

# Marxism, Postcolonial Theory, and the Specter of Universalism

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## Abstract

Following recent debates between Vivek Chibber and leading postcolonial theorists, I probe into what is missing in these exchanges. I focus on the figure of the ‘tribal’ in modern India in Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* and Alpa Shah’s *In the Shadows of the State*, both of which claim to offer emic perspectives on subaltern politics and history. Yet both works, despite their undeniable differences, display a striking universalism that puts them, paradoxically, in the company of Chibber. This universalism, which we may call the *resisting subject*, is about the Other and about us simultaneously, the former constituted by the latter as an abstract object of analysis and as a key symbol of intellectual vanguardism. Are we not better off abandoning such universalisms and searching for ways in which Marxist theories of culture can be melded with postcolonial theories of capitalism?

## Keywords

anthropology, indigeneity, Marxism, postcolonial theory, social history, social theory

## Introduction

In a much-discussed recent critique of ‘postcolonial theory’, Vivek Chibber (2013a: 4) questions the role of ‘culture’ in subaltern studies, which he takes to be an especially egregious instance of this theoretical tradition. According to Chibber, subaltern studies not only ‘reinserted culture as a central mechanism in social analysis’, but were also ‘known for their insistence on the importance of the cultural specificity of “the East”’. Both of these assumptions led (or misled, in Chibber’s view) Subalternists such as Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty to posit, in postcolonial contexts, ‘a capitalism that accommodates to the hierarchies and the culture of the ancien régime ... capitalism, yes, but without capitalist power relations and without a recognizably capitalist culture’ (Chibber, 2013a: 16). In other words, trajectories of capitalism in the postcolonial world were interrupted by comprador elite as well as subaltern cultures, and hence, they differed from trajectories of capitalism in Europe. But, Chibber argues, ‘[t]he universalization of

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capital is perfectly compatible with the persistence of social, cultural, and political differentiation between East and West', that is, '[c]apitalism can sustain a broad gamut of power relations and social identities'. What is universal for Chibber (2013a: 150–51), however, are 'certain needs and interests' of subaltern groups, grounded in 'a common human nature', which cause them to resist the mutant forces of capitalism in disparate sociocultural contexts. Instead of recognizing these needs and interests, subaltern studies (and by implication, postcolonial theory too) stands accused of encasing subaltern pasts in a 'revived Orientalism' that regards 'political psychology [as] culturally constructed, all the way down' (Chibber, 2013a: 176).

Chibber's critique of subaltern studies and postcolonial theory has, of course, attracted its own critics since it was published little over a year ago. Partha Chatterjee's (2013) excoriating rejoinder to Chibber mocks how two staples of modern liberal political theory, universal human nature and basic human needs, dominate the apparently Marxian critique in *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013a), and how this analysis is thus utterly blind to 'the distinction between History 1 and History 2' in Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000a). As more than a few witnesses to the Chatterjee–Chibber public debate at the Historical Materialism conference in New York on 28 April 2013, myself included, have observed, Chatterjee's deft reading of Marx's oeuvre outdid Chibber's efforts and showed the latter to be little more than a Rawlsian liberal devoted to some variant of social contract theory. Bruce Robbins' (2013) review of Chibber's book goes a step further to point out that it lacks any theory of culture at all, and in this sense, it is akin to analytic Marxism with its firm commitment to rational choice theory and methodological individualism (see, e.g., Elster, 2007). In fact, although Chibber (2014) has vehemently objected to being labeled a peddler of rational choice theory, he states clearly in his book that he subscribes to a modified version of rational choice theory that treats individuals as 'satisficers' rather 'maximizers' of self-interest (Chibber, 2013a: 198–99). Equally damning is Chibber's (2013b) own assertion during an interview that sociological theory must, ultimately, be constructed and evaluated, regardless of the peculiarities of cultural contexts:

Why should it matter if capitalists consult astrologers as long as they are driven to make profits? Similarly, it doesn't matter if workers pray on the shop floor as long as they work. This is all that the theory requires. It doesn't say that cultural differences will disappear; it says that these differences don't matter for the spread of capitalism, as long as agents obey the compulsions that capitalist structures place on them.

As such, whatever we may say about postcolonial theory, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* is a rather problematic book, and the author's subsequent claims in defense of his book have only provided more ammunition to those critical or skeptical of his efforts.

In this paper, I do not seek to adjudicate the debate between Vivek Chibber and his critics; nor do I intend to defend subaltern studies against their critics. My task here is both more modest and more ambitious. By demonstrating some surprising similarities between Chibber's approach and that of postcolonial theorists, I want to highlight what is missing altogether in recent polemical exchanges on subaltern studies and their afterlife in the academy. I focus on the figure of the 'tribal' or adivasi in modern India in a classic and a contemporary work, Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983/1999) and Alpa Shah's *In the Shadows of the State* (2010), both of which claim to offer emic perspectives on subaltern politics and history. Yet both works, despite their undeniable differences in method and disciplinary position, display a striking universalism, one that puts them, paradoxically, in the company of Chibber. This universalism, which we may call the *resisting subject*, does strive to transcend this or that sociocultural context. But the resisting subject, of which the adivasi is the foremost example in India, is not simply a summation of basic human needs or an emblem of human nature sans context. What I

hope to show in this paper is that this universalism is about the Other and about us simultaneously, the former being constituted by the latter as an object of academic analysis and as a 'key symbol' (Ortner, 1973) of radical intellectual politics. This is the common intellectual ground on which Vivek Chibber and his postcolonial critics come together: the universal figure of the resisting subject is less about a deeper social-scientific understanding of, say, resistance or subalternity than it is a matter of avant-gardism in the academy today. As such, if we are to take the conversation between Marxism and postcolonial theory in more productive directions in future, I ask, are we not better off abandoning such universalisms as the resisting subject and searching for ways in which Marxist theories of culture can be melded with postcolonial theories of capitalism? Moreover, might it not be better for academics, ensconced as we are in neoliberal spaces of privilege, to give up avant-gardist tropes and postures in order to find newer ways of forging solidarities in our field-sites and beyond? In raising these questions, I am implicitly advocating an ethics and politics of listening, in which scholars are allies rather than vanguards and solidarity between scholars and their subjects is worked out rather than imposed or assumed a priori.

### The Resisting Subject in Subaltern Studies

In a page-long note at the end of his programmatic statement to launch Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha (1982) noted that different strata of peasants featured prominently among the 'subaltern classes' in colonial India. Peasant resistance is, of course, a recurring theme in the early volumes of Subaltern Studies. Some well-known examples are David Arnold's (1982) essay on the Gudem-Rampa rebellion, Gyan Pandey's (1982) analysis of peasant politics and Congress nationalism in Awadh, Gautam Bhadra's (1983) insights into two rebellions on the eastern frontier of the Mughal empire, and Tanika Sarkar's (1985) study of Jitu Santal's rebellion in Malda. All of these works, besides Guha's, aligned themselves with the 'moral economy' framework developed by James Scott (1976) within the nascent field of peasant studies. Additionally, they shared with scholars such as Kumar Suresh Singh (1966) and Michael Adas (1979) the assumption that rural uprisings, especially those that took millenarian forms, were implicitly anti-colonial in their politics. Finally, we must recognize how Subaltern Studies emerged from a sense of failure within leftist, especially revolutionary leftist, circles to 'adequately engage and mobilize the peasantry' (Chandavarkar, 1997: 181). It is against this political-intellectual backdrop that we ought to make sense of the contents of Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects*, which James Scott in his foreword to the 1999 edition called an 'underground classic' and John Beverley in his blurb for the same edition describes as 'the most significant—and potentially the most influential—work of social theory since Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*'.

There is very little to suggest, contra Chibber's pronouncements, the distinctiveness of Oriental culture(s) in *Elementary Aspects*. The term 'elementary aspects', as Scott notes in his foreword (1999: xi), acknowledges the intellectual influence of Émile Durkheim's classic *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). It also, however, reveals Guha's debt to the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure and the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (Chakrabarty, 2000b: 23). In the same way that Durkheim (1912/2001: 13) identified the 'most primitive' religion in the world in order to lay bare the 'the religious nature of man' as 'an essential and permanent aspect of humanity', Guha, too, sought to study nineteenth-century tribal rebellions in order to lay bare the elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in India and beyond. If the evolutionary logic of a now-outmoded anthropology seeps into *Elementary Aspects*, it should not be surprising. Whatever we may say about Durkheim's structuralist method, it is necessary to situate Guha's analysis of tribal rebellions vis-à-vis a longer genealogy of Bengali literary and historical writings that render the figure of the tribal Other as a romantic vestige of a bygone *bhadralok* past (Banerjee, 2006). As

such, the tribal Other, simultaneously, symbolized a lost past as well as the avant-gardism in the present. The resisting subject as the object of academic (historical) analysis was thus conjoined to the possibility of vanguardism today.

The substance of this vanguardist politics within the academy rested, ultimately, on the ability to interpret subaltern politics in the actors' own terms. Emic perspectives on peasant rebellion, in other words, constituted the point of departure in *Elementary Aspects*. As Ranajit Guha (1999: 11) put it, 'we must take the peasant-rebel's awareness of his own world and his will to change it all our point of departure'. This is why Guha supposedly embarked on his famous critique of Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959). Hobsbawm, in Guha's view, was mistaken in characterizing 'primitive rebels' from an etic perspective as 'pre-political', that is, pursuing forms of social activism that predate modern constitutional, party-driven politics. And, yet, it is Guha (1999: 9–10) who wrote the following words:

More often than not it [peasant insurgency] lacked neither in leadership nor in aim nor even in some rudiments of a programme, although none of these attributes could compare in maturity or sophistication with those of the historically more advanced movements of the twentieth century. The evidence is ample and unambiguous on this point... Quite clearly one is dealing here with a phenomenon that was nothing like a modern party leadership.

Compared to the 'anti-imperialist struggle' under Gandhi's leadership, he added, 'the peasant movements of the first three-quarters of British rule represented a somewhat inchoate and naïve state of consciousness' (Guha, 1999: 11). If Hobsbawm's primitive rebels were 'pre-political', Guha's subalterns were 'inchoate' and 'naïve' in their politics. The difference between the two is merely semantic, and as Vivek Chibber (2013a: 156) recognizes somewhat cryptically in a footnote, 'Guha bases his criticism on a rather serious misconstrual of the argument in *Primitive Rebels*'. Both Guha and Hobsbawm, therefore, regarded the resisting subject as a universal category, but their claims to offer emic insights into peasant politics sat uneasily with their tendency to embed a wholly etic analysis in a radical politics.

Guha's analysis of the Santal Hul of 1855 exemplifies his approach to the resisting (tribal) subject. To him, the Hul showed the 'first glimmer', albeit 'feeble and incipient', of a political consciousness among the Santals (Guha, 1999: 28). The brothers-in-arms Sidhu and Kanu are thus quoted to show that they understood 'some of the basic elements of economic exploitation and the political superstructure which legitimized these' (Guha, 1999: 29). The rebels knew something about their exploitation; the radical historian knows it all. 'Negation', the next step for the rebels, according to Guha (1999: 54–55), may be seen in Sidhu–Kanu's statement that the deity that appeared before them was a 'white man' who sat and wrote orders to them. According to Guha (1999: 55), this was 'clearly a case of overdetermination, the power of the colonialist sahib and that of the pen-pushing dhoti-clad babu were telescoped here in a composite vision and raised to divine power'. But it is anything but clear why the deity of the Santal rebels should be a white man, especially if theirs was truly an anti-colonial rebellion. In a similar vein, the fact that the rebels offered puja and their leaders wished to emulate the Hindu gentry's grand Durga puja celebrations is interpreted by Guha somewhat arbitrarily to imply an inversion of peacetime protocol: 'Such an open and energetic avowal of Hinduism on the part of a lowly, "unclean" tribal peasantry could not have been regarded by the Hindu elite as anything but subversive' (Guha, 1999: 72). This is a curious interpretation, especially when one considers how Santals have, historically, offered puja to Durga and other goddesses in the region. Lastly, Guha's (1999: 184–88) claim that castes such as the Kumars, Telis, Gwalas, Lohars, and Doms as well as the entire tribal community were loyal to the Santal rebels is difficult to accept as an instance of collective action arising from shared grievances

against the Raj. If rebel solidarity was indeed produced by ‘the systematic use of primordial networks’, buttressed by shared grievances, then how do we explain the betrayal of Sidhu–Kanu by their own men? In raising these critical questions, my intention is to show, on the one hand, the arbitrariness of some of Guha’s etic interpretations of the Hul, and on the other hand, the encapsulation of every detail of tribal rebellion into a prior conceptual framework in which the politics of the resisting subject mirrors the radical politics of the historian. It would be fair to say, as Gayatri Spivak (1988) later did, that Guha’s approach to tribal rebellions is deaf to subaltern speech and the emic or lived meanings of Santal life that would have undoubtedly distinguished his work from Hobsbawm’s. Ironically, intellectual vanguardism here produces the radical subject rather than radical subaltern politics generating allies among scholars.

Nonetheless, Ranajit Guha consistently applied the same approach to explain other tribal rebellions such as the Kol Insurrection of 1831–32 and the Birsaites *ulgulan* (1895–1901). Both these rebellions, he stated, were anti-colonial in character (Guha, 1999: 26). Yet the evidence he could muster pointed merely to ill-feelings against usurers and landlords. This is why it was necessary for Guha to come up with a theory of ‘transference’ to explain how any attack on local moneylenders or the gentry could be safely interpreted in anti-colonial terms. The *sarkar* (state), he argued, was inseparable in tribal consciousness from the *sahukar* (usurer) and *zamindar* (landlord). It did not matter that tribal subjects petitioned the Raj, declared themselves loyal subjects of the British, and remade themselves along the lines of colonial ethnological monographs to the extent that when the Birsaites *ulgulan* broke out, its leaders sought a Munda Raj under colonial overlordship (Chandra, 2016). In ventriloquizing for the tribal-subaltern, Guha painted a portrait of primitive rebels as anti-colonialists par excellence. This was hardly original, of course: nationalist readings of the Santal Hul, the Kol Insurrection, and the Birsaites *ulgulan*, all acknowledged in *Elementary Aspects*, had made the same point earlier (Datta, 1940; Jha, 1964; Singh, 1966). However, with the nationalist elite discredited in the eyes of radical historians such as Guha, the figure of the subaltern, especially the tribal-subaltern, came to be valorized in an anti-colonial narrative that was Indian as well as universal. The universal category of the resisting subject, exemplified by the tribal-subaltern adorned in anti-colonial colors, thus became the object of Subaltern Studies’ radical historiography.

It may surprise some readers to know that *Elementary Aspects* received high praise in Vivek Chibber’s otherwise critical attack on postcolonial theory, especially subaltern studies. Lauding Ranajit Guha’s treatment of the resisting subject, Chibber (2013a: 154) writes:

The actual content of *Elementary Aspects* suggests that [Guha] wished to emphasize the commonality of Indian peasants with European peasants, and the book’s reputation as a founding text for indigenist or nativist histories of the East is ill-deserved.

Such praise, so strikingly at odds with the rest of Chibber’s book, acknowledges the value of the comparative-historical method, by which Guha produces a universal object of academic analysis and ties it to a radical politics. It is this method that enables Guha to construct a conceptual framework that situates the object of his intellectual inquiry in line with his own politics. Doing so necessarily entails a politics of academic ventriloquism, by which the tribal-subaltern cannot speak but must be spoken for. Regardless of what the archive says, the radical historian must interpret subaltern speech and encode it within a theoretical edifice that wishes away the emic/etic divide. This is, ironically, the common ground where Marxism and postcolonial theory come together in *Elementary Aspects*. If this common ground is taken to be characterized by universalism, it is of the ‘justificatory’ than the ‘essentialist’ kind, opposing contextualism with ‘strong beliefs about the normative content of human reason’, albeit without assuming a fundamental human nature or



essence (Benhabib, 2007: 11–13). This is also, of course, where the limits of universal reason and of intellectual vanguardism make themselves apparent. Only by recognizing these limits, I suggest, can we search for newer ways of doing critical social science through listening and seeking to understand worlds that are often different from our own.

## The Resisting Subject in Contemporary Anthropology

It would be misleading to suggest that there is something peculiar to the resisting subject in Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects*, its comparative-historical method or Subaltern Studies at large. Over the past three decades or so, ethnographers have learned much about the challenges of representing the resisting subject (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Gledhill, 1994; Ortner, 1995): the resisting subject in ethnographic studies, often taken to be entire communities, invariably turns out to be fuzzy and divided, its intentions are not easy to discern, and its politics may be ambivalent or contradictory. Yet the resisting subject is alive today as a universal category of anthropological analysis (Fletcher, 2001; Gledhill, 2012; Seymour, 2006; Theodossopoulos, 2014; Urla and Helepololei, 2014). One particular instance is the rise of the 'indigenous', formerly known simply as tribes, as an object of worldwide activism and scholarship (De la Cadena and Starn, 2007; Dove, 2006; Hodgson, 2011; Yashar, 2005) despite its critics in and outside the discipline of anthropology (Béteille, 1998; Kuper, 2003; Mamdani, 2012). The indigenous makes sense as a resisting subject today in two complementary ways: on the one hand, the indigenous is the global subaltern and activist networks have emerged in its defense against nation-states and capitalism; yet, on the other hand, the indigenous is also a key symbol of our radical desire to transcend our own capitalist-consumerist selves in search of alternative, even radical, futures (Chandra, 2013a). It is against this backdrop that we ought to read Alpa Shah's *In the Shadows of the State* (2010), a much-debated recent anthropological monograph on indigeneity and its discontents in contemporary India.

*In the Shadows of the State* is highly readable and provocative, targeting academics as well as non-academics interested in the rise and popularity of indigeneity discourses worldwide today. The book has two basic aims: first, to expose the myths and half-truths about tribal-indigenous lives to which activists often resort during their work, and second, to explain what kinds of politics the so-called indigenous actually pursue in their everyday lives. The writing style and tone of the book suggest that it is not written only for South Asian area studies specialists, but a wider readership that appreciates the use of 'ethnographic holism and rigor to suggest normative possibilities that are beyond the narratives and academic debates of our texts' (Shah, 2010: 185). Following David Graeber's (2004) invitation to imagine a radical anthropology, Shah believes that 'a sensitive, nuanced, and robust analysis of the complex, contradictory, and differentiated realities of indigenous politics' can lead to radical political alternatives in future. While this promise of 'arcadian' spaces and futures is not, to Shah's mind, about the resisting subject (Shah, 2010: 185–86), these spaces and futures are nonetheless rooted in the purported tendency of the indigenous subject to keep the disenchanting state away and find enchanted alternatives to it in the forests of eastern India. The contemporary anthropological imagination here, therefore, mirrors what the 'indigenous' objects of anthropology do, namely, resist the state. As in *Elementary Aspects*, the primary appeal of Shah's book lies in its claim of an emic understanding of indigenous lifeworlds, so different from our own, which offers the author and the readers a surprising pathway to radical political possibilities.

Just as Ranajit Guha deployed Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* as a foil to present his own manifesto on radical politics, Alpa Shah, too, treats indigeneity activists as a foil for her arguments. Her 'critical ethnography' seeks to make sense of the 'social networks, forms of political representation, and economic structures that produce and subvert indigeneity as both an idea and a lived

experience' (Shah, 2010: 27, 32). Indigeneity activists, claims Shah, imagine tribal subjects to be living in harmony with flora and fauna in the forests, embedded in longstanding communities that shape the mores of each new generation (Shah, 2010: 108). But she finds that these statements are, in fact, very far from the truth: her tribal informants frequently found themselves at odds with marauding elephants that threatened their lives, homes, and crops, and young men and women were all too eager to leave their villages in search of work and pleasure in a megacity (Shah, 2010: 111–14, 138–43). The activists are wrong and Shah is right because she alone has access to the truths that the ethnographic method generates; the implication is that, if activists were to pursue Shah's method, they would also reach the same conclusions about tribal-indigenous groups. That this is not necessarily the case, however, ought to be evident from recent writings of ethnographers working among 'indigenous' populations in India, all of whom may be regarded as key interlocutors of Shah today (see, e.g., Chandra, 2013b; Damodaran, 2012; Ghosh, 2006; Karlsson, 2003; Karlsson and Subba, 2006; Nilsen 2010; Padel and Das, 2010). After all, as an interpretive method used to generate and describe field data, ethnography often leads researchers to divergent conclusions (Heider, 1988; Wedeen, 2009), and when ethnographers disagree on indigeneity and the varieties of activism around it, it makes little sense to use one's ethnographic data to caricature and invalidate the claims of indigeneity activists in toto. Yet, Shah, much like Guha, presents her interpretation of her fieldwork data as the only valid perspective on the matter, explicitly dismissing activist discourses and implicitly disregarding other ethnographers' accounts of indigenous rights activism. To Shah, 'the local appropriation and experiences of global discourses of indigeneity ... maintain a class system that marginalizes the poorest people' instead of ameliorating or ending their poverty and marginality (Shah, 2010: 32).

Shah's own opinion is that the modern state has been experienced by her 'indigenous' interlocutors as a source of corruption and oppression, and hence, their all-too-rational response is to stay away from it. These interlocutors would, in her words, 'given a choice ... prefer to have nothing to do with sarkar [the state] and expect nothing from it' (Shah, 2010: 54). It is here that Shah cites *Elementary Aspects* in support of her statement that the corrupt, oppressive state in her fieldsites may be traced back to the colonial period, when the Kol Insurrection, the Santal Hul, and the Birsaites ulgulan were launched as 'peasant protests against [their] subordination'. This instance of intertextuality helps us clearly see the concrete links between Guha's and Shah's writings and the universal category of the resisting subject to which they give rise. To explore the anti-state orientation of her interlocutors further, Shah (2010: 59) follows Guha in sketching the inner life of the tribal-indigenous community, which she discovers in a 'sacral polity' built on 'mutual aid and reciprocity' that exists as a democratic alternative to the modern state and its oppressive ways. Here, then, are Guha's 'primordial' networks of solidarity, albeit now in peacetime. If there is no evidence of violent rebellion or even non-violent protest in Shah's monograph, it is not because these do not exist (Chandra, 2013b; Ghosh, 2006; Sundar, 2009), but because the resisting subject in times of peace is the object of her inquiry. The sacral polity is thus the handiwork of the resisting subject today, and it is also, for Shah, the fountainhead from which arcadian spaces and futures may emerge.

To Alpa Shah, it is from an ethnographic examination of the actual condition of 'indigenous' populations, then, that we can derive a radical politics today. The tribal-indigenous are, therefore, 'our contemporaries' (Shah, 2010: 189), comrades-in-arms in our quest for radical potentialities. The ethnographic method deployed in *In the Shadows of the State* permits a complete identification with the subjects of research in a sense that Guha's comparative-historical method arguably did not or could not. And yet, the ethnographer's claim to listen and represent voices from the 'field' cannot be taken at face value. Despite the claim to emic understanding, none of Shah's research subjects speak of sacral polities as democratic, let alone arcadian, spaces. Nor, of course, do they share

the author's conception of what constitutes radical politics, unsure as we remain as readers whether Shah's subjects consider themselves to be pursuing radical politics at all. These must, as in *Elementary Aspects*, be etic claims to a kind of scholarly vanguardism that, nonetheless, identifies completely with the figure of the resisting (tribal) subject. The vanguardist tropes in Shah's book, however, do not belong to this or that sociocultural context, but are universal. Once again, we are on the common ground between postcolonial theory and Marxism, though the former is not as culturalist and the latter is not as vanguardist as their critics suggest.

## Conclusion

To return to where we began, the grand battle between the representatives of Marxism and postcolonial theory, it is certainly tempting to see it as an instance of much ado about nothing. But, then again, the battle lines are drawn so sharply and the unwillingness to enter into dialogue is so palpable that the current impasse seems real enough. My modest solution to find a way out of this impasse is to look for a couple of rather surprising similarities between Vivek Chibber and those whose work he has criticized so forcefully. These similarities do not imply that substantive differences do not exist; they obviously do in terms of method and subject matter. The similarities lie in their aims: first, in the search for universalisms such as the resisting subject to make sense of postcolonial history and politics, and second, in the manner in which these universalisms, whether class struggle, anti-colonial resistance or anti-state social organization, permit scholars to pursue an avant-gardist politics by claiming a complete identification with their research subjects. For the sake of clarity, I have focused on the figure of the tribal or indigenous subject as an instance of the universal resisting subject, and explained how two prominent works of South Asian history and anthropology across different generations have, despite their methodological and theoretical differences, written remarkably similar narratives about the resisting tribal subject. These narratives are, of course, not simply about the tribal Other but also about the authors and their claim to be doing radical politics through their scholarship. The constitution of the object of intellectual analysis in these narratives becomes the ground on which the flag of academic avant-gardism gets hoisted, during which the tribal-subaltern has little or no say but is spoken for.

In pointing out these uncomfortable but hardly novel truths about what our embattled theorists of Marxism and postcolonialism share in common, I wish to ask whether such universalisms as the resisting subject and the radical pretensions that flow from them ought to be abandoned today. Those who would answer in the negative might say that such universalisms render social critique powerful in and outside academia. In response, it is worth asking whether academic avant-gardism benefits anyone except those claiming a kind of intellectual purity within a professional parlor game. Might it not be better to pursue a different kind of intellectual praxis in which textual representations of our research subjects do not fight mock battles in the service of this or that grand theory? At the very least, I think, the possibility is worth contemplating. In concrete terms, this would mean, on the one hand, grappling with 'engaged universals' (Tsing, 2004) such as the nation, development, civil society, and social movements that we encounter in particular contexts, and on the other hand, committing to 'thickness' and complexity (Ortner, 1995) rather than to parsimonious or abstract theoretical frameworks. In terms of the philosophy and sociology of the social sciences, this is a call for 'realism' (Sayer 2000; Shapiro and Wendt, 1992) and 'contextualism' (Bhargava, 1992), but one that does not give up on comparison or the elaboration of similarities and differences (van der Veer, 2013). The results will almost certainly be less dramatic than the grand universalisms and theories that promise so much yet deliver so little. But, arguably, the interests of critical social science as well as our research subjects will be better advanced by paying



more careful attention to the layers of meaning, often complex and sometimes contradictory, that researchers invariably encounter. At the very least, this is a call for patience, nuance, and reflexivity in engaging with subaltern populations: to listen more carefully, and then, grapple with the analytical and ethical dilemmas of interpretive research. Ultimately, this is a call for forging solidarities with particular struggles in specific contexts rather than claiming to speak on behalf of universal abstract subalterns. It is a call, in other words, for an ethics and politics of listening and for scholars to be allies rather than pose as vanguards.

Beyond a reflexive intellectual praxis that compels us to listen better and, when necessary, to act in the service of specific subaltern struggles, it is finally worth asking how Marxism and postcolonial theory might engage with each other fruitfully if they give up their desire to produce grand pronouncements on the state of the world. In the dialogue of the deaf that followed the publication of Vivek Chibber's book, we may discern, above all, an inability to carve out a fresh intellectual space in which Marxist theories of culture can be melded with postcolonial theories of capitalism. This is a potentially overlapping space between Chibber and his critics, which permits both sides to learn from each other's strengths and where everyday realities drive theory, not vice-versa. In fact, such an intellectual space already exists, for instance, in the study of modern India if we consider scholarship linking the anthropology of caste to the everyday politics of labor and capital (see, e.g., Chari, 2004; de Neve, 2005; Gidwani, 2008; Harriss-White, 2003; Harriss-White et al., 2013). A parallel anthropology of the emerging relationship between indigeneity and capitalism is also well underway (Bessire, 2014; Hale, 2005; Hodgson, 2011; Li, 2010, 2014; McCormack, 2012; Muehlmann, 2009). There are two distinctive features of scholarship in this vein: first, it grapples conceptually with sociocultural forms in their distinctive material contexts without a priori notions of class, labor or capitalism, and second, it lays open the varieties of actually existing capitalism in postcolonial contexts, thereby paving the way for constructive exchanges among scholars working in different world regions and between scholars and activists more generally. In this overlapping space in which Marxist theories of culture meet postcolonial theories of capitalism, scholars abjure Theory for the sake of what Robert Merton (1949: 39–53) long ago called 'sociological theories of the middle range'. Embedded firmly in particular empirical contexts, these theories yoke together culture and capital by probing, comparing and contrasting, and drawing tentative generalizations in the form of nuanced arguments. In doing so, they seek solidarities with the marginalized or subaltern without reducing them to mute playthings in an academic parlor game. To call for scholars to give up their radical avant-gardist pretensions does not, after all, imply that they need to abandon social critique. On the contrary, it calls for scholars to pursue critical social-scientific agendas in which empirically-grounded critique is tied to an epistemic politics of listening and solidarity. Only then can we truly dispel the specter of universalism that haunts both Marxism and postcolonial studies today.

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