

Book Review

Postcolonialism and the Specter of Capital. By Vivek Chibber. Verso. New York, March 2013. 320 pp. ISBN: 9781844679768

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“Postcolonialism and the Specter of Capital” has been considered one of the most important critiques to the postcolonial project. Important thinkers, as Slavoj Žižek and Noam Chomsky, have endorsed this work as a powerful understanding of postcolonial theory.

The author informs his critique within the historical materialism approach from which the postcolonial trend was developed, but from which also deviates. In his characterization of what is this postcolonial moment, V. Chibber shows us that postcolonial studies start from a project that tried to highlight the importance of non-Western literatures in the canon, transcending their marginalization and rapidly migrated to different discipline in during a moment defined as “cultural turn” in the end of the century. This turn was extremely important and because of that a massive part of Third World studies have moved to the postcolonial framework. This approach claimed that it is not only the study of colonial history, but a way to enable political practices. It questions “practices and consequence of domination and subordination” (Chibber, 2013, 2).

Chibber tries to discuss the relevancy of Subaltern Studies and show us that the postcolonial framework rejected Marxism. According to him, this rejection is political, attempting to show that the “the world has moved on” – that there are plenty of central elements for the debate of capitalism/colonialism in India. Subaltern studies, thus, have different perspectives and it developed in different ways based not only on a Marxist perspective, but also from post-structuralisms. In fact, even though the “bandwagon effect”, the common characteristic of Subaltern Studies, it is “the critique of Eurocentrism, nationalism (‘the national form’), colonial ideology, and economic determinism” that bring the works on this perspective together.

The chapters are developed similarly throughout the book. First, the author presents the argument based on extensive quotation of the work of a postcolonial scholar. After that, he attempts to unveil the flaws of the theory showing how universal categories can explain the same phenomenon better than the postcolonial alternative. His first step, in Chapter 1 is to define his understanding of postcolonial theory. After that, he centralizes his critique in three central arguments for the difference between West and East to postcolonial theorist.

Through chapters 2 and 4, he debates the first argument in terms of the difference between the universal nature of the *bourgeoisie* in the West and the not universal in the East. Chapters 5 and 6 are centralized in the second argument: the difference between the development of power relations in the West and in the East. Finally, chapters 7 and 8 debate the difference of motivations between political actors in the West and in the East. It is a tension between the universal Marxist concepts against the particularism of postcolonial theories. Chapter 9 presents Chakrabarty's ideas of historicism, even though he characterizes postcolonialism as historicism and not as an historical understanding while chapter 10, the last one, deviates from the main theme of the book and talks about the theory of colonial nationalism.

The book has, certainly, interesting questions and it is an important work for the area of International Relations and for the understanding of colonial relations even for those who agree with postcolonial theory. However, I have to point out some problems with his book. First, this project seems to be much circumscribed on how Marxism is complete and how it explains everything, while postcolonialism deviates from it and thus does not understand the universal process conducted by the Capital. If Subaltern Studies at the beginning could be considered an "innovation within Marxism" (Chibber, 2013, 7), as he says, its "deviation" is what makes the perspective interesting. Second, although his project seems to be a critique to the entire postcolonial theory, his exegetic task is focused on few works and authors from the South Asian debate that he himself considered as central for the perspective. Finally, there are also problems with his debate on Marxism. He makes a straightforward connection between canonical Marxism and Subaltern Studies but, although he defines the latter, the Marxist perspective in which he bases his work is not defined and does not follow the same dialectical methodology encompassed on it.

Subaltern Studies, as part of the postcolonial framework gives "voice" or rather agency to the dominated. It is an attempt to tell the history of the subalterns from the point of view of the subaltern. If we even consider the scholars criticized by V. Chibber, there are much more relations between Subaltern Studies and Marxism than the one recognized by him.