CHAPTER ONE

Postcolonial Theory and Subaltern Studies

1.1 POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AS ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

Over the past two decades, postcolonial studies has acquired considerable visibility in academic circles. Its point of origin was in literary and cultural studies, where it started as a movement to transcend the marginalization of non-Western literatures in the canon. On this count, the campaign experienced enormous, and rapid, success. By the turn of the millennium, the conventional packaging of modern literary training had expanded—at least at many elite American universities—to include the works of authors as diverse as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Aimé Césaire, Salman Rushdie, and Gabriel García Márquez. This was a remarkable and salutary achievement in its own right, and had the influence of postcolonial studies been limited to this, it would have certainly merited real attention. But its significance would have been limited. Most likely it would have been understood as a current which, while no doubt important for widening the perspective of its field, nonetheless remained part of the internal story of an academic specialty—no more worthy of attention than any other scholarly trend. What set it apart—and continues to do so—were two additional facts about its trajectory.

The first was that postcolonial studies rapidly migrated beyond literary analysis, to find a happy home in other disciplines. It was most visible in history and anthropology, but its influence soon spread to other scholarly domains. This was part of a broader trend in academia at the fin de siècle, which has since continued apace and is often referred to as "the cultural turn." The New Left's brief flirtation with Marxist materialism had, by this time, largely dissipated; in its wake came an abiding interest in culture and ideology, not merely as an object of study but as an explanatory principle that rapidly usurped the same exalted place that "class" or "capitalism" had occupied just a decade prior. As the shift toward cultural analysis gathered steam, it was not altogether surprising that intellectuals looked to literary theory for guidance on how to approach their subject. The frameworks and theories dominant in departments of literature thus found an audience in related fields—and among the exports was postcolonial studies. For area specialists in particular, whose focus was what had been known as the Third World, the turn

toward cultural analysis naturally translated into a fascination with postcolonial studies as a framework. By the turn of the century, then, the approach was no longer a purely disciplinary phenomenon.

The second noteworthy fact about postcolonial studies was that it claimed not just to study colonial history but also to enable political practice. The ambition was not simply to generate scholarly output but, as Robert J. C. Young advised, to “foreground its interventionist possibilities.”

Leaving figures in the postcolonial field have often referred to it as more than just a theory; it is also presented as a form of practice or even a movement. In its early years, this impulse was naturally directed toward the structures of colonial and neocolonial domination. More recently, however, postcolonial studies has expanded its domain to the social sphere more generally. In a recent introduction to the field, it is described as a theory relevant to anyone “joined by the common political and ethical commitment to challenging and questioning the practices and consequences of domination and subordination.”

The focus on imperial cultures and colonial rule thus occupies only one part of the field’s universe. It now takes as its remit the gamut of social practices.

Postcolonial studies has thus positioned itself not only as positive theory but also as radical critique. In so doing, it has stepped quite consciously into the vacuum left by the decline of Marxism in both the industrialized West and its satellites. In part, this flows from the biographical trajectories of its leading lights, many of whom participated in the New Left’s dalliance with Marxism. Figures such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Ranajit Guha, Anibal Quijano, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty emerged from the Marxist milieu of the 1970s, even if their immersion in it varied in intensity. It was only natural for them to take Marxism as their primary interlocutor as they made their way out of its orbit and forged the agenda for postcolonial studies. But while these biographical factors are certainly not irrelevant, the primary source of the engagement with, and rejection of, Marxism has been political: a sense that the world has moved on; that the dilemmas of late capitalism, particularly in the Global South, cannot be apprehended by the categories of historical materialism; even more, that the failure of liberation movements in the twentieth century was, in substantial measure, the result of Marxism’s abiding theoretical inadequacies.

As a result, the challenge faced by postcolonial studies is strikingly similar to the one accepted by Marxism a century ago—to generate a theory adequate to the needs of a radical political agenda. There are differences, of course—the most obvious one being that Marxism’s initial development and spread was almost entirely based in working-class organizations and political parties, while its

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Postcolonial studies is its mirror image, having developed entirely within the university and, though drawing some inspiration from movements, rarely in more than symbolic contact with them. Still, in the universe of academic production, the success has been nothing short of remarkable. As even one of its critics has been moved to observe, "the most flourishing sector of cultural studies today is so-called postcolonial studies."4

But for any critic of postcolonial studies, the very success of the field raises formidable challenges to a proper assessment of it. Owing in large measure to their roots in poststructuralist theory and its anti-foundationalism, many postcolonial intellectuals have eschewed developing the kind of clearly constructed propositions that would normally accompany a research agenda. This would, perhaps, be considered too vulgar a display of truthmongering. Again and again, we find that the proponents of the field present it more as an intellectual orientation than as a theory. It is part of the move to what has been called post-theory.5 In the inaugural issue of one of the journals dedicated to the field, Robert Young announces that "postcolonialism offers a politics rather than a coherent methodology. Indeed . . . strictly speaking there is no such thing as postcolonial theory as such—rather there are shared political perceptions and agenda [sic] which employ an eclectic range of theories in their service."6 I believe that Young's characterization is quite accurate, and points to a central difference between postcolonial studies and the Marxist tradition it seeks to supplant. It is not that postcolonial studies is an assemblage of theories while Marxism was not—in fact, Marxism always comprised an eclectic range of theories, much as does the former. The difference is that Marxism always sought internal coherence and systematicity, while postcolonial studies resists any compulsion to bring together and assess its various strands. Thus, as its influence has spread, the variations in what falls under its rubric have tended to increase. From literature and cultural studies, to historiography, the philosophy of history, and anthropology, it is now possible to find postcolonial theory in all these areas and elsewhere besides, but with the common "theory" increasingly hard to discern.

The reluctance to strive for coherence has been overlaid with a phenomenon more typical of university culture. This is the eagerness among academics to appear au courant, at the cutting edge, to display familiarity with the very latest conceptual advances. The most common means of so doing is to troll for the latest neologisms in order to pepper one's work with them, even if only for symbolic purposes. The result is a kind of conceptual inflation, in which the substantive influence of a framework appears to extend far beyond its actual reach. Postcolonial studies has enjoyed this inflated popularity more than most others—hence the spread of terms

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5 See Eagleton's characteristically bracing discussion of this phenomenon in ibid., chaps. 1-4.
6 Young, Editorial, 5.
such as “subaltern,” “hybridity,” “the fragment,” and “diaspora” across the scholarly landscape. Its conceptual repertoire can be found in works of many kinds, even when they are not committed to the same research agenda or to a common set of theoretical parameters. As a result, works that appear to fall within the domain of postcolonial studies may be committed to quite distinct theoretical agendas. What they will have in common is the field’s style, not its substance.

If a field of research or intellectual practice becomes truly chaotic, it poses some special challenges for critics. Normally, in assessments of any research program, the first task is to locate its central theoretical propositions. These can then be judged with regard to consistency, empirical success, coherence, and so on. But in the case of a field as diffuse as postcolonial studies appears to be, critics run the risk of discovering counterexamples for every theoretical commitment they criticize. For every failure of the theory that critics might adduce, defenders can find exceptions and successes. The challenge is thus to examine whether, under the mountain of loosely connected scholarship, there lies a core set of commitments or propositions. If no such core can be discovered, the next task is to see whether there exists a strand of theorization within the field that has some coherence and makes explicit its commitments, even if these have not been adopted by the field as a whole.

Now, it seems reasonable to suppose that despite the “bandwagon effect” of its jargon, postcolonial studies does have some common political and theoretical commitments at its core. It is known for its critique of Eurocentrism, nationalism (“the nation form”), colonial ideology, and economic determinism. Its leading theorists claim to have excavated the sources of subaltern agency and reinserted culture as a central mechanism in social analysis; indeed, they are known for their insistence on the importance of the cultural specificity of “the East.” These themes are quite commonly associated with postcolonial studies and are part of its attraction to intellectuals. Further, they are more than a set of political commitments. Serious proponents of these views presumably also carry a set of arguments in support of their positions. Perhaps these arguments are not accepted across the spectrum of those who call themselves postcolonial theorists, but as long as the arguments cohere, they do permit assessment. And so long as the influence of the arguments being assessed is real—even if not universal—then the critique is not only possible but also meaningful.

1.2. THE RISE OF SUBALTERN STUDIES

It happens that we can identify several strands of theorization within postcolonial studies. Some of them, particularly its cultural theory and some of its metatheoretical arguments, have already generated considerable discussion.

7 Some notable engagements on the literary and cultural front are Aijaz Ahmad.
Although I intend to take up these issues to some extent in the following chapters, my central concern in this book is to examine the framework that postcolonial studies has generated for historical analysis and, in particular, the analysis of what once was called the Third World. There is little doubt that, had it not been for its spread into historical and anthropological scholarship, postcolonial studies would have enjoyed far less notoriety on the general intellectual landscape. Once exported into area studies and historical scholarship, however, the theory gained more general visibility. Moreover, scholars in these more empirically oriented domains have made efforts to enunciate their theoretical commitments. We are therefore able to analyze these historical arguments as well as the theory that they collectively comprise.

The most illustrious representative of postcolonial studies in the scholarship on the Global South is undoubtedly the Subaltern Studies project. Initially the term was merely a name, a proper noun that referred to an annual series published in India starting in 1982. But what began as an annual volume of essays on modern Indian history, inspired by Gramscian theory and critical trends within historical scholarship, had, by the turn of the century, morphed into something more generic. “Subaltern” now became a marker of a theoretical orientation, an adjective that characterized an approach to the analysis of colonialism, or imperial history, or even politics in general. Leading proponents of the project having announced its affiliation with postcolonial studies, it was, by the end of the twentieth century, widely regarded as the face of postcolonial scholarship in area studies. To be sure, there were and are theorists within the postcolonial fold who are not directly affiliated with Subaltern Studies or its theoretical agenda, but there is no more conspicuous exemplar of postcolonial theory in the relevant disciplines than the “Subalternists” themselves.

The contours of this story are well known. When the annual series was launched in 1982, it was received in the scholarly world as the local avatar of


"history from below" as developed by the New Left. It was conceived by Ranajit Guha, a historian of modern India then based at the University of Sussex, together with a small group of younger scholars. At the time they began meeting, in the late 1970s, most members of this group would have regarded themselves as Marxists. As with so many of their peers in the West, they were impressed by the achievements of the movement for a "history from below" and the turn toward popular consciousness as a research agenda. All of the sketches that group members have drawn up in later years recount the influence of E. P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and pioneers of popular history. A natural accompaniment to this agenda was an abiding interest in the work of Antonio Gramsci, whose influence among social historians was growing rapidly during this period. Gramsci's scattered but powerful reflections on Marxist theory and Italian culture embodied, for this later generation, their dual concerns with popular history and matters of consciousness. The group that coalesced around Guha was no exception to this trend.

While the group internalized the turn toward popular movements and culture that was then pervading historical scholarship, it also took on board another set of concerns, of a more local character. These had to do with the trajectory of colonial and postcolonial India as set against the wider experience of global modernity. In initiating its project, the Subaltern Studies group proposed not just to ask new questions—about the history of subordinate groups, popular movements, peasant consciousness, and so forth—but also to provide new answers to old questions, especially questions about the Subcontinent's political evolution since Independence. All these concerns are in evidence in the first volume's prefatory document, which serves as a kind of manifesto. In it, the editors declared their intention not only to uncover the hidden history of the Subcontinent's laboring classes but also to provide some explanation for the historic failure of Indian nationalism, whether as an elite project or a popular aspiration for a national liberation struggle. The editors thus committed themselves to developing an account of the broader political economy of the entire modern era in Indian history, a theme that had been at the center of debates in the Subcontinent in the preceding decades. The truly innovative dimension of Subaltern Studies, then, was to marry popular history to the analysis of colonial and postcolonial capitalism.

9 This group included Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyanendra Pandey, and Dipesh Chakrabarty.
While the intellectual agenda mapped out was no doubt exciting, it did not by any means constitute a radical break from the milieu that produced it. As had been promised, the early volumes of Subaltern Studies pursued the twin themes of history from below and colonial political economy. While the resulting output was exciting and in many ways innovative, it fit rather easily into the cultural Marxism in vogue at the time, and although it raised the hackles of some Marxists in India, the criticisms were not easily distinguishable from the reactions that typically accompany any departure from familiar nostrums. Subaltern Studies was largely seen as an innovation within Marxist theory, not as a radical departure from it. This is not to downplay either the significance of the early work or the reactions—often hostile—that it elicited from more orthodox Marxists. But the flavor of these critiques, and of the Subalternists' responses to them, was that of a dispute within an epistemic community rather than a rupture within it.

The more portentous departures came some years into the project, perhaps most famously with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" in the fourth volume. This was the first sign that the project might be making a transition from cultural Marxism to a more decidedly poststructuralist agenda. This was, of course, a familiar turn. From the start, Subaltern Studies had been closely aligned with intellectual trends in the New Left. Within this generation, poststructuralist theory was gaining in popularity by leaps and bounds. If the Subalternists now turned to Foucault and Derrida for inspiration, it would simply be keeping pace with broader shifts. One of the first signs of a shift within the Subalternist collective came in 1986, with the publication of Partha Chatterjee's Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World. In this work, while deploying some standard Marxist arguments about Indian nationalism, Chatterjee also offered an initial glimpse of themes he would revisit and deepen over the years—themes that evinced a decidedly postmodern suspiciousness of scientific thought, rationalism, and the larger Enlightenment project. Chatterjee's book was followed in 1989 by Dipesh Chakrabarty's Rethinking Working-Class History, which reflected a growing ambivalence toward Marxist frames for labor history, in particular their materialist and rationalist assumptions. By the early 1990s, the traversal to a broadly postmodernist sensibility was more or less complete. While the annual volumes still published essays continuing the call for history from

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13 For examples of such responses, see Partha Chatterjee, “More on Modes of Power,” in Ranajit Guha, ed., Subaltern Studies II (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).


below, there was now an increasing preoccupation with textual analysis, with marginality rather than exploitation or domination as an axial concept, with the critique of "grand narratives," and so on.\textsuperscript{16}

The turn toward a recognizably poststructuralist orientation certainly ensured the project's attractiveness outside the narrow circle of Marxist historians of South Asia. But perhaps equally important was the blue-ribbon reception that the series received in the West starting in the early nineties. The \textit{Subaltern} series had attracted some attention in the West during its initial years, but this was largely confined to area specialists and a small circle of historians. To be sure, it was seen as a bracing development that Indian historians were taking up themes that had so enlivened scholarship in the West in the recent past. But this was happening across the spectrum in area studies—in African studies, especially in South Africa, among Latin Americanists, and also in some quarters of Middle Eastern studies.\textsuperscript{17} There was nothing especially exotic or singular about the turn in Indian historiography. What made the Subalternists stand out was the incorporation of their project into the most dynamic trend in post-Marxist theorizing in the West, within which they found some powerful patrons. The first was, as mentioned, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who parachuted into the project in 1985 with her essay in the fourth volume. Even more significant was the publication, in 1987, of \textit{Selected Subaltern Studies}, which included a foreword, and hence endorsement, by Edward Said, an imposing presence on the intellectual scene by the late 1980s whose 1978 book \textit{Orientalism} had already become a modern classic. As a result, the publication of \textit{Selected Subaltern Studies} not only brought the project to Western academic circles, but delivered it with the imprimatur of two leading lights of cultural theory.

The marriage of Subaltern Studies to post-Marxian cultural theory was a dramatic success. It was from a reading of the early volumes that a leading American scholar of South Asia claimed, with no hint of irony or embarrassment, that "Indians are, for perhaps the first time since colonization, showing sustained signs of reappropriating the capacity to represent themselves."\textsuperscript{18} The framework being developed by the collective soon became an object for more


\textsuperscript{17} It is interesting that South African historiography was moving in a direction largely parallel with that of India in the 1980s, with a strong turn to history from below and a kind of Gramscian Marxism. Key to this development were the works of Charles van Onselen, Belinda Bozzoli, Shula Marks, Dan O'Meara and others. The intellectual history is very ably charted by Martin J. Murray in "The Triumph of Marxist Approaches in South African Social and Labour History," \textit{The Journal of Asian and African Studies} 23:1-2 (1988), 79-101. But these works never received the same attention in broader circles as did their Indian counterparts.

\textsuperscript{18} Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of South Asia," \textit{Modern Asian Studies} 20:3 (1986), 445. Emphasis added. Better late than never, one might say...
general discussion among area-oriented scholars. A conspicuous marker of its impact was the decision by the American Historical Review, in 1994, to host a symposium on the project's importance to the historiography of the Global South. But while the appearance of such a debate in the discipline's flagship journal was certainly noteworthy, it was only one example of the growing notoriety of Subaltern Studies as a theoretical tendency. Anthologies of not merely the group's essays but also of the surrounding debates began to appear. By the turn of the century, there was even a Latin American Subaltern Studies group and a journal devoted primarily to exploring the ramifications of the Subalternist approach for historical, cultural, and political analysis.

### 1.3 Subaltern Studies as Theory

Subaltern Studies is a distinct, influential, and representative stream within postcolonial studies, perhaps more than any other. But can it be identified with the production of an interesting theory? If the phenomenon merely consisted in a revamped call for history from below, as seemed to be the case in its early years, or a jeremiad against the depredations of colonialism, or the celebration of Third World agency, then whatever else it achieved, it could hardly merit attention as a theoretical project. The matter is complicated somewhat by the fact that the obscurity of much poststructuralist theorizing resists easy delineation of its claims, and although Subaltern Studies is less given to such murkiness, the project is by no means free of it. No critic can approach the task of explicating its central theoretical commitments without trepidation. But, as it happens, members of the collective have, on a few occasions, offered a summary of the project's core theoretical agenda. One of the more recent of these, an essay by Dipesh Chakrabarty titled "A Small History of Subaltern Studies," is also the clearest and most comprehensive to date.

One of the most striking revelations in Chakrabarty's presentation is that Subaltern Studies was, from the start, a fundamentally theoretical enterprise. In other words, in the collective members' own view, their work was oriented toward...
The upshot of the Conventional Story is that capitalist modernization was a global phenomenon, albeit one whose spread was temporally and spatially differentiated. Even though the colonized world came to it later, there was little doubt that it would track the grooves laid down by the advanced world. The engine that drove this process was constituted by industrialism and modern economic practices, and the accompanying political and cultural transformation was part of the package. This was capital's universalizing mission, as conventionally understood. It endowed the modern era with a recognizable Zeitgeist. This carried an important implication: namely, that it is possible to slot practices and even forms of consciousness into their appropriate places in the progression from premodern to modern. Europe showed the developing world a rough picture of its own future. Thus, if social agents in the latter regions were found to have exhibited forms of consciousness that did not conform to modern expectations, then it must be because they had not been fully subjected to the cleansing effect of capitalist relations. The cure, at least in part, would be simply to wait—to allow capitalism to do its work and imbue the agents with a modern orientation. Thanks to capital's ceaseless quest for hegemony, there would be a slow, but quite certain, global convergence around characteristically bourgeois forms of cultural and political reproduction.

**THE SUBALTERN STUDIES RESPONSE**

A central concern of the Subaltern Studies collective has been to reject central components of the Conventional Story, whether in Marxist or liberal guise. Much of their theorizing about the colonial and postcolonial world can be understood as a double movement—the rejection of core propositions of this orthodoxy, followed by an exploration of the implications of this rejection for our broader understanding of the colonial world and, more generally, of the Global South. And just as the Conventional Story begins with a thesis about the agent driving forward the modernizing project, so too do the Subalternists. The core arguments are summarized in the following two theses about the peculiarities of capitalism in the East.

**The Specificity of Colonial Capitalism**

**Thesis 1: A Nonhegemonic Bourgeoisie**

The first source of the colonial world's divergence from the European trajectory is the character of its bourgeoisie. It is not that no capitalist class existed in the East. Rather, it is that the bourgeoisie under colonialism was either unable to, or chose not to, secure a leading position for itself in the struggle against the ancien régime. This is true for capitalists from the metropole, who went to the colonies under the patronage of the Europeans, as well as for local entrepreneurs who grew to maturity under colonial rule. These bourgeois classes, of course, exercised a great deal...
of power. But they did not take up cudgels against dominant landed classes of the ancien régime. Instead, both segments of the bourgeoisie accommodated to the interests of the latter, thereby incorporating them into the modern political order. The result, Chakrabarty notes, was that “there was no class in South Asia comparable to the European bourgeoisie of Marxist metanarratives”—in other words, a bourgeoisie committed to eradicating the feudal order and capturing state power in order to revolutionize the political culture.\(^{24}\)

Their eschewal of revolutionary ambitions meant, in turn, that there was little chance the capitalists would try to bring popular classes under their umbrella in a national-popular struggle against the traditional order, for they had sworn off taking on the feudal landed classes in a frontal assault. As a result, they would fail to appease the peasantry, since the main target of peasant animus was the landed overlord. Nor would the capitalists be able to promise workers a rising standard of living, since a backward agriculture would remain a drag on growth rates. Thus, Guha concludes, whereas the European bourgeoisie had come to power by forging a hegemonic coalition with workers and peasants, there would be no parallel experience in the colonial world. The bourgeoisie would exercise dominance, but not hegemony.

**Thesis 2: The Derailment of Capital’s Universalizing Drive**

The bourgeoisie’s abrogation of a revolutionary course of action in India, its refusal to dismantle the pillars of feudal power, is taken to signify a deeper historical truth: that in its colonial venture, capital abandoned its “universalizing mission.”\(^{25}\) Universalization for the Subalternists seems to refer to two aspects of capitalism, the first of which is the ability of capital to present its interests as consistent with the interests of other classes, even those it exploits. This, for Guha, constitutes the key to the classic bourgeois revolutions in England and France. A rising bourgeoisie, in both cases, was able to overthrow feudalism because it successfully presented its own interests as congruent with those of peasants and workers, and in so doing, forged a social coalition under its leadership, a coalition it then mobilized to overthrow the feudal monarchy. In this instance, capital’s universalizing drive refers to its ability to rise above the pursuit of its narrow sectional interests and make common cause with those of other classes.

The second aspect is the implantation of social institutions that reflect the politics and culture typical of bourgeois rule. These are taken to be those institutions that can be identified with liberalism and citizenship: formal equality, political freedoms, contractualism, secularism, and so forth. For the Subalternists,
the link between capitalism and liberalism is very strong. It rests, perversely, on their acceptance of certain aspects of the Conventional Story, in which the bourgeoisie is understood to have fought not only for economic freedoms but also for political liberties. Once they had displaced the feudal ruling classes, the bourgeoisie forged a social order based on both kinds of freedoms—the right to property, as well as political freedoms. This order of rights and liberties was granted to all, creating a national political community that overcame localism and particularism of the ancien régime. Universalism is, in this instance, the spread of political liberalism as an accompaniment to the economic hegemony of capital.

The putative derailment of capital's universalizing drive is very significant for postcolonial theory, and for the Subalternist project in particular. Socially, it signals that the deep political and cultural transformations that accompanied the rise of capitalism were not in the East's cards—at least, not in any way that could fit into the standard liberal or Marxist framework. This is because the agent taken by the Subalternists as having ushered in these transformations—the emerging bourgeoisie—failed to demonstrate any such inclinations once it arrived on Eastern shores. From this sociological fact is derived a theoretical conclusion: if the social matrix and developmental arc of the modernizing Global South are not the same as those of early modern Europe, if their dominant political and cultural forms depart so radically from those of the modern West, then the theories imported from the West cannot be appropriate to the study of Eastern settings. As a result, the East needs its own, sui generis theoretical categories.

The Specificity of Colonial Modernity and the Dislodging of Eurocentrism

We move now to the implications of the argument from uniqueness. Theses 3 through 5 examine the consequences for political power and nationhood, while thesis 6 takes up the problem of Eurocentrism

- Thesis 3: Colonialism and the Pluralization of Power

Since colonial capitalism does not seek to overthrow the feudal landed classes, and instead merely accommodates them, it also backs away from eliminating the concomitant forms of domination. Unlike what took place in Europe, where an ascendant bourgeoisie swept away antiquated power relations even as it set about displacing feudal rule, the bourgeoisie in colonial and postcolonial settings learned to live with them. Thus one finds coexistence and active reproduction of classically bourgeois power relations—such as the wage relation—with forms of subordination typically associated with precapitalist social formations. It follows that modernity in such a setting will not keep to the same path as in Europe, with the same basic institutions, their verisimilitude increasing with time. Instead it will be an altogether different kind of modernity, one in which
apparently outdated power relations will be reproduced alongside more “modern” ones. This is an index of the fact that the bourgeoisie in colonial conditions failed “to live up to its own universalizing project.”

The immediate implication of this survival of antediluvian forms of social domination, Chakrabarty argues, is to force us to rethink the nature of power. In Europe, where the bourgeoisie was able to transform the social order, power came to be aligned with the rule of capital. Not so in colonial modernity. Guha’s analysis, observes Chakrabarty, “fundamentally pluralizes the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universal history of capital.”

Hence, even while capital can be seen to expand around the globe, “the global history of capitalism need not reproduce everywhere the same history of power . . . [Cap]ital and power can be seen as analytically separable categories.” Marxists are the primary targets of this admonishment, since they are held to assume a co-linearity between capital and power. If one accepts that a disjuncture between the two is possible, then the relevance of canonical Marxism cannot but suffer: the “traditional European-Marxist political thought that fuses the two [i.e., capital and power] is therefore always relevant but always inadequate for theorizing power in colonial-modern histories.”

- **Thesis 4: The Two Domains of Colonial Politics**

Colonial capital’s refusal to take up its universalizing mission, its willingness to accommodate the ancien régime, has some important implications for political analysis. First, since it leaves untouched older forms of power, and therefore also the political idiom linked to those power relations, it means that the bourgeoisie does not integrate subaltern culture into its own modernizing discourse. A split between the two domains persists, so that the elite and the popular remain distinct social formations. This does not by any means suggest they are entirely independent of each other; it means rather that there is a recognizable “subaltern” domain of politics, related to, but distinct from, that of the ruling classes. This state of affairs is held to be in sharp contrast to Europe, where, claim the Subalternists, as an index of its hegemony a revolutionary bourgeoisie successfully integrated the popular into the domain of elite and organized politics.

Second, the persistence of this subaltern domain means that forms of political engagement typically associated with premodern politics will persist in modern times, as will the idiom in which the struggles of the poor and the oppressed have long been formulated. The language of a recognizably bourgeois politics will not be universal. Indeed, the assumption that politics is organized around the rational pursuit of individual interests becomes problematic. Often politics will be waged in

27 Ibid., 12.
28 Ibid., 13.
religious language and around religious issues. Furthermore, the dominant axis will typically be community/ethnicity, not individual or class interests.

If peasant struggles in India are organized around caste or ethnic groupings, or are expressed in nonsecular terms, it is not a sign of their being "prepolitical," and hence premodern, as the Subalternists accuse Marxists such as Eric Hobsbawm to be claiming. Instead, it shows they are thoroughly political and modern, for they reflect the fundamentally different character of colonial modernity. European political theory commits the error of equating modernity with recognizably bourgeois forms of power and political discourse. Colonial modernity, however, generates a break between these two; it produces a capitalism that accommodates to the hierarchies and the culture of the ancien régime. This is capitalism, yes, but without capitalist power relations and without a recognizably capitalist culture. Politics in such settings is therefore "heteroglossic in its idioms and fundamentally plural in its structure, interlocking within itself strands of different types of relationships that [do] not make up a logical whole." If peasant political consciousness here does not resemble that of the Western laboring classes, it is because it cannot. The problem is not with the peasant, but with the expectations of the scholar, who brings to the table of analysis an unwarranted teleology.

• Thesis 5: The Spuriousness of Colonial Nationalism
Once it is accepted that, because of the absence of a universalizing bourgeoisie, there remained a gulf between the elite and popular domains within the culture, it cannot but affect our understanding of colonial nationalism. For colonial apologists, the colonial state was an agent of progress because it imported European culture into the conquered territories, a culture that lifted the native population from its rude state into modern civilization. It created a nation where once there was none. For nationalist historians, on the other hand, the replacement of colonial apologetics did not lead to a thorough critique of colonial capitalism. They replaced the flawed premise of colonialism's civilizing mission with a bland acceptance of a purportedly hegemonic domestic bourgeoisie. Nationalist historiography endowed the nationalist movement's leaders with a spurious legitimacy, since it is assumed that this leadership spoke for the nation.

An acceptance of the Subalternist critique of colonial capitalism requires a rejection of both the colonial and the nationalist theorizations of the independence movement and the state to which it gave birth. Chakrabarty concludes that the Subalternist theorization of nationalism calls for a "critical stance toward such official or statist nationalism and its attendant historiography." The foun-
dation of their rejection of official nationalism was their observation that two spheres of politics persisted—the popular and the elite—the coexistence of which was the “index of an important historical truth, that is, the failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation.”

Because the bourgeoisie failed to integrate the elite and subaltern domains into one, there was no question of the nationalist leadership articulating a nation-building project akin to that of the European bourgeoisie, since “there was no unitary nation to speak for.” The real question, which the Subalternist historians now undertook to answer, “was how and through what practices an official nationalism emerged that claimed to represent such a unitary nation.” Subaltern Studies thus launched not only a critique of nationalist politics, but also of the historiography that endowed this nationalism with a spurious legitimacy.

- Thesis 6: The Eurocentrism of Classical Theory

Having examined the social implications of the bourgeoisie's putative abandonment of its universalizing drive, we turn now to the implications for theory. The upshot of the preceding theses is that the colonial and postcolonial social formations cannot be assimilated into the same general framework as those of the advanced West. Not only do they diverge in their basic structure, but they cannot be assumed to be moving along the same broad trajectory of development. From this premise, postcolonial theory draws a seemingly natural conclusion: if the reality of colonial social formations is fundamentally different from that of Western social formation, then theoretical categories generated from the experience of the West cannot be appropriate for an understanding of the East.

Hence, as Chakrabarty avers, “a history of political modernity in India could not be written as a simple application of the analytics of capital and nationalism available to Western Marxism.” These analytics are lacking because they are based on the assumption that colonial social formations are sufficiently similar to Western ones—or are on the same path of development—to justify reliance on the same theoretical framework. It is this basic congruence between West and East that the Subalternists deny, and it is this claim that is the basis for their conclusion that Western theories cannot be grafted onto Eastern realities. Two issues in particular stand out: agency and historicism.

Let us first address agency. For Subalternist theorists, the Eurocentrism of received theory is especially evident in its understanding of political movements. Their critique focuses on the matter of political psychology. Subalternists often accuse Western theorists of imputing a provincial and culturally specific psychology to peasants and workers in the East. Chakrabarty suggests that Marxist

32 Guha, quoted at ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Chakrabarty, Provincializing Europe, 15.
analysis cannot appreciate the dynamics of labor struggles in colonial India, because it assumes that Indian workers function in a liberal, bourgeois culture. This assumption, he insists, is carried over from Marx's own work on the labor contract, insofar as the latter assumes that both labor and capitalists have internalized bourgeois norms. The most egregious Eurocentric assumption is that workers are motivated by material needs. Chakrabarty takes Marxists to task for assuming that workers make choices based on their interests. This assumes that workers are motivated by what he calls a "utilitarian calculus," which he equates with a bourgeois culture. What Marxists fail to understand, he contends, is that workers in India were motivated by an entirely different kind of psychology, namely a psychology specific to their pre-bourgeois culture, wherein choices were not made on "rational" grounds to serve material interests. Rather, workers' choices reflected the premium they placed on community, religion, and honor.

Partha Chatterjee largely embraces the same strictures on the analysis of peasant politics. He warns that agrarian movements in colonial India cannot be subsumed under Marxist or liberal theories, which are organized around the Western notions of interest and rationality—common components in the theories imported from Europe. Among the culprits he lists are Marxism, modernization theory, Chayanovian theories, the disciplines of economics and sociology, and liberal theory more generally. Peasant agency must be understood "in its own constitutive forms," a mode of understanding that none of the approaches just listed can achieve. "We must," argues Chatterjee, "grant that peasant consciousness has its own paradigmatic form, which is not only different from bourgeois consciousness but in fact its very other." Hence, since peasant consciousness is fundamentally different from the consciousness generated by bourgeois culture, we need new, indigenous categories. Only after Western theories have been set aside can we construct a proper sociology of peasant agency.

As for the second issue, historicism, this is perhaps the most elusive concept in the Subalternist arsenal. It appeared in some essays by Dipesh Chakrabarty during the 1990s, but did not take center stage for the Subalternists until the publication of Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* in 2000. By assembling the earlier work, and providing Chakrabarty with the opportunity to develop the concept further, *Provincializing Europe* places historicism at the very heart of Subalternist theorizing. Unfortunately, being given pride of place has done little to clarify meaning. Chakrabarty not only fails to provide the reader with a clear understanding of historicism, but, as I shall show later in the book, seems quite committed to preserving the concept's opacity.

Chakrabarty identifies historicism with a cluster of arguments: that the

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38 Ibid., 164.
colonial world must follow in the steps of the West, and its future has therefore already been foretold;\textsuperscript{39} that there are no discontinuities in historical processes, and thus all elements of a whole are tightly bound together, developing in quiet synchrony;\textsuperscript{40} that any institution seeming to fit poorly with modern sensibilities is probably a relic or an anachronism;\textsuperscript{41} that all the East need do in order for these unfamiliar elements to disappear is “wait,” and they will melt onto the template set by the West.\textsuperscript{42} All these assumptions are attributed to Marxism in particular, but viewed as extending back to the Enlightenment tradition. The critique of historicism therefore comprises a core element of Subaltern Studies' critique of Eurocentrism and encapsulates much of what the Subalternists find objectionable about Western political analysis.

Historicism is an outlook that illicitly subsumes local processes into a larger whole. This it does diachronically, in the form of historical teleology, or synchronically, in the form of structural essentialism. Closely bound up with the rejection of historicism, therefore, is the advocacy of what the Subalternists call the “fragment.”\textsuperscript{43} Fragments are those elements of social life that cannot easily be assimilated into dominant discourse or structures—minority cultures, dissident tracts, oppositional gestures. Fragments are thus part of social life. Social theory does violence to them when it ignores them, pretending that all that is worthy of analysis is the mainstream or the powerful, and also when it recognizes them but refuses to acknowledge their particularity, instead folding them into the mainstream. A postcolonial theory must, therefore, embrace the fragment, not only as a marker of resistance to dominant structures but as an analytical strategy. It is an antidote to the hubris of totalizing theories.

The arguments encapsulated in the preceding six theses do not by any means exhaust Subalternist social theory, nor do they cover all the issues to be taken up in this book. They do, nonetheless, cover much of the ground that the Subalternists have mapped out over the years, and a substantial portion of the claims now associated with their project. For the most part, since they largely follow Chakrabarty's own summation of the collective's contributions, they have the added benefit—especially with regard to the first five theses—of having been confirmed by one of the most active members of the collective. I have followed Chakrabarty fairly closely in my rendering of the theoretical project, in part to block a common response by postcolonial theorists when they come under scrutiny, namely to insist that their views have been misunderstood, distorted,
or exaggerated. Such lapses are certainly possible, especially given the turgidity of their prose. Chakrabarty’s essay, by contrast, is noteworthy for its succinctness and lucidity, thereby facilitating the task of the critic.

Thesis 6, the final thesis summarized above, regarding the Eurocentrism of Western theories, is not only a well-known element of the postcolonial canon but perhaps its most famous. Indeed, it may surprise readers to encounter some of the more historical theses, especially thesis 1. It is a peculiarity of the Western reception of Subaltern Studies that these more sociological arguments—about capital’s abandonment of its “universalizing drive,” and the consequences thereof—have been passed over largely in silence, in favor of the conclusions that are derived from them. Yet as we have seen, the claims regarding capital’s failed universalization are basic to the project as a whole and, indeed, comprise much of the work of several of its leading theorists, including its most senior member, Ranajit Guha. No assessment of the more well-travelled parts of the Subalternist landscape can afford to ignore the foundations on which they rest, and so, while we will in due course attend to the validity of these more meta-theoretical conclusions advanced by the Subalternists, we are obliged first to examine the historical sociology on which they rest.

1.4 ASSESSING SUBALTERN STUDIES

Mine is not the first critical engagement with Subaltern Studies. Over the years, there have been several careful and quite illuminating discussions of the project as a whole, and of work by individuals associated with it. A great deal of what I have to say in the following chapters will build on the available body of critique. It might be useful, however, to alert the reader to ways in which this book departs from existing treatments.

The first difference has simply to do with timing. Many of the more well-known critiques of the project were published during the early and mid-1990s, before some of its key arguments had been fully developed or had even seen the light of day. This means that several of the more recent strands of its theoretical work have not been given the attention they deserve. Moreover, elements of

the earlier work remained somewhat obscure—and thus their import was not thoroughly appreciated—until their fuller explication in later years. A salient example of this is Guha’s argument about capital’s abandonment of its universalizing mission, which was briefly outlined in the first volume and presented in bits and pieces over the next few years, but could not be properly grasped till the publication, in 1997, of Dominance without Hegemony. So, too, with Chakrabarty’s critique of historicism, which was introduced in the early 1990s but did not then attract the attention it is now garnering. Hence, there would seem to be a need for a fresh examination of the project, now that members of the collective have articulated its implications more extensively.

A second difference regards content. Several well-known engagements with Subaltern Studies have, between them, taken on different aspects of the project. One prominent theme has been the worry that the collective has not so much provided an alternative to the Orientalism of Western theories as revived it, repackaged as radical chic. Another has been the claim that the agrarian analysis offered by the theorists is not an alternative to Western theories but rather an offshoot of the impeccably Western economics of A. V. Chayanov. Others have noted that the early commitment to popular history was quickly replaced by an obsession with elite discourse, specifically the discourse of the Bengali elite. Yet another theme has been the epistemological claims of the project and, in particular, its flirtation with relativism. Finally, there is now a considerable literature on the Subalternist critique of secularism.

In large measure, I agree with many of these critiques and will amplify some of them in the following chapters. And yet, even though certain aspects of Subaltern Studies have been effectively criticized, the actual theory produced by the

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47 Brass, “Moral Economists, Subalterns.”


49 See Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura.”

50 Some of the articles on this subject are collected in Rajeev Bhargava, ed., Secularism and Its Critics (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998). The best engagement with Subaltern Studies on this issue is Achin Vanaik’s brilliant Furies of Indian Communalism.
group has largely escaped scrutiny. Instead, the object of attention has more often been the politics of the project—its motivations, its implications, its place in the broader intellectual landscape. What has been given especially short shrift is the Subalternists’ social and historical theory, on which they base the arguments that have drawn the greater part of the critical attention. One intended contribution of the present book is an analysis of these more foundational elements of the Subaltern Studies project and, by extension, the wider gamut of postcolonial studies. Here the primary focus will be the Subalternists’ historical sociology, particularly their understanding of the East-West divergence—a subject crucial to their project, albeit one that has garnered very little attention. But I will also address more theoretical matters that have rarely been scrutinized in depth, and more rarely still in tandem with their broader historical claims.

1.5 THE FAILURE OF SUBALTERN STUDIES

Having signaled this book’s goals, let me now describe its basic architecture. Readers will have noticed that the main thrust of Subaltern Studies is to stress difference. The project’s basic message, which is consistent with the broad orientation of postcolonial studies, is that because Western theories are incapable of understanding the dynamics of non-Western societies, their inadequacy calls for a drastic overhaul of fundamental concepts or even the construction of an altogether new framework. The inadequacy of received theories stems from their inability to appreciate the fact that capitalism in the East turned out to have fundamentally different properties than did capitalism in the West.

In the six theses previously enumerated, it is possible to discern three domains in particular where Subalternist theorists stress a fundamental divide between East and West. The first is in the nature of the bourgeoise: the Western bourgeoisie carried forth capital’s universalizing drive while its descendant in the East did not. Second, the power relations produced by Western capitalism were unlike the power relations capitalism generated elsewhere. Third comes the question of political psychology: political actors are motivated by a different set of concerns in the East than they are in the West.

I will argue that the claims for a fundamental difference with regard to capital, power, and agency are all irredeemably flawed. I take up the question of the bourgeoisie in chapters 2 through 4; chapters 5 and 6 examine the issue of power; chapters 7 and 8 examine the problem of political psychology. Chapter 9 then addresses one of the main pillars of recent Subalternist theorizing, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s arguments about historicism. I conclude with an assessment of Partha Chatterjee’s theory of colonial nationalism.

The main thrust of the book, then, is to elucidate the failure of the arguments from difference, so central to postcolonial theory. Subaltern Studies has been the most ambitious attempt to demonstrate the various dimensions in which East
and West diverge, but the attempt has not succeeded. The point is not to insist that there are no differences at all between the two; rather, that the differences, such as they are, are not of the kind described by the Subalternists. Now, this refutation of their historical and political sociology is important in its own right, but it matters also for its theoretical implications. Postcolonial studies has famously advocated an overhaul of the received frameworks of European thought. Again, the call to rethink the basic structure of Western theory is based on the prior claim that the structure of modernity in the East is so different from its structure in the West that the categories developed out of the European experience cannot possibly be adequate for analyzing the East. But if the sociology on which this argument rests is shown to be deeply shaky, then the grandiose claim that we must rethink our understanding of capitalism, politics, history, agency, and everything else is also called into question. If there does not exist a fundamental divergence between East and West—regarding the nature of their bourgeoisie, the power relations in place, and the subaltern groups’ motivational structure—then we are permitted to consider the possibility that the theories emerging from the European experience might well be up to the task of capturing the basic structure of Eastern development in the modern epoch. Instead of being entirely different forms of society, the West and the non-West would, according to this perspective, turn out to be variants of the same species. Further, if they are indeed variations of the same basic form, the theories generated by the European experience would not have to be overhauled or jettisoned, but simply modified.

In order to drive this point home, I complement the critique of Subalternist theories by developing an alternative analysis of the same phenomena they take up. Hence, in the chapters on the bourgeoisie, I show that Ranajit Guha’s argument is mistaken and also explicate the essential convergence of capitalist strategies West and East; in the critique of Chakrabarty’s analysis of power, I explain how capitalism produces precisely the forms of authority that he deems departures from “bourgeois forms of power”; and in rejecting Chatterjee’s and Chakrabarty’s account of political psychology in the East, I provide positive evidence that it is the same as the political psychology of actors in the West, bolstering my argument with elements of a theory of rationality in political agency. So, too, with my critique of historicism and of Chatterjee’s theory of nationalism. My hope is that readers will not only be persuaded of the weaknesses of the Subaltern Studies project but that they will also see the strength of the very theories that the Subalternists impugn.

In the course of showing the flimsiness of their case, and offering an alternative to their account, I hope to show that Subaltern Studies fails to deliver on its two basic promises—that it has developed an explanatory framework adequate for understanding the nature of modernity in the East, and that it is a platform for radical critique.
THE EXPLANATORY FAILURE

Subaltern Studies fails as an explanatory framework because it systematically misrepresents the relationship between capitalism and modernity, both in the East and in the West. It does so in two ways. First, it promotes a distorted understanding of what is distinctive about capitalism as a social system. Subalternist theorists take certain aspects of twentieth-century liberal culture as being defining characteristics of capitalism itself. Not surprisingly, once capitalism is defined so narrowly, it is easy to conclude that what we have in the East is not capitalism at all or that it is a bastardized version of the system. Recall that this is the perspective embodied in Theses 1–4, that capitalism mutated after its arrival in the colonies, losing its universalizing drive and generating a political order fundamentally different from the order established in early modern Europe. This argument, however, is based on a somewhat tendentious interpretation of the European experience and of capitalism's "universalizing drive." I will show that the arguments promoted by Subaltern Studies on both these issues are fundamentally flawed, because they build into their very definition of capitalism elements that are specific only to its very recent incarnation. Once we generate a more accurate analysis of European modernization, the apparent deviation of the East from some putative norm is revealed as chimerical. In other words, the political conflicts, institutional setups, forms of power, and other factors in postcolonial capitalism turn out to be not so very different from those of its European ancestor.51 Hence, Subalternist theorists are simply mistaken in their insistence that the basic course of modernity in the East cannot be explained through the lens of capitalism. This is the fundamental thrust of my argument in chapters 2 to 6.

The second way in which the Subalternists misrepresent the relationship between capitalism and modernity is not by obscuring the role of the former but by denying it altogether. In other words, they evacuate capitalism from domains in which its influence has in fact been critical. I will demonstrate this in chapter 10, where I examine Partha Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist ideology. He notes, correctly, that a defining feature of colonial nationalism was a commitment to scientific and economic modernization. The ideology of nationalism thus tended to promote national modernization as a basic goal. Chatterjee

51 The Subalternist critique of the Indian bourgeoisie repeats many arguments from an earlier debate among historians about the course of German modernization. In that context, too, German capitalists were indicted for shortcomings based on a highly romanticized conception of the British and French experience. This line of argument was brilliantly criticized in Geoff Eley and David Blackbourn, The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984). The German debate was preceded by a similar set of arguments among British Marxist historians about England's path to modernity, touched off by E. P. Thompson's well-known article "The Peculiarities of the English." Socialist Register 2 (1965), 311–62. Surprisingly, in spite of their obvious relevance, none of these works finds mention in the Subalternist literature.
argues that the turn to modernization came about because national elites had internalized Western discourse, but I will show this argument to be entirely mistaken. Nationalist elites promoted modernization not because they were the victims of indoctrination but because of the pressures of governing in a capitalist world economy. What Chatterjee presents as an effect of discourse was in fact a recognition of real, material pressures from global capitalism. This is an example of how Subalternist theorists simply whisk capitalism out of the picture, even where it played a central role.

It is not that members of the collective pretend capitalism is irrelevant or has no material reality. Indeed, they invoke it constantly. They agree that any viable theory of the modern must take into account its connection to capitalism. The problem is that even while recognizing its importance, they obscure its dynamics—in some instances by endowing it with properties it does not have, in others by denying it powers it does indeed have, and in a few cases, such as Chatterjee’s, by “disappearing” it altogether. The result is most curious: while claiming to theorize capitalism’s global adventure, they separate the concept from its referent. It is shorn of any properties we might justifiably associate with it. Hence, far from illuminating the peculiar trajectory of development in the East, Subalternist theorists shroud it in further mystery. They raise central questions about such matters as the course of political development, the structure of power, social agency, and nationalism but fail time and again to answer them properly, for the connections between these phenomena and broader structural transformations are simply lost from view. In sum, Subalternist theorists do not answer the very question they raise—namely, how the entry of capitalism into the colonial world affected the evolution of its cultural and political institutions.

**THE CRITICAL FAILURE**

Regarding the status of Subaltern Studies as critique, there are two dimensions of the failure on this front.

The less obvious, though by no means less important, dimension of the failure can be stated quite simply: one cannot adequately criticize a social phenomenon if one systematically misunderstands how it works. Subaltern Studies theorists cannot formulate a critique of globalizing capitalism if their theorization of its basic properties is mistaken. They are unable to separate those phenomena that are generated by capital, from those that are independent of it. Even more important, however, their arguments are not merely erroneous; in fact, they amount to a highly romanticized, even sanitized, presentation of capitalism. This is especially evident in Guha’s work but also figures prominently in Chakrabarty’s. The romanticization is not intended; it is simply a consequence of the fact that they identify capitalism with its newly minted liberal incarnations. Instead of taking liberal, democratic capitalism to be a recent phenomenon, brought about through centuries of struggle, they build its
particular features into their bedrock definition of the system. Furthermore, not only do they build liberal freedoms into the definition of capital, they attribute the advent of those freedoms to the European bourgeoisie. Naturally, in a comparison between this idealized picture and the reality of postcolonial capitalism, the latter appears deformed and denatured. But when we replace the idealized picture with a more accurate one, it generates very different conclusions with respect to not only postcolonial capitalism but also the quality of modernity. This is a central pillar of my argument in chapters 3, 4, and 5.

The more obvious failing on the critical front is that, far from landing a blow against colonialist and Orientalist presentations of the East, Subaltern Studies has ended up promoting them. I show this especially in chapters 7 and 8, but it also arises in chapters 9 and 10. This is not true of all of the collective's members, though. Guha's work is largely free of Orientalism, whereas it is a central plank for both Chakrabarty and Chatterjee, who both insist that laboring classes in India were motivated by fundamentally different conceptions of the self than were their counterparts in the West. Others have noted this aspect of the Subaltern Studies framework and have issued strong objections. I join in this criticism, but in a different vein. Many critics have urged that the Subalternist depictions of agency be rejected because of their Orientalism. The offensiveness of an argument, however, cannot be grounds for its rejection. The fact is, both Chatterjee and Chakrabarty go to considerable lengths to support their arguments empirically and theoretically. The bulk of chapters 7 and 8 is therefore dedicated to arguing that their Orientalism is not just objectionable but wrong—their own evidence undermines the claims they make about agency in the East. I augment this argument by offering a bare-bones, but I hope credible, theory of social agency, which is unabashedly universalistic while aiming to avoid charges of parochialism. To minimize accusations of cultural bias, I mainly use as evidence the empirical work of Guha, Chatterjee, and Chakrabarty themselves.

1.6 WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT

So much for what the book is. Now some words on what it is not. This is not meant to be a history or intellectual biography of Subaltern Studies. I make no claim whatsoever to exhaustiveness or even comprehensiveness. My concern is to address components of the Subalternist project that have had real influence and have, in turn, been highlighted by members of the collective as their most important contributions. My intention is to examine the ideas that have become associated with the project in the broader intellectual culture, not to address the

52 Chatterjee tries to present Guha's arguments as coextensive with his own, but as I will show in chapter 8, the attempt is unsuccessful.
project in its entirety. As it happens, I do believe that I address most of the main arguments produced by members of the collective. Mainly because the book threatened to grow beyond a reasonable length, I have had no choice but to omit some. Perhaps the most conspicuous by its absence is Partha Chatterjee's recent work on political society in postcolonial formations. Also missing are Gyanendra Pandey's defense of the fragment and the overall debate on secularism. These are all important issues, but some of them have already received attention, and others will have to just be taken up at another time.

Moreover, this book largely avoids the task of tracing the theoretical lineage of the Subalternists' arguments. As a result, even though the influence of Gramsci and Althusser is evident to those familiar with the relevant literature, I do not analyze the nature of this connection. Nor do I assess how their ideas have been reconfigured at the hands of Subalternist theorists.\textsuperscript{53} Again, this is partly because of the need to keep the book to a manageable size (and it is already longer than I had either wished or intended), but primarily because of my desire that the reader not be distracted by whether Subalternists have correctly interpreted a given theorist. What matters is not whether they are true to this or that theoretical tradition but whether they have produced sound arguments, and it is that final product—their arguments \textit{as they stand}—that we need to assess.

Finally, I would like to say something about style. Readers will find that I rely a certain amount on direct quotations of passages—sometimes long ones—from the texts I subject to critique. As a reader, I find it distracting, choppy, even annoying. Normally I avoid it as much as possible, but I resort to it here in order to preempt charges of misrepresentation. I want the reader to be able to judge the merits of my arguments about key texts, and so I reproduce the relevant passages in full. But I also provide summaries for readers whose eyes, like mine, tend to glaze over in such circumstances.

However, there is another reason for this strategy. Several of the main theorists bury their arguments under a dense thicket of jargon, or present them so cryptically that the meaning is hard to nail down. The critic is therefore left with little choice but to interpret them to as best she can. Naturally this injects uncertainty into the argument. Here, again, the best antidote is to let the reader see the relevant texts so that she may form her own judgment about my rendering of them. No doubt there remains an element of interpretation in the task, but this is the case even when one deals with texts of exemplary clarity.

\textsuperscript{53} For an interesting set of arguments on Gramsci's incorporation into postcolonial studies and the Subalternist oeuvre, see Timothy Brennan, \textit{Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
Subaltern Studies is known for advocating—and, it is claimed, exemplifying—a rejection of Eurocentric theories inherited from the nineteenth century. If the theories they implicate are indeed Eurocentric, then they should be rejected outright. But first a relevant question presents itself: Are the characterizations accurate? We need to understand why, as Dipesh Chakrabarty contends, the modern experience of the East “could not be written as a simple application of the analytics of capital and nationalism available to Western Marxism.”

Chakrabarty and other Subalternist theorists acknowledge that many of the foundational historical arguments for this thesis were either developed in or inspired by the work of Ranajit Guha, who starting in the very first volume of Subaltern Studies, offered a historical sociology of colonial India that sought to establish the specificity of colonial modernity. His focus was the Indian experience, but the relevance of these essays is considered to extend far beyond the Subcontinent. Guha argued that while liberal and colonial ideology described Indian political development as coextensive with the European experience, in fact the modernization of India departed in basic ways from that of Western Europe. The differences were significant enough to create a qualitatively different kind of political culture in South Asia. It is on the basis of this argument that much subsequent Subalternist theorization proceeded.

The root cause of the East-West divergence is taken to reside in the peculiar nature of the colonial bourgeoisie. As summarized in theses 1 and 2 in the preceding chapter, it is the absence of a revolutionary bourgeoisie that accounts for the persistence of two parallel political domains, the elite and the subaltern. Had capital in the colonial setting not forsaken its “universalizing mission,” it would have integrated subaltern culture into its own liberal worldview as part of its hegemonic strategy. In so doing, it would have generated a coherent culture, as was purportedly achieved in Europe. But in colonial India, Guha suggests, capital attained dominance without integrating the dominated classes into either its own worldview or the institutions characteristic of its rule in Europe. There thus remained a chasm between elite and subaltern domains. Hence, political culture in colonial and postcolonial settings did not and could not converge with the patterns observed in Europe. The subaltern domain