalism that rest on a comparison with the European achievement. But the comparison fails because Guha quite dramatically misunderstands the European story. For Guha, the basic condition of Indian political culture is that the subaltern sphere continues to be separate from that of the elites, unlike the West, where the elite and subaltern words were

integrated very early in their modernization. The reason that India differs so from the West has to do with the weakness of the Indian bourgeoisie. In the West, a vigorous and dynamic bourgeoisie overthrew feudalism and created an integrated political order in the aftermath of the bourgeois revolutions of 1640 and 1789 in England and France respectively; whereas in India, the bourgeoisie drew back from this challenge during its own counterpart of the bourgeois revolution – the struggle for independence from British rule. I show in PTSC that Guha’s understanding of the European experience is baseless. And when we compare the two records, it turns out that the European bourgeoisie was no more committed to an integrated political culture than was its Indian counterpart, and political culture in the former was not more integrated after its bourgeois revolutions than was the Indian one in 1948. Hence, the case for a deep “structural fault”, as Guha calls it, between East and West – at least on this score – is a failure.

Chatterjee responds with three assertions. First, that Guha never makes any claims about the classic bourgeois revolutions at all – his criticism is only of the historiography of colonial India and the comparisons that *it* makes with Europe; second, that when Guha uses the expression “Indian bourgeoisie” he is not referring to capitalists, but in fact to the middle class leadership of the Congress; and thirdly, that, in so far as there is any European referent that Guha has in mind, it is the mid-Twentieth century British state, not the earlier vintage of the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century. These are quite astounding claims, and readers familiar with DH might wonder if Chatterjee is being facetious. But he seems to intend for us to take him at his word. I will therefore respect his challenge and attend to his claims *seriatim*.

Before proceeding, we should make one observation about method. In PTSC, my critique of Guha’s argument is carefully laid out over the course of three chapters, with one chapter devoted entirely to an explication of his view. I present his case very elaborately, because, as I say in the preface to the book, I wanted readers to be confident that I was not setting up a straw man that could easily be knocked down. Toward this, I not only describe his position, but do so with the help of innumerable passages from DH, accompanying each claim with supporting citations or quotes, and showing how they fit

into the overarching structure of Guha's argument. Chatterjee is of course free to disagree with my reading of Guha. But, even the weakest standards of scholarly integrity would oblige him to then provide some explanation for why Guha seems to be saying, in all those passages that I adduce, exactly the opposite of the view that Chatterjee attributes to him. If Chatterjee were at all concerned with the facts, he would go back to those passages – at least some of them – and explain how it might be that when Guha says “France in 1789”, he really means “England in 1945”. What we get instead is a barrage of assertions, not backed up by any textual evidence, and without any engagement with all the evidence that I adduce in support of my interpretation. I will come back later in this paper with a suggestion as to why Chatterjee adopts this novel strategy.

*Does Guha refer to the bourgeois revolutions?*

Let us take up the first of Chatterjee's claims regarding Guha – that his argument is only about the historiography of colonial India, and hence he does not make, and nor does he need to make, any substantive claims about the bourgeois revolutions. There are two distinct issues here, a textual one about whether Guha *in fact* makes claims about the bourgeois revolutions, and a logical one about whether he *needs to* for his argument.

It is of course true that DH is centrally devoted to a critique of liberal historiography, and I make ample note of that in PTSC (see PTSC, pp. 44-45; 91-92). The issue is, does Guha rest his case upon any substantive claims about actual history of the West? Chatterjee says that he does not -- “nowhere in the book”, he announces, “does Guha make any claims” about the bourgeois revolutions.<sup>1</sup> All of Guha's factual arguments are supposed to refer to only the Indian experience. But here is Guha's own encapsulation of his argument, which I quote in PTSC, which Chatterjee in no way could have missed when he had read my book:

Liberal historiography has been led to presume that  
*capital, in its Indian career, succeeded in overcoming*

the obstacles to its self-expansion and subjugating all precapitalist relations in material and spiritual life well enough to enable the bourgeoisie to speak for all of that society, *as it had done* on the occasion of its historic triumphs in England in 1648 and France in 1789. Resistance to *the rule of capital* has been made to dissolve ideally into a hegemonic dominance. (DH 19, emphasis added).

It is easy to see that this passage flatly contradicts Chatterjee's claims, and I will adduce several others in what follows. But the point is not to go hunting for quotations or to pile up instances where certain words are mentioned. It is, rather, to examine the structure of Guha's argument, so that we might appreciate the place that such references occupy within it.

The passage I have just quoted comes at the end of Guha's presentation of the essence of his view. He deems liberal historiography to be a kind of apologia for colonialism, hence a view that is ideological (DH: 6-11). Historians working within the parameters of liberal ideology are seen as upholding the worldview and the interests of a certain class – the metropolitan bourgeoisie. “A bourgeois discourse par excellence, it [liberal historiography] helped the bourgeoisie to change or at least significantly modify the world according to its class interests in the period of its ascendancy, and since to consolidate and perpetuate its dominance” (DH: 6-7). He concludes that the effect is for liberal scholarship to “speak from within the bourgeois consciousness itself” (DH: 7). So the scholarship of colonialism that Guha is criticizing, is not only wrong, but attached to the defense of bourgeois dominance. His project is thus one of ideological critique.

How, then, does one criticize such an ideology? One does so, Guha avers, by pointing to the *contradiction* between the claims made by it, and the reality of the world. This is what the rising bourgeoisie did in Europe in the ear of the great bourgeois revolutions: “The bourgeoisie itself had dramatized such decalage during the Enlightenment by a

relentless critique of the *ancient regime* for decades before *the French Revolution* and anticipating it in effect” (DH: 13; emphasis added). This critique, Guha continues, was “true to the real contradictions of the epoch”, i.e. those central to feudalism, which was the economic system of the ancient regime, and which the rising bourgeoisie overthrew in 1789 – or so Guha claims (ibid.). Just as the rising bourgeoisie based its criticism on the contradiction between reality and its ideal representation, so too, Guha argues, “the critique of the dominant bourgeois culture arises from the *real* contradictions of capitalism (DH: 13).

Now we are approaching the heart of the matter. If liberal historians are the representatives of capital, then it follows that a critique of their work has to point to a gap between their claims and actual course of events – the real contradictions to which Guha refers in the preceding paragraph. What are these? “One of such contradictions which serves as a basis for the critique of bourgeois culture in dominance relates to the *universalizing tendency of capital*” (DH: 13). On the one hand, capital does have a powerful universalizing drive – it revolutionizes social relations, replaces old institutions with those bearing its stamp, it spills beyond national borders and brings remote regions under its sway. But, this drive is frustrated by its own limits. Here Guha turns to Marx for guidance. For Marx, the fact that bourgeoisie came to power and dominance in the early modern period was an expression of its universalizing drive – a drive that is real. But this drive began to run out of steam not long after the class achieved hegemony. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the revolutions of 1848.

Whereas the bourgeoisie had valiantly crafted an encompassing social coalition against the ancient regime and replaced it with a new order in the classical bourgeois revolutions, it turned away from any such undertakings in 1848. Guha observes that “the triumph of the universalist tendency was not obvious in bourgeois practice ... The failure of the Prussian revolution of 1848 *to achieve the comprehensive character of the English and French revolutions respectively of 1648 and 1789*” inspired Marx to “write a series of brilliant but bitter reflections on this theme” (DH: 17; emphasis added). In these writings, “the performance of the nineteenth-century German bourgeoisie is distinguished ... from

that of their class in seventeenth century England and eighteenth-century France in terms of their respective records in overthrowing the old order” (ibid.).

This brings us to the nub of the issue. After describing how Marx drew up a balance sheet of the bourgeoisie’s achievements in 1848 and set it against the record of their performance in the great bourgeois revolutions, Guha declares, “The relevance of this [i.e. Marx’s] critique for the study of colonialism can hardly be overestimated.” It presents, Guha suggests, a template for the analysis of capital’s colonial venture. Marx overturned liberal apologies for the practice of the bourgeoisie in 1848, by showing that such apologetics endowed capital with ambitions that it *no longer entertained*. He showed that liberals ascribed to capital a universalizing commitment that it had in fact abandoned. So too, in the colonial setting, “the representation of the colonial project of the European bourgeoisie as a particularly convincing example of the universalist mission of capital has for a long time been a matter of routine in academic teaching and writing” (DH: 18). But just as Marx had shown that 1848 instantiated capital’s abandonment of its universalizing drive, so too, Guha says, the critique of liberal historiography must show the latter “has been primarily responsible for a serious misrepresentation of the power relations of colonialism” (DH: 19). And it is at this point that Guha presents us with the encapsulation of his view, which I quoted above: the misrepresentation perpetuated by liberal historians is that they, like liberal apologists in the mid-nineteenth century, assume that capital is motivated by the same revolutionary commitments that it supposedly had in 1648 and 1789. This is the contradiction -- the real anomaly -- that anti-colonial critique points to as ideological critique.

For Guha, the method for critique is derived from Marx’s “brilliant but bitter” reflections on the failure of capitalists in 1848. He follows Marx on this count very faithfully. Marx accepted the story about bourgeois heroism in 1648 and 1789, and so too does Guha. In the section of the book where he lays out the basic premises of his argument, Guha comes back again and again to the reality of their achievements at the early stage of capitalism, when it was, to him, a truly revolutionizing force and hence really did embody a universalizing drive, and its later career, when this drive was abandoned. Just as Marx

condemned the Prussian capitalists for turning away from the ambitions of their predecessors, so does Guha. He complains about the Indian variant, “the indigenous bourgeoisie, spawned and nurtured by colonialism itself, adopted a role that was distinguished by its failure to measure up to the heroism of the European bourgeoisie in its period of ascendancy” (DH: 5). What was this period of ascendancy? It is abundantly clear that he has the bourgeois revolutions in mind. No-one who reads the crucial opening sections of DH can miss the architecture of the argument, nor the significance of Guha’s references to the bourgeois revolutions. It quite remarkable that Chatterjee tries to suppress this obvious and quite uncontroversial fact.

My account also enables us to see why Guha feels *compelled* to draw a contrast with the bourgeois revolutions. *Pace* Chatterjee, he does not develop his argument as a simple refutation of the liberal description of British rule in India. Guha is not content to simply show that colonialism was despotic. His ambition is to analyze colonialism at a deeper level – as an instance of capital in its *global* venture. For Guha, liberalism misrepresents the true nature of colonialism because it is unable to see the mutation that capitalism undergoes as it expands into the colonial world. It assumes that capitalists in a colonial setting are motivated by the same goals and ambitions that drove the Western bourgeoisie in its “period of ascendancy”, as Guha describes it. Liberal historiography assumes that capital strove to integrate the subaltern sphere with the elite sphere, that it built a consensual social order and secured its social hegemony, giving it the authority to “speak for all the nation”. It assumes, in other words, that capital retained its universalizing drive.

The entire structure of *Dominance without Hegemony* is built around this idea – that in its colonial venture, capital abandoned something it *once had* – in 1640 and 1789.

Chatterjee suppresses the basic fact about Guha’s book, because to understand its central argument in this way is to appreciate its intrinsically contrastive character. Guha embeds his critique of liberal historiography in a deeper social and historical argument about the actual course of capitalism in the West and in the East. He has to refer to the bourgeois revolutions because they exemplify the kind of transformation that he feels did not occur



in the colonial world, but which liberal ideologues keep insisting did in fact occur. His goal is not a simple refutation of liberal nostrums about colonial rule. He seeks, instead, to develop an analysis of the forces that actually shaped modernization in the colonial and postcolonial world, to put that experience in global perspective, and finally, to generate categories more adequate to apprehending that experience. He intends to show, through detailed analysis, that capitalism in India produced a different kind of modernity from that of the West, a very specific form of political rule, which he calls dominance without hegemony. Its peculiarity simply cannot be understood without reference to some events which comprise the norm, or the standard, against which the peculiarities of colonialism can be understood. Guha makes this abundantly clear in the opening pages of his book, before he even commences with the substance of his argument (DH: xi-xiii; 3-5). Why Chatterjee thinks he can dupe readers into ignoring this is something of a mystery.

*What Does Guha mean by the Indian bourgeoisie?*

Chatterjee's second, and equally absurd, line of defense is that I misconstrue what Guha means by the term "bourgeoisie" in the Indian context. I take him to mean "capitalists", whereas he in fact uses it to refer to middle class leaders of the nationalist movement. His critique of the Indian bourgeoisie is untouched by any facts about Indian capitalists, since, Chatterjee avers, he is actually writing about urban professionals and such.

Is there any reason to believe Chatterjee? Let us begin with the observation that Guha's entire analysis rests on the proposition that the peculiarities of colonial modernization flowed from *capital* having abandoned its universalizing drive. It is capital that is the protagonist on both sides of the world, and it is capital whose performance is judged against its competence (DH: 4-5). Now, against this fact, what should be the natural interpretation of the concept "bourgeoisie", when Guha uses it – that he is using it to refer to capital, which is the lynchpin of his analysis, or that he has reverted to its eighteenth century usage, without ever informing the reader that he has done so?

For Guha, the evidence for capital's turn away from a universalizing project was its refusal to base its leadership of the nationalist movement on the consent of the masses. The two central essays of DH enumerate the myriad ways in which the Indian National Congress marginalized the needs and aspirations of the poor and the minority communities, promoting obedience over rebellion, stability and order over revolution. There is no dispute over Guha's healthy contempt for the intellectuals and professionals who were at the helm of the Congress. But none of this changes the fact that for Guha, the Congress and its leaders matter because they were organizing around the interests of *another* class – the domestic industrialists, who were supposed to be the carriers of capital's universalizing mission, but refused to be.

Mid-way through the first essay in DH, Guha summarizes a series of articles in which Gandhi implored the Indian ruling classes – agrarian landlords and capitalists – to be more accommodating to the laboring classes, so it could garner their consent. Guha observes that Gandhi “hoped that the *capitalist class* would ‘read the signs of the times’ and voluntarily surrender its wealth” before mass radicalization overtook the movement. That article, Guha observes, triggered a response from G.D. Birla, who he describes as “*the most advanced section of the Indian bourgeoisie*”, and who urged his fellow capitalists to heed Gandhi's advice (DH: 38, emphasis added). Guha is describing Birla, one of the biggest industrialists in India, as a leading representative of the Indian bourgeoisie. And on that very page, he uses “bourgeoisie” and “capitalist” to refer to the same group of people – something that Chatterjee insists never happens.

Later in the book, Guha offers an explanation for why Indian capitalists refused to follow Gandhi and Birla's advice. He starts by drawing a parallel between the drama unfolding in India, and the baseline experience against which he always places it, Western Europe. The Indian bourgeoisie was trying to present its own interests as universal ones, much as the European bourgeoisie had in its own rise to power. But while the latter managed to present its own interests as the common interest, the Indian bourgeoisie could not (DH: 130-131). At the heart of the Congress' failure was its “failure to assimilate the class interests of peasants and workers into a bourgeois hegemony” (Ibid.: 133). The fact that it

could not was an expression of “the predicament of a bourgeoisie nurtured under colonial conditions and its difference from its opposite numbers in Western Europe” (Ibid).

In the West, the bourgeoisie was able to gather the resources – both material and spiritual – to bring the working class into a coalition with itself. But in India,

By contrast, the contrived character of industrialization under the raj ... left no choice for the Indian bourgeoisie to develop its interest as anything other than the particular interest of a particular class. Trapped in conditions which did little to encourage any organic growth and expansion, it hardened quickly into a parasitic and precocious outcrop on the surface of colonial society and defined itself sharply by its antagonism with *its Other – the working class*, an antagonism which, from the very beginning, it sought to resolve by discipline rather than by persuasion (DH: 134, emphasis added).

This is a crucial passage, in that Guha makes it clear what he means by “bourgeoisie” – an exploiting class, whose Other is the working class. It is trapped in conditions where it cannot grow and expand as its European counterparts had, and hence it lacks the material basis for incorporating the latter into a hegemonic coalition. So its relation with workers is inescapably antagonistic. Guha draws out the implication: “Thus while the bourgeoisie in the West could speak for all of society ... even while it was striving for power or had just won it, in India there was always another voice, a subaltern voice, that spoke for a larger part of society, and which it was not for the bourgeoisie to represent”. And he concludes, “that is why the elite nationalism of the Congress leadership and that party’s official platform could never be adequately representative of Indian politics of the colonial period” (DH: 135).

For Guha, the Congress represents the hegemonic project of Indian big business. But it can only muster dominance without hegemony, because it cannot break through the limits that are imposed on it by that very class. The class, in turn, cannot offer the same programs and concessions that its counterpart in Europe did during the period of its own ascendancy, because it is locked in an antagonistic relations with what Guha describes as “its Other” – the working class. And finally, this latter relation can be traced back to the stunted industrialization of colonialism, which gives the bourgeoisie little room for growth. So, the reader should now ask – what is the most reasonable interpretation of “bourgeoisie” as Guha is using it here? Is it lawyers and civil servants who see the working class as their Other? Or is it Birla and Tata?

There are numerous other such references in the text, but the point should be obvious. *Dominance without Hegemony* is a book about the universalizing drive of *capital*, and how it failed in colonial conditions. Chatterjee knows this full well. The idea that, in the Indian case, the concept is meant to refer to lawyers and intellectuals is simply absurd.

*Is Guha comparing India to 1945 Britain?*

Chatterjee’s final claim is that Guha’s reference point is not Western Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, but England in 1945. I must say, this is Chatterjee’s most audacious gambit of all. For the fact is that there is no reference at all to Britain at mid-century in the entire book – none that I could find. Virtually all of Guha’s discussion, with regard to England, is for what he calls the “heroic period” of the bourgeoisie’s rule – the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Again, readers should listen to Guha himself. At the end of his first essay in DH, Guha begins his “aurocritique” by observing that “*nothing that has been said above is addressed to the practitioners of colonialist historiography in Britain today*” (DH: 95, emphasis added); there is no reference in it to twentieth century Britain at all. Instead, the essay enjoins Indian historians to ask, *inter alia*, why it was that Indian colonial institutions cannot be understood “either as a replication of the liberal-bourgeois culture of *nineteenth-century Britain* or as the mere survival of an antecedent pre-capitalist culture?” (DH: 95-96, emphasis added).

And so, Guha makes it clear that his frame of reference is Britain of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the historians of that time, because it was those historians who established the discourse legitimizing colonialism, presenting the colony as nothing more than an extension of British liberalism as practiced at that time. Hence, Guha's interlocutors are James Mill, Macaulay, Bentham, and others. The insistence that Guha is actually referring to mid-twentieth century Britain is another sign of Chatterjee's desperation.

### Abstract Labor

Let us now move to the next issue Chatterjee raises, which is my examination of several postcolonial theorists' approach to the concept of abstract labor. The motivation for my intervention was to examine a common charge that postcolonial theory levels at the Enlightenment tradition, that its universalizing categories obliterate all historical difference. They do so, we are told, because they homogenize the diversity of social experience by subsuming it under highly abstract, one-dimensional categories. One example of this is Marx's concept of abstract labor, which either assumes that labor and laborers in capitalism become more homogenous over time, or is unable to adequately theorize those differences that do exist, since the categories treat labor everywhere as being the same. I show in PTSC that this critique is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept, and that the latter can in fact not only appreciate historical difference, but is an essential tool for such an analysis. Hence, while it is certainly true that some universalizing categories might be problematic, it is sheer folly to insist that this is a necessary flaw in all such categories. Postcolonial theory's broadside against Enlightenment universalisms is vastly overdrawn.

Chatterjee accuses me of having misunderstood what abstract labor is. His argument proceeds in two basic steps. First, he has me define capitalism as a system in which there is generalized market dependence; he then objects that such a definition erases the importance of wage-labor as an essential component of capitalism, and imputes to me the

view that wage labor is unnecessary or irrelevant for the emergence of abstract labor in capitalism. Having described my argument this way, Chatterjee then proceeds to develop an elaborate defense of the connection between waged and abstract labor, showing, he claims, that in denying this connection, I have veered very far from Marx's own conceptualization. Finally, he claims that this gaffe also prevents me from understanding what Dipesh Chakrabarty's critique of the concept tries to accomplish.

The only problem with this criticism is that it is tilting at windmills. My entire argument about abstract labor, and how the category is perfectly adequate for apprehending the social differences with the working class, presumes that for abstract labor to emerge, economic production must be governed by capitalist laws of motion, and labor must work for a wage. There is not even a hint, anywhere in my book, that wage labor is irrelevant for this process. I do, as Chatterjee says, provide a definition of capitalism as generalized market dependence – but wage labor is simply a form of market dependence, and it never occurred to me that I would have to remind the reader of this elementary fact. Hence, it was never my intention to claim, nor did I imply, that socially necessary labor can be derived from petty commodity production. It is quite extraordinary that Chatterjee would try to wring such a position out of my argument.

Of course, having misrepresented my view in such a fashion, it does allow Chatterjee to entirely avoid answering my charges in PTSC. The central question I addressed was this – do universalizing categories necessarily occlude the study of social difference? And I showed that, in the case of abstract labor, they do not. Chatterjee never even addresses this issue in his response, and indeed, he buries it altogether by going off on a pointless tangent about the importance of wage labor, a fact that I not only affirm, but place at the center of my argument.

It is not surprising that Chatterjee's misrepresentations extend to the work of others as well. He insists that since I have grossly mishandled the problem of abstract labor, it bleeds over into my understanding of Dipesh Chakrabarty. Chakrabarty, he argues, approaches the category by asking if capitalism in Bengal jute mills had succeeded in

“establishing abstract labor as the common measure of labor power” (71). And he finds, we are told, that it had not, because Brahmins insisted on getting higher than average wages because of their social position. But two points are worth noting here – first, Chakrabarty *never* links the issue of wage levels to abstract labor in the book that Chatterjee cites. The term “abstract labor” appears on all of *two pages* in *Rethinking Working Class History* -- the book to which Chatterjee -- and in those pages, Chakrabarty is concerned not with wage determination, but with the *cultural* changes that capitalism is supposed to be about – exactly the issue that I do discuss.<sup>2</sup> The real locus of Chakrabarty’s arguments regarding abstract labor is not the one that Chatterjee cites at all, but *Provincializing Europe*. And again, there is simply no link in that book between the abstraction of labor and wages.

Even more confusing is Chatterjee’s basic premise itself, that some workers demanding higher wages for themselves is evidence that capital in Bengal had failed to “establish abstract labor as the common measure of labor power” (71). This, we are led to believe, is what Chakrabarty tries to show, and what I do not comprehend when I defend the validity of the concept. But how does the mere *demand* for higher wages amount to evidence against abstract labor? Did these workers actually receive higher wages? If so, how does this undermine validity of the concept? Chatterjee cannot possibly mean that any deviation from a set wage level amounts to a negation of abstract labor, since wage hierarchies are very much a part of Marx’s theory. So the question is, how much variation does the concept allow? Chatterjee does not even offer a glimmer of an argument. He merely hints at a fact – workers made wage-related demands based on caste status – and then moves on, as if the answer is so obvious that it does not require discussion. The problem, of course, is that Chatterjee does not give us anything resembling an argument one way or another. All we have is innuendo and chest-thumping.

Chatterjee then proceeds to enumerate a list of arguments that Chakrabarty is supposed to have developed – about workers’ rural ties, their consciousness, their religiosity -- the implication being that these are also issues that I ignore in my assessment of Chakrabarty.

But these are the very issues that I do take up in great detail, and I show to be deeply problematic (PTSC Chapter 8.) What exactly is the weakness of my argument supposed to be in my assessment of Chakrabarty on these issues? Chatterjee never informs us. All he says is that, in the face of all of the various ways in which these aspects of workers condition in Calcutta departs from some pure model, “Chibber does not find in Chakrabarty’s evidence any reason to doubt the universalizing spread of capital” (SSC: 71).

In this one instance, Chatterjee is correct – it is very much my view that the persistence of rural ties, the attachment to religious identities, the use of interpersonal coercion by managers, and other problems that Chakrabarty adduces as proof of capital’s failed universalization are in fact entirely compatible with the latter. And I spend the better part of *three chapters* presenting arguments and evidence in support of my view. But Chatterjee does not engage with a single one of them. He never tells us what they have to do with abstract labor at all, and he never tells us exactly what is problematic in my argument about them. He simply continues to argue by innuendo, listing a series of facts about India and implying that their significance is so obvious that merely to state them is to present a case for his view – precisely the view that I challenge with actual arguments in PTSC, page after page, chapter after chapter, which he never even tries to counter. What he does, instead, is spend a big part of his paper arguing for a position that I never denied – that wage labor is the precondition for abstract labor. And he ignores every one of the arguments I did make about why Chakrabarty and others are deeply mistaken in their criticisms of the concept.

### Interests, Agency, and Politics

The final issue Chatterjee raises is the problem of peasant consciousness and interests. In PTSC I approached this issue by first laying out in great detail what Guha, Chaterjee and Chakrabarty claim about the nature of subaltern consciousness in India.<sup>3</sup> Chatterjee and Chakrabarty both insist that social explanations based on agential interests are deeply



problematic in the Indian context, unlike that of the West, where they are deemed appropriate. Chatterjee in particular claims that Guha's and his own work show that to be true in the case of peasants, and Chakrabarty thinks that he shows the absence of interest-based action in the case of workers. In PTSC, I demonstrate in some detail that the actual facts adduced by Guha, Chatterjee and Chakrabarty actually show the very opposite – that subaltern groups in India were in fact no less sensitive to their individual material interests than a materialist account would predict. And I then try to provide a positive account of what some such interests might be – which are consistent with the empirical historical narratives of Chatterjee and his colleagues – and how a commitment to the existence of such interests need not lead to an imperviousness to culture in social life. This part of the book spans Chapters 7-9 in the book.

Chatterjee does not fare well in those chapters, and one might have expected him to respond in some detail to my criticisms, since they are quite detailed. But he responds only by more obfuscation and outright fabrication. First, referring to his own work, he claims that he never denied the importance of peasants' interests in all domains, but only in the dynamics of political mobilization. Peasants were perfectly capable of recognizing their economic interests, he avers; it was in political movements that community tended to trump individual interests (73). So I am charged with distorting Chatterjee's argument. Community consciousness was never presented by him as an obstacle to the perception of individual interests.

Chatterjee suppresses the fact that in PTSC, I produced quotation after quotation in which he claims precisely what he is now denying. Instead of trying to address the evidence in any meaningful way, Chatterjee flatly denies that it exists. Readers who wish to examine it more thoroughly should refer to Chapter 7, Section 2 and Section 4. There we find Chatterjee referring to interest-based judgments as “bourgeois consciousness”, which he claims Indian rural agents do not possess, and which he counterposes to their “peasant consciousness”.<sup>4</sup> Chatterjee castigates the entire tradition of social science – sociology, Chyanaovian rural anthropology, ‘moral economy’ arguments, and Marxism for assuming that peasants act on their material interests.<sup>5</sup> In his more empirical work,

Chatterjee repeats these claims, but goes a step further. He now describes the effect of “peasant-communal ideology” to be such that peasants cannot even distinguish exploiters from exploited. They have to be taught this ability by agents from outside the rural community.<sup>6</sup>

Now it is of course true, as I observe in PTSC, that peasants feel powerful bonds of commonality with members of their community, because they are bound together in various material interdependencies. Hence, there is no denying the importance of community consciousness. But two points are relevant here. First, the sense of community so typical in rural communities is built upon a real commonality of interests. Peasants’ sense of mutuality, duty, obligation, etc. derive from this real interdependence, it is not reproduced apart from it. Second, the issue is not whether a consciousness of this sort exists, but whether it is so powerful as to erase any awareness of individual interests. Chatterjee denies both of these possibilities in the works that I criticize, and does so quite explicitly. Instead of understanding community consciousness as being consistent with individual interests, he *counterposes* duty to interest, community identity to individual identity, rationality to obligation See PTSC, pp. 157-166). Not only is this characterization of peasants bizarre, but Chatterjee’s own evidence shows that individual interests were in fact central to peasant consciousness throughout the period he is studying (PTSC: Chapter 7.4, 7.5).

Chatterjee seems to realize the bind he is in. In his response, he weakens his arguments, and now retreats to the claim that peasants were capable of identifying their interests in the economic sphere, but continued to have a distinctive community consciousness in their political mobilizations. He now is willing to allow that peasants were aware of their economic interests. But this awareness, he argues, did not guide them in their political struggles. Their political consciousness continued to be governed by community, which retained its autonomous dynamic.

But this position is even more absurd than his earlier one. There are two possibilities that might explain the process Chatterjee has described, in which peasants are aware of their

individual economic interests, but draw on their community ideology in political struggles. The first is that they continue to rely on community ties in political struggles because it is in their *interest* to do so. So, for example, they might join hands with jotedars in rural struggles because, even though the latter are exploiters, they are able to contribute resources that smallholders lack. I actually raise this possibility and address it as an explanation in PTSC, pages 172-174. I pointed out there what I will repeat now, that if this is what Chatterjee has in mind, then it supports the very premise that he wishes to reject – that peasants’ political calculations were based on a consideration of their interests. But this would be a “bourgeois consciousness”, whose existence Chatterjee denies.

The other possibility is that community bonds persist in politics because even while peasants can discern a clash of interests in the economic sphere, they are incapable of doing so in the political sphere. But if this is so, how does Chatterjee explain it? For it amounts to a pervasive *cognitive failure* on the part of the Indian peasantry. If they can make a certain kind of cognitive operation in their economic relations, what prevents them from carrying out the same kind of operation in another one? If they are aware of, and act upon, their material interests in their economic reproduction, how are they not able to discern these interests in politics? What makes this especially confusing is that the operation involves the same objects – the local jotedars. If a smallholder knows that a jotedar is charging him an unfairly high rent, or is sequestering his property, and the smallholder therefore trying to resist it, are we to believe that they forget these facts when they join politics? When this same jotedar tries to run for office or calls for a political campaign, do we take it that the peasant simply forgets everything he knows about the rents and the property disputes and simply joins in, singing local folk songs and praising this local notable? The mind boggles -- yet it is precisely what Chatterjee would now have us believe. His earlier view at least had the merit of consistency.

As a final ploy, Chatterjee tries to bolster his case with another appeal to authority.<sup>7</sup> My defense of agential regard for well-being is taken by him to fly in the face of recent work in social anthropology. But this too is utterly false. Of course, there is, and has been for

some time, a strong strand of culturalism in social anthropology. But the trend in recent years is firmly in the other direction, away from the cultural relativism that postcolonial theory endorses, and toward more universalistic theories.<sup>8</sup> In fact, some of the most exciting and influential recent work has centered on two facts about agency that Chatterjee, and Subaltern Studies, typically denies – that social actors are motivated by a healthy regard for their well-being, and secondly, that this motivational structure appears to be operative across cultures.<sup>9</sup> Two aspects of agents’ orientation have particular salience – first, that they view cooperation and some kind of other-orientation as important and desirable, and second, that such an orientation is not allowed to spill over into a consistent altruism. In other words, agents are willing to cooperate as long as they do not feel taken advantage of. This appears to hold true in a wide variety of cultural and social settings. The important point for us is that the orientation just described includes a healthy regard for individual interests, and it undermines the idea that there is a deep chasm separating East from West in agents’ motivational structure. Is it possible that Chatterjee is not aware of this massive body of work, even though he is employed in an Anthropology department in the United States? Or is it that he is aware of it, but chooses to suppress it? I will leave to for the reader to judge which of the two is more embarrassing.

Finally, let us quickly address Chatterjee’s defense of his theory of colonial nationalism, which I take up in Chapter 10 of PTSC. Recall what his argument is in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* – that the chief flaw of nationalist ideology in India was that it internalized the Enlightenment ethos of Reason – rational thought, the admiration of science, and most importantly, the drive to modernize the economy. I argued that this turn to modernization was in fact driven by the constraints of the global capitalist system, and the demands coming from domestic classes. I showed that Chatterjee’s argument not only falls flat, but fails to address even the basic considerations that nationalists themselves adduced in defense of their view. Chatterjee now counters that his denunciation of Reason was meant to be *ironic*.

We should stand back in admire Chatterjee's audacity here. It is not just that he wishes to modify or clarify what he argued in his book. Chatterjee's defense is, when he criticized Nehru for internalizing the Enlightenment ethos, for adhering to a modernizing discourse, he *really didn't mean it*. He does not tell us what exactly it was that he did mean, so that we might discern the view that underwrote his resort to irony. The reader might want to know how an entire book, which purported to offer a theory of nationalism and an explanation for its infirmities, was in fact a long satire. But Chatterjee, in keeping with the pattern of the rest of his response, just throws his retort and walks away.

He does so, of course, because he cannot possibly substantiate it. In fact, it is a tacit admission that he has no real response to my criticism. And even more unfortunately for him, I anticipated a response of this kind and addressed it pre-emptively in PTSC. For those readers who do not see its blatant absurdity, they ought to consult PTSC, pp. pages 281-283. As I argue there, it cannot be the case that Chatterjee's denunciation of Reason is ironic. The entire structure of *Nationalist Thought* is built around the attempt to prop up the critique of Reason and of the INC as its agent. If what Chatterjee wanted to argue was something else, the architecture of the book, its evidence, its protagonists, would have had to be entirely different from what they in fact are. Chatterjee is once again hiding behind a smokescreen.

### Conclusion

It is quite remarkable that in the course of his essay, Chatterjee fails to address *any* of the criticisms I make in PTSC. His response amounts to nothing more than a series of misdirections and outright falsehoods. Instead of dealing with the fact of Guha's mistaken assertions about the bourgeois revolutions, Chatterjee simply denies that he ever made them. Rather than answering my charge that the Indian bourgeoisie was little different than any other, Chatterjee announces that Guha had reverted to the eighteenth century use of the term – without ever informing the reader that he was doing so – and hence never made any claims about Indian capitalists. Instead of dealing with the obvious

contradictions in his, and Chakrabarty's views about subaltern agency and interests, he denies that he ever held the views that I attribute to him – the same views for which Subaltern Studies is in fact known -- without ever addressing the reams of textual evidence I provide. In order to rebut my analysis of abstract labor, Chatterjee steers the discussion away from the questions that have animated the debates – whether abstract categories can apprehend social difference – and invents a debate that has never been relevant for postcolonial theorists. And when faced with the obvious weakness of his critique of Reason in his book on nationalism, he settles upon the novel strategy of saying, essentially, that he was just *kidding* when he placed the concept at the center of his analysis.

All this is carried out without engaging the facts or with the texts. Chatterjee does not give us any clues as to where we might find the textual evidence for his assertions. The essay is remarkably free of citations or references. He relies, instead, on continual appeals to authority and on innuendo, implying, time and again, that an assertion must be true because some authority believes it to be, or even worse, that for anyone to believe otherwise would be sheer folly -- even though I expend considerable energy and space in my book showing why the views he deems true are in fact mistaken.

The only way to make sense of this bizarre exercise is by recognizing that it is not meant to be a response to my book at all. It makes much more sense if viewed, instead, as a *performance*. Chatterjee's essay is designed to allay any anxieties that his followers might have about the foundations of their project in the wake of PTSC. It is a palliative, a balm, to soothe their nerves. Subaltern Studies was not just supposed to offer a rival framework for interpreting colonial modernity; it was also supposed to have internalized whatever was worth retaining from the Marxian tradition, thereby inheriting the mantle of radical critique. For years, the Subalternists have focused just about everything they have written on the irredeemable flaws of Marxism and the Enlightenment -- how they are implicated in imperialism, their reductionism, essentialism, etc. It is startling to find Chatterjee now presenting himself, and his colleagues, as dedicated followers of the Moor himself, their framework as nothing more than an extension of his own. The

reason, of course, is that PTSC challenges the Subalternists on these very grounds. Chatterjee's "response" is an exercise, not to address my arguments, but to dismiss them as irrelevant, and to reassure the reader that all the dross that she has been fed for a quarter century was actually nectar – "no need to even read the book", Chatterjee is saying, "we were right after all". Hence, the chest-thumping and braggadocio.

But of course, this strategy comes with a risk – it might turn out that people do actually read, not only PTSC, but the texts that Chatterjee defends. I have tried to point to the relevant sections and pages, both in my book and in the other work to which he refers, but the fact is that even the most perfunctory reading will show the falsity of his claims. No doubt, many of his followers will take their cues from him and try to prop up his absurd declarations. They will twist and turn the relevant passages to wring the meaning from them that they need. Chatterjee knows that there are more than two generations of academics out there who have invested far too much in postcolonial theory; they will not let its obvious infirmities get in the way of its propagation. He knows this, and it is for them that he has crafted his essay. These are the people he is trying to reassure, with his reliance on authority, his re-found Marxism, his blithe dismissal of worrisome facts, and the like. It is a remarkable performance, but a performance nonetheless. The question now is, how many readers will fall for it?

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Chatterjee 2013, p. 69. Hereafter, all unattributed page numbers refer to Chatterjee 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> See Chakrabarty 1989, pp. 225-226. These are the only pages where Chakrabarty actually discusses abstract labor.
- <sup>3</sup> I will not directly address Chatterjee's rather amusing objection to my use of "psychology" to refer to subaltern consciousness. I did so only because it is common parlance in social science and philosophy. Readers made anxious by concepts like "psychology" may rest assured that the two words refer to the same object.
- <sup>4</sup> Chatterjee 1993, p. 163.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., 163-164. See PTSC, pp. 162.
- <sup>6</sup> Chatterjee 1982, p. 37.
- <sup>7</sup> There is another such resort to authority, which I will not address at any length – Chatterjee defends Chakrabarty's culturalist argument – the target of my criticism in Chapter 8 of PTSC – by pointing to its "solid Marxist provenance" in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* (73). Only three points need be made: first, its being found in Hegel is a bizarre basis for calling it Marxist; second, even if it can be found in Marx, this has *no bearing* on whether or not it is a defensible position; and third, I address the very distinction he alludes to, criticize Chakrabarty's use of it, and provide actual arguments in favor of my view in PTSC, Chapter 8 (see pp. 187-200). I do not reject his argument on the grounds that it is a deviation from Marx. In fact, I never make any claim about its lineage one way or another, since it is of *no relevance* in assessing its soundness. Chatterjee's appeal to authority is therefore not only a little sad, but also utterly irrelevant.
- <sup>8</sup> See Michael Brown 2008 and the ensuing discussion.
- <sup>9</sup> The research on this subject is enormous. Some of it is summarized in Gintis et al, (2005). See also Gurven 2006; Gurven and Winking 2008; Runciman 2008; Price 2003.