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Dipesh Chakrabarty's proposition to provincialize Europe harbors ambiguities and contradictions that open it to misreadings. Some misreadings stem from a shallow grasp of Chakrabarty's argument or a cavalier invocation of the title, but others follow from deeper issues in the book concerning the place of Europe in social theory, the universality of concepts from European thought, and the difficulty of escaping the frame of national history. Some problems arising from these issues might be avoided by taking a transnational perspective on the questions Chakrabarty raises, although a transnational approach does not necessarily guarantee success. However one views them, such seeming limitations of *Provincializing Europe* reflect the risks Chakrabarty took in proposing a project that is simultaneously methodological, institutional, and political. Moreover, they are the source of its wide impact.
Keywords: Dipesh Chakrabarty, transnational perspective, *Provincializing Europe*.

Treslendo *Provincializing Europe*

A proposta de Dipesh Chakrabarty de provincializar a Europa é marcada por ambiguidades e contradições que a tornam suscetível a leituras enviesadas. Algumas destas leituras partem de um entendimento superficial dos argumentos de Chakrabarty ou de uma invocação leviana da sua obra, mas outras têm origem em questões mais profundas a respeito do lugar da Europa na teoria social, da universalidade dos conceitos procedentes do pensamento europeu e das dificuldades de escapar ao quadro da história nacional. Alguns dos problemas que advêm destas questões podem ser evitados se adotarmos uma perspetiva transnacional sobre os temas abordados por Chakrabarty, embora esta perspetiva transnacional em si mesma não seja uma garantia de sucesso. Seja como for, as aparentes limitações de *Provincializing Europe* tornam patentes os riscos que Chakrabarty correu ao propor um projeto que é simultaneamente metodológico, institucional e político. São, de resto, estes riscos que estão na origem do seu vasto impacto.
Palavras-chave: Dipesh Chakrabarty, perspectiva transnacional, *Provincializing Europe*.

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Reading Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," the 1992 article in *Representations* that became the first chapter of *Provincializing Europe*, was one of those experiences in graduate school when one finds someone has said, and said brilliantly, what was on one's mind without one fully realizing it. Many parts of Chakrabarty's article resonated deeply for reasons both intellectual and institutional. I was already studying the history behind the "universalization of Europe"—especially the role that non-European historians played—without quite thinking of it in those terms. Chakrabarty's argument that other pasts could be mobilized to contest histories governed by European metanarratives—and that national history in particular depended on suppressing such pasts—confirmed my intuition that the topic of my dissertation, the history of national history, was a story of contention and struggle whose ultimate actors were states and the populations they sought to control. For a student of nationalist thought — particularly in Japan, where a particularistic view of history became a legitimation for the invasion of Asia — Chakrabarty's position that a critical view of Europe's universalization need not be nationalist or nativist strengthened my political backbone. Finally, I knew by experience the obligation Chakrabarty observed of so-called "non-Western" historians to know the literature on European history, without the reciprocal obligation of one's Europeanist colleagues. I was an impressionable doctoral student, but I still recall the uncanny sense that Chakrabarty seemed to be saying what I was thinking.[1]

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1 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?", *Representations* 37 (1992): 1-26.

Although *Provincializing Europe* is rightly critical of "transition narratives," it is not wrong to say the book appeared at a time of true transition in historical research on the world outside the North Atlantic. Chakrabarty says in the preface to the 2007 reprint that the condition of possibility for the project was globalization, but it is important to recall that the era when the project took shape, the late 1980s and early 1990s, saw the final assault on modernization theory in the Anglophone social sciences. Modernization theory was a key postwar means by which categories derived from the history of Europe were enforced in the study of non-European societies. The condition of possibility for formulating the project may more properly speaking have been the dissolution of the geopolitical order that gave rise to modernization theory, socialist theories of non-capitalist development, and Area Studies. "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History" and *Provincializing Europe* were strikes against the lingering presence of modernization theory in historical methods and academic institutions, and an exploration of what could follow its demolition. This was also the era of the ascendance of postcolonial theory's critique of the categories of European knowledge and of their use to rule over the colonized. Like *Provincializing Europe*, other work built on this critique, such as Partha Chatterjee's *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, was empirically rich and politically bold, but also methodologically introspective.[2] What would follow — where the project of provincializing Europe would lead—was far from clear.

Perhaps reflecting the uncertainty of the moment when *Provincializing Europe* appeared, what readers have taken away from it has varied widely, not always echoing its most important arguments. Foremost among Chakrabarty's interventions, I would say, was the contention that Europe, as the source of metanarratives in the social sciences, "remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on," a condition he

2 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

described as the "everyday subalternity of non-Western histories."[3] The presence of a "hyperreal" Europe in the social sciences meant that the provincialization of Europe had to be a *methodological* project, not one grounded on the geographical focus of the research. Taking history as "a knowledge system embedded in institutional practices," the project also had to challenge institutions such as universities and the organizations that regulate the historical profession.[4] Though it may have seemed academically oriented, the ultimate goal of such a project was political: to renew political philosophy "from and for the margins" by returning to it "categories whose global currency can no longer be taken for granted."[5] *Provincializing Europe* meant to recuperate the emancipatory potential—and the *universality*—of European concepts such as rights and nation through a double move: to expose the parochialism of their canonical expression, on the one hand; to show the ways the colonized both used and challenged them to "arrogate subjecthood to themselves", on the other.[6]

Bold and confident as its arguments were, *Provincializing Europe* has been subject to frequent misreadings. It is not uncommon to hear "provincialize Europe!" as no more than a call for attention to the histories of other, equally important, parts of the world. The book has been taken too as a program to write the histories of non-Western countries in their own terms, not those of European historiography, despite Chakrabarty's avowal that this was not a nativist project.[7] By the time the argument on the "politics of despair" appears in the first chapter — reproduced from "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," it seems, out of fidelity to Chakrabarty's first articulation of the problem — the entire proposition may seem like an impossible contortionist act.[8] The verve of the eye-catching title, which can serve as a simple (maybe ir-

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 27, 42.

4 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 27, 41.

5 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 16, 45.

6 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 40.

7 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 43

8 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 45-46.

ritable) riposte to all those Europeanists in history departments—may ironically have contributed to such misreadings by drawing attention away from the content.

There are more fundamental sources, however, for misreadings of *Provincializing Europe*. I will point out some sources candidly but also, I want to stress, in a spirit of admiration. What I see as the book's most important contention is also the most difficult one to reckon with. How *does* Europe remain the sovereign, theoretical subject of non-European history? What's more, what can one do about it if, as Chakrabarty says, the European intellectual tradition is the only one "alive" in social science?[9] Misreadings of *Provincializing Europe* also are enabled by ambiguities and contradictions it contains. For one, the book's stance toward national history — jointly universalized by imperialism and anticolonial nationalism — is ambiguous.[10] The critique of the naturalization of the nation-state notwithstanding, the project can be taken as a self-aware continuation of national history as method, inasmuch as the practical illustrations in *Provincializing Europe* can be construed as "Indian," not middle-class Bengali. (The subtitle of the original article *was* "Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?"). The book's treatment of concepts from the European Enlightenment, moreover, is irresolute. Are they truly "universal" or only "placeholders" that perhaps are heuristically necessary for thought?[11] More on this later.

Rereading *Provincializing Europe* twenty years after its publication (nearly thirty since "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History"), I see that what I took from it as a graduate student was also a misreading. The question that crystallized for me from reading the initial article was one Chakrabarty never asked: how *were* concepts derived from European history "made universal"?[12] I accepted the methodological critique, but turned it toward a project in intellectual history, specifically national history as an epistemology and practice of writing.

9 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 5.

10 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 41.

11 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 70.

12 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 42.

In *National History and the World of Nations* I argued that this way of representing the past was adopted around the world as the result of a structural causality created by the extension of the international system of states and the global market. The genealogical sources of ideas about history and society that underlay national history (including the concepts "nation" and "history" themselves) were French, British, and German but it was transnational political and economic conditions that made them useful, even necessary, in other parts of the world. The writing of national history was, fundamentally, a way of explaining the place of one's nation in the world. Establishing and institutionalizing it required extinguishing other ways of imagining the history and geography of human communities.[13] As local as the struggles to do so may have been, however, I thought that understanding the large-scale, structural forces at work required a comparative and transnational perspective. In a sense the argument was about how Europe was *de*-provincialized in the nineteenth century, that is, how some ideas of parochial origin changed the imagination and political construction of community in the ways that were the subject of Chakrabarty's critique.

I continued this exploration in my work on the universalization of concepts which, though still inspired by Chakrabarty's example, was perhaps a more fundamental misreading of it. Looking at why some particularly unusual European concepts such as "society" came to be accepted as universally valid for describing the history and organization of human life, I argued that the critical part of the process was not their production but *reproduction*, a process of transnational vernacularization carried out through second-hand readings and successive translations, that progressively attenuated the concept's connection to the European history from which it derived. Whether those who produced the concepts thought they were universal was not the issue; rather, it was how they were universalized. Political struggle might be founded on competing universalisms, particularly between what I called gene-

13 Christopher L. Hill, *National History and the World of Nations: Capital, State, and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 40-42.

ralizing universalisms (as a process, civilization always has the same result) and relativizing ones (every place has a nation, but each nation is different from all the others).[14] Again I thought this history had to be understood transnationally, and again I was far—actually farther—from *Provincializing Europe*'s goal of reinvigorating the universality of categories of political thought that Chakrabarty considered to be only nominally European.

I have touched on these examples from my own work because it is clear now that in it I set aside ambiguities and contradictions in Chakrabarty's proposition for provincializing Europe—or one might say that I chose one side of the contradictions and ignored the other. One example is *Provincializing Europe*'s treatment of the universality of ideas from the European Enlightenment, whose legacy may be in even greater dispute now than it was in the 1990s. Chakrabarty approached the problem as one of "being" and "becoming," borrowing terms from Marx's argument on the history of capital. Ideas that "are" universal must "become" manifest in the world through a process of working out "logical presuppositions." The universal is never truly realized. Instead different particulars temporarily occupy its place. Nonetheless it still exists. (62-63, 70) This is an unexpectedly Platonist argument that to me never adequately explains why concepts derived from the history of several European societies should be inherently valid elsewhere. Without really reckoning with the problem, in my work on national history and the history of concepts I set aside "being" (the supposition that universal ideas exist) and concentrated on "becoming" (how ideas are universalized). More consciously, I set aside investment in the universality of one set of ideas as untenable, and argued instead that political struggle can be waged through different universalisms (in the example above, nation versus civilization).

Another ambiguity in *Provincializing Europe* that I maneuvered around is the way — mentioned earlier — that the project can seem

14 Christopher L. Hill, "Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational Nineteenth Century," in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 147, 150-52.

to resurrect a national frame for history, despite its critique of the universality of the nation-state. I think that fulfilling the project of provincializing Europe does indeed require working transnationally, not only in methodology but also in empirical examples. A transnational approach is not necessarily a resolution of the problem of working with categories received from the Enlightenment, however. It may in fact create the risk that conundrums in *Provincializing Europe* regarding the universality of concepts, for example, would be reproduced in worse form through the transnational turn. Will transnational history only be a history of the universalization of Europe? The work of Christopher Bayly comes to mind, although one might even fault Odd Arne Westad's much praised *Global Cold War* on this front, inasmuch as "Third World" solidarity movements inevitably collapsed back into the U.S.-USSR conflict, in Westad's view.[15] A decade of dynamic research on the economic, religious, and cultural history of the Indian Ocean—among other examples—suggests however that working on scales other than the nation—that is, differently than *Provincializing Europe*—is a promising path to Europe's provincialization.

With an attitude of great respect, I should say that what I have called ambiguities and contradictions in *Provincializing Europe* reflect the risks Chakrabarty was willing to take in proposing a response to a problem that was simultaneously methodological, institutional, and political. Apparent aporias in the project made *Provincializing Europe* subject to strong misreadings, as well as weak ones. (Hopefully mine are the former.) Places where Chakrabarty did not have everything worked out were openings where others following his lead could go. This may ultimately be the source of its inspiration. *Provincializing Europe* is a project that can be fulfilled in many ways.

15 Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107.

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