Provincializing History

A conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty on the 20th Anniversary of *Provincializing Europe*

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This interview was held in Lisbon in January 2020. At the time Dipesh Chakrabarty was visiting the city where we live to participate as a keynote speaker in a congress on the Anthropocene, organized by Fundação Culturgest and Centro Interuniversitário de História das Ciências e da Tecnologia. Nevertheless, this interview focuses exclusively on *Provincializing Europe - Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference.* The book was first published by Princeton University Press in 2000. At that point, Dipesh Chakrabarty was already living in the USA, teaching at the University of Chicago, where he still remains a professor, although in the last ten years his main interest has become climate change and the challenges it presents to the discipline of History and the Humanities, not to mention to humanity itself. Throughout the last two decades, *Provincializing Europe* became one of the most influential books in the field of History, with far-reaching implications for theoretical debates on the status of the discipline, ranging from the ethical to the methodological dimensions of its practice. Planned to be part of *Práticas da História* special issue on the 20th anniversary of *Provincializing Europe*, our conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty covers, among other issues, his formative years, his move to Australia and his relation with Marxism.

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***Provincializing Europe* was published twenty years ago. What was the initial motivation for writing the book?**

One early motivation was my archival experience, the other one was more personal. The archival experience arose from the fact that when I was young and an apprentice historian, I decided to do labour history, working class history. And I took the idea of "the working class" for granted. I thought that if you worked in a factory, you were a member of the working class. This was the early 1970s in Calcutta, a city where the dominant academic culture was Marxist. The assumption of the received Bengali Marxism was that the working class had a "natural" or "inborn" tendency to be united against their oppressors, the owners of factories and industries. But when I went to the archives, one of the first things I discovered was a lot of new evidence for conflicts –some of which turned bloody, causing big and small riots –between Hindu and the Muslim workers in the factories around the city towards the end of the 19th century. The data suggested that the facts of being Hindu or Muslim mattered to the workers. My Marxist friends and teachers, however, felt very uneasy about my findings. For, as readers of E. P. Thompson, they assumed that there was a story waiting to be written about "the making of the Indian working class." They thought a good Marxist analysis would explain these conflicts away by showing that it was either because of what the employers were doing that the workers were divided against their "own" interests, or it was because of the nature of the labour market, but they would feel extremely uncomfortable with a historical account in which the workers themselves had some responsibility for having feelings that did not accord with our Marxist theories. So they would say, "No, no, you have to find an interpretation that gives a political-economic explanation for the level of workers' consciousness. If you say that the Muslim and Hindu workers had their own "reasons" for engaging in these conflicts, then that's just too superficial." A veritable intellectual battle emerged around my work and around these ideas that I had put forward in a paper I wrote in Calcutta around 1975 on these working-class riots, though I also have to acknowledge the stimulation that these debates gave me

even if much of the criticism seemed stinging at the time. My teachers, I should also say, were liberal and generous enough to encourage me to publish my ideas even if they were vehemently opposed to them. That very controversial paper was later published in the English journal *Past and Present*.[1]

When I left the country to go to Australia to pursue a doctoral degree, I left having been somewhat scarred by the experience of this intellectual battle. But leaving the country made for another realization that became very important in shaping my academic life. In the India I grew up in, Marxist academics did not care to think about whether or not Marx was, after all, a European intellectual, born of traditions of thought that were particularly – and in a provincial sense – European. We used to think of Marx as a scientist. Just as it did not matter that Newton was English, similarly it didn't matter to us that Marx was a German thinker. We had very little self-consciousness about the history of the intellectual traditions we actually loved to work within. As a student, I was thought to think that Marx was right, Max Weber was wrong, you know, that Lenin was right and Kautsky was wrong, that Stalin was right and Trotsky was wrong, and so on. Suddenly, as I started my student-life in Australia of the late 1970s, I encountered several reading groups, reading Marx and *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* and commentaries on them. Reading that commentarial literature, you could not but be aware that Marx was a German intellectual, and that he was a German Jewish intellectual who worked within certain intellectual traditions that he probably shared even with those who were opposed to him. Reading Marx more deeply than I had ever done in Calcutta, I was becoming much more aware of different currents in the European intellectual traditions that Marx drew on. In my Indian upbringing, what we had already accepted from Europe seemed ours. So you could say that my intellectual alienation from Europe, ironically, began outside of India, as I engaged more deeply with European intellectual traditions. In India I was just a Marxist, we were all Marxists,

1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s", *Past & Present* 91 (May 1981): 140-169.

and Marx was simply right. There was no question of historicizing Marx. Marx was not historical; Marxism was scientific and universal.

At the same time, I felt that without somebody like Marx guiding our analytical framework it would be very hard to think of modernity, capitalism, and modern India. So that's why I eventually said that European thought is both indispensable and inadequate. That was the general idea of "provincializing" Europe. To say that, yes, European thought is part of everybody's life after colonial rule, so it is indispensable but it is also inadequate, because the colonized came to these ideas from within other histories, other understandings of life, other modes of being that were not extinguished (in India), and hence there were always problems of translation (using that word in a broad sense).

Ok, so in *Provincializing Europe* there is an attempt to historicize Marxism... And at the same time, in the book, when you talk about "History 2", you take inspiration from part of the Marxist tradition – for instance, Rubin's writings on value. So one could say that in *Provincializing Europe* there is also an attempt to read Marxism against Marx...

So, I never became an anti-Marxist, unlike some people. I did not become alienated from Marxism to the degree that I would be hostile to it. But I was interested in Marx because Marx essentially embodied and represented that part of Enlightenment thought that was interested in the universal. And the real question for me was: What is the universal? What is its relationship to the particular and the singular? Is it an abstract form? How and where do you see it? I have a sentence in "The Two Histories of Capital" chapter, where I say that the universal becomes visible only when somebody falsely claims to be universal.[2] You know, because the universal is not empirically observable but it becomes visible through acts of usurpation. It is only when somebody

2 "The universal turns out to be an empty place-holder whose unstable outlines become barely visible only when a proxy, a particular, usurps its position in a gesture of pretension and domination", see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009 [2000]), 70

falsely claims to represent the universal that you know that they are not so, but you also see the form of the universal. No particular human being, for instance, represents *the* human form, but you can see the human form in all individuals.

So one can understand from your answers that *Provincializing Europe* addresses major challenges confronting historians and the discipline of History, but also engages with your own political concerns about Marxism, the Left, etc... This simultaneity reminds us of an article you wrote in 2006, "Subaltern History as Political Thought"[3], where you start with a reading of Hayden White, then you discuss the work of historians like Georges Rudé and you end up dialoguing with Rancière's notion of politics and case studies like Francesca Orsini's *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism*. In this same article you address both the politics and the history of collective agency. And in-between you state your scepticism towards what you somehow consider the final attempts from the Left and from Marxism to name a universal political subject – and you refer to the multitude of Negri and Hardt...

I think something interesting happened in Marxist traditions in the twentieth century, beginning particularly with the Soviet revolution. Take the question of how Marx comes to the world-historical category of the proletariat. The category almost comes out of a Hegelian deduction, a dialectic of deduction. Like if you have Capital as a category that is able to appropriate even the worker's body into the process of its self-reproduction, its opposite is really the person who has nothing to lose but their chains. So the proletarian is the dialectical opposite of the person who acts as the bearer of capital, the capitalist. You don't have to be empirical; if you could think of Hegel's philosophy as

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Subaltern History as Political Thought," in *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*, eds. V. R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), 93-109.

an algorithm, then this would be the result. And I think Marx came to this idea without being empirical. But in 1844, when Engels was writing *The Conditions of the English Working Class* in Manchester, it was as though they found a sociological correlate of the philosophical category. So what happened was that the sociological working class and the philosophical proletariat become the same, as if you had found a philosophical category realized in flesh and blood in a social group that constituted the working class, the class that would carry out the anti-capitalist revolution. This expectation marks the First International and the 19th century. But by the time of the First World War it's clear that the revolutionary Europe of 1848, of the Paris Commune, that revolutionary Europe has been exhausted. And this revolutionary spirit had moved to other parts of the world that were not as industrialized as Western Europe or Great Britain. What you thus have is the reversal of the European 19th century when the sociological category of the working class looked for a while like the revolutionary and philosophical category of the proletariat. But when the revolutionary spirit came to Russia, the working class was small. The overlap between the sociological and the philosophical had collapsed. So by the time the Russian revolution happens, Lenin develops the theory of the "professional revolutionary", who leads the working class. The theory becomes: "The working class by itself will not produce the revolutionary demands that go beyond economism. You need people from outside the working class to lead that class to its revolutionary mission." Trotsky develops the "theory of substitutionism", where the party comes to represent the interests of the proletariat. Lukács has a similar formulation in *History and Class Consciousness*. So you can already see a historical displacement of the original category of the proletariat. The Party has become the working class. And then when you come, later on, to the Chinese revolution –and these are the two most inspiring revolutions, the Soviet and the Chinese, and then the Vietnamese one –you have this idea with Mao that the peasants will be the substitutes for the working class. Going forward in history, when you come to someone like Franz Fanon, the proletariat is replaced by "the wretched of the earth", an expression

that is taken from a line in the song the Communist Internationale. So what you get in the twentieth century is a series of historical substitutes for the category proletariat. And then we, in subaltern studies, come a long way away from Gramsci, with our use of the category of subalterns. Similarly, Hardt and Negri refer to the multitude. My friend Partha Chatterjee created a new category of agents he called the "political society" as distinct from those who belonged to the Hegelian sphere of the civil society. I would say that the 20th century is a hunt for a series of substitutes for the proletariat. The big question of the 20th century left was "Who would be the revolutionary subject?" The Left spent a lot of time, almost a century, looking for a substitute.

And, therefore, while the challenges posed to you by the figure of the working class would eventually lead you to write *Provincializing Europe,* for other members of the Subaltern Studies collective it was the figure of the peasant that first intrigued them...

If we read E.P. Thompson, who was a kind of an intellectual guru for us, we see that the path to citizenship includes the death of the peasant, the medieval peasant. The peasant is forced to move to the city. He is at the factory gate, an unskilled worker. The unskilled worker-peasant is disciplined inside the factory. And these peasant-workers go through a period of transition where they engage in all forms of protest including machine-breaking but, eventually, the stories of trade unionism and organization, and the story of citizenship converge. So that trade union rights become the rights of a citizen. The political subject of modernity, the citizen subject, is thus written into the category of the "working class". What happened in the history of modernity in India or China was that revolutionary politics were engaged in without the assumption that the peasant would die out as a social category. Instead you assumed that the peasant would remain a peasant and would yet be a revolutionary and/or a citizen. And that's why the Party becomes important, because ultimately it's the Party that would have to mobilize the peasants. Subaltern studies arose from the empir-

ical fact peasants did not cease to be peasants even as they became revolutionaries or nationalists. This fault line, between the theory and the peasants, what the peasants actually thought, drove the subaltern studies project. Early subaltern studies – especially in the work of our teacher, Ranajit Guha, undertook structuralist operations to distil out of empirical peasants an abstract consciousness that will be closer to revolutionary consciousness needed for a complete remaking of society.

There are many ways of reading *Provincializing Europe*, but perhaps we can agree that there is a tension between, on the one hand, your attempt to contribute to a better knowledge, a better practice of the discipline of History, so that the categories we use do not limit our awareness of the richness of empirical reality, in search for a better "translation" ..., and on the other hand there is your engagement in a critique of the discipline of History itself, the impossibility of "translation", etc. And when we see your trajectory, from your work on the working class to your book *The Calling of History,* perhaps we can also see in this ambivalence...

In the Introductory chapter of *Provincializing Europe* you'll find that I ask, as a postcolonial person who has been through the historical process of Europeanization of the earth and who, yet, had an awareness of non-European modes of being, from what perspectives would I examine my own life, if you took seriously the Socratic maxim that an unexamined life was not worth living. I realize that my deeper interest in History has always been about making sense of life, of historical forms of life and of different modes of being in the world, to use a Heideggerian turn of phrase. Having a conversation with the two of you, sitting in Lisbon, is very distinct from having a conversation with old friends in Calcutta but not any less enriching or interesting. I was always interested in the meanings of these connections between humans. Because sometimes you don't know a human being autobiographically, but you can have a deep conversation. And I was interested to know, if History, the discipline, could be a way to examine our lives in that Socratic sense. When

I was taught History, it was all Marxist social history and was very sociological. Softly sociological, with causal connections between events, like "this happened because that had already happened." And those were interesting tricks to learn, but I realized that my deeper impulses had to do with more philosophical questions about the meanings of the past or in the human need for past accounts of themselves. So part of *Provincializing Europe*, and part of the work I'm doing in climate change, has to do with this deeper question of what does it mean to be a human being in our times.

But part of *Provincializing Europe* was also about understanding how globalization and the general sense of democratization of the world after the 1960s – when Western liberal-capitalist countries changed their immigration laws to allow the migration of skilled labour from the formerly-colonized nations –enabled different kinds of self-reflexivity about the disciplines we work within. I am part of that migration. By the time I was writing *Provincializing Europe*, I was in Australia. And the most revolutionary thing that happened in my academic world in Australia was the establishment of Indigenous or Aboriginal History as an academic subject. I was teaching at the University of Melbourne. This was a great learning experience. There was an English friend of mine, Patrick Wolfe, who for his Ph.D. worked on the connection between the history of the Australian settler-colonial state and the development of Anthropology as a discipline. He was a very fine man and a brave scholar who sadly died last year. Patrick was teaching a small class on Aboriginal History, and the class had some aboriginal students. Once the class was given the exercise of discussing a historical document as part of their lessons in History's methods, but the document had to with a case of a massacre of an Aboriginal group by white settlers. The Aboriginal students in the class said, "We don't want to read this document. It's too painful." But all this was very instructive from the point of view of how you might go about writing the history of the discipline of history in the colonial or post-colonial setting. Patrick was in effect trying to teach his Aboriginal students that, in order to write good [?] history that would get back at their exploiters or

oppressors, they have to work on and get over their experience of pain enough so that they could read and use the document as historians! I joked and told Patrick this story about an Indian psychoanalyst who had trained as psychoanalyst in America and then gone back to Delhi to practice as a psychoanalyst. And then he discovered that Indians did not know how to be patients of psychoanalysis. Because instead of working the triangle of mother, father and the child, they would talk about extended families, imagined families, village-related uncles and aunts. So the psychoanalyst finally realized that in order to function as an analyst in India, he would first have to teach Indians how to be patients of psychoanalysts, so then he could then cure them of their problems! That anecdote, apocryphal or not, sums up for me the history of the disciplines – at least the social science disciplines – in the colony.

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