



Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)

1. Historians who wish to gain a deeper appreciation of the task of writing histories in our contemporary and postcolonial world should take special note of Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. The wide range and clarity of Chakrabarty's essays makes the important insights and contribution of the Subaltern Studies Collective accessible to historians of all periods and regions.
2. One essay deserves particular attention. Anyone who may have been wondering whether Marxist theory really is dead and buried would do well to examine "Two Histories of Capital." For, where one might presume that Marx's writings are inapplicable to the post-foundational world we now inhabit, we find in this essay that Marx's analysis is sufficiently flexible to appreciate its nuances. Where some European theorists have offered a structuralist interpretation of Marx, and others (E.P. Thompson, for example) have pushed for more atheoretical and historicist appropriations, Chakrabarty shows how Marx employed both approaches.
3. He accomplishes this by outlining two understandings of history (1 and 2) found in Marx's writings. History 1 is the story of capital becoming or making itself. This is not a teleological perspective that might propose that everything coming before capitalism is in a process of becoming capitalist. It is rather the process by which capital appropriates things that may or may not be its antecedents. It is about archive formation, the formation of a past that is retrospectively posited by capital, or, in short, the process of rewriting history so that it fits. History 2, by contrast, is resistance to 1, or life itself. For Marx, Chakrabarty suggests, capital can never be universal: "No global capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital, for any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise made up of History 1 modified by somebody's History 2s." [70] As such, Marx's analysis can be as applicable to places where it has been considered irrelevant owing to particular economic conditions as to those places where it has long been applied (industrialized Europe).
4. With a title as provocative as "provincializing Europe," however, the reviewer must turn to an examination of this concept. Doing so, means necessarily slighting the formidable scholarship evidenced throughout the volume, but, I would argue, it is an imperative that Europe, as it is laid out for us here, forces upon us.
5. Provincializing Europe denotes at least two different things. At one level, it is something that is occurring before our eyes, with the dominance of Europe,

embodied in colonialism, on the wane. Europe is a victim, in part, of its own success. Two of its offspring -- modern imperialism and third-world nationalisms -- have grown in its place, so much so that we now see "the possibility of an alliance between metropolitan histories and subaltern peripheral pasts" at the expense of the universals presented through the Enlightenment and Europe.

6. But provincializing must mean more besides this, otherwise the historian would require only the use of the "factual register." The author could record the details of this provincialization, producing the kinds of "affective histories" that Chakrabarty places in the second half of this book, which provide "a loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of the human life-worlds." [18]
7. So, *Provincializing Europe* explores the "theoretical register" also. Chakrabarty's purpose in the first half of the volume is "to explore the capacities and the limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity in the context of non-European life-worlds." [18] Since social science is the product of Europe and is so tied to concepts of modernity forged in the crucible of European colonialisms, he contends, we need to be aware that it may not be a good guide for us as we attempt to interpret these new histories that are coming to the fore.
8. If not exactly a call to arms, this work is certainly a call to retheorize some of the central categories in social and historical analysis. Chakrabarty wants to lead the way in this process of provincializing, taking us further than the hermeneutic, enlightenment tradition has been able to do. For, metropolitan histories and "third-world" nationalisms are still partly products of Europe and, when academics are insufficiently imaginative they remain firmly tied to their European moorings.
9. But, Chakrabarty's own ambivalence about his project is inescapable. Since we academics are products of the project now being provincialized we do not necessarily want to discard Europe and its Foundations entirely. And if we further believe, as Chakrabarty seems to do, that the Enlightenment and Europe have bequeathed us the rule of law, etc., then we may want both to give them credit for these things and retain them.
10. At the same time, however, we see that other things have been lost or missed in the attaining of these perquisites and certain narratives or histories have become subaltern in the process. Thus, if we are to sustain a theoretical edge, "demystifying the ideological underpinnings of societies, and, in particular, understanding those places that seem most peripheral to the march of European history, then we need to step beyond a European historicism that places other histories only in the position of becoming." Instead, we need to see that such histories do not suggest a "failing" or a "lack" of something found in Europe; they are sites of "plenitude" and "creativity." [35] Yet, all the while, we are part of the enlightenment (European) project working within our academic discipline, and so are likely to be stymied in this endeavor.
11. The author's ambivalence towards the provincializing project is perhaps clearest in his attempt to move from analysis towards a prescription. Here he informs the reader that "provincializing Europe...refers to a history that does not yet exist." [42],

one that cannot therefore be outlined, except in terms of what it is not. And what it is not is a rejection of modernity. For intellectuals operating in academia cannot "situate ourselves outside the knowledge procedures of our institutions," which are so linked to the modern. Nor is it a move towards cultural relativism because Enlightenment's reason "has been made to look obvious far beyond the ground where it originated." [43]

12. But, the project should recognize that Europe is "an imaginary entity" and it should write into history ambivalence, contradiction, use of force, irony and tragedy, though it should do so without losing the "grand narrative," which (with so much to accomplish) perhaps explains why it has yet to take form. Indeed, the project should "realize within itself its own impossibility." [45] Perhaps, in the end, Chakrabarty represents the postcolonial historian's sense of the insurmountable task that faces her/him, when he writes that historians wanting to provincialize Europe must "look to a history that embodies the politics of despair."
13. Who wouldn't be ambivalent about being a party to that? So, in a cryptic postscript that follows this first essay, the author informs the reader without any explanation whatsoever, that "the politics of despair" evident in this essay are left over from when it was first written in 1992 and do not drive the larger argument of the book. Perhaps despair would have returned the theorist to Hobsbawm's view of the "prepolitical" protesters or the "chiliasm of despair" (Thompson) in which they found themselves mired. But it also presents a problem of seemingly siding with the desperate when the author may not feel comfortable doing so.
14. In part, this ambivalence may arise from the ever-present European ghost. Indeed, Europe is provincialized here in a way that makes it take on a coherence that perhaps needs closer examination. There is a reification of Europe occurring even as it is declared imaginary and made peripheral to the "affective histories" outlined in the second half of the volume. This seems only fair at first glance, that a historian should want to treat Europe in the way that so many Europeanists following in the train of Orientalists manhandled "the East." And yet, empires continued to strike back, finding ways to move back from the provinces to the metropole, politically and discursively, as so much recent work has shown. As such, provincializing Europe thus may allow this process to continue.
15. Moreover, the very division into factual and theoretical registers is an example of Europe imposing itself unwanted. Indeed, the differences between those essays that fit within the theoretical and those in the factual designations are not so great. Theory appropriately drives the factual essays, so that they are always more than "affective histories," and describing them as such hives them off from what is designated as theoretical discussion in a way that is somewhat unfortunately diminishing. If "Provincializing Europe" had not been given ascendancy in this way, animating the first chapter and providing the title for the book, and had the essays been scrambled, so that histories of capital could sit cheek by jowl with histories of sociality in Bengal, then this de-theorizing -- even orientalizing -- of the "affective" would not have been so apparent. It is unfortunate, then, that the one essay that is most able to cast its shadow over the others is allowed to dominate the book. Ironically, by their mere location, following the lead essay, each subsequent essay finds itself provincialized by Europe.

16. Influenced by "The Two Histories of Capital" this reader would rather have seen the provincializing project take a back seat to further exploration of the limits and applicability of Histories 1 and 2. For, while Capital can subsume oppositions within its logic, as defined within the process of moving from History 2 to 1, Europe as a category endeavoring to encompass the legacy of the Enlightenment, has been shown by Chakrabarty's "affective histories" to be inadequate to this task. In the end, Marx's intellectual currency has more staying power than that of Europe, which is merely incorporated into History 1 in the form of a Euro. The alliance between metropolitan histories and subaltern pasts have been achieving this for us whether or not we wished them to do so. It may be that Euro and Dollar diplomacies maintain the appearance of some kind of status quo, but we will not need a Pound to know that this is no more than "an old bitch gone in the teeth." ¹
17. But if we find it necessary to *actively* endeavor to provincialize *Europe*, surely we must do so in a way that questions its history altogether, deploying History 1 and 2 so that subaltern pasts emerge, not within, without, or in relation to Europe, but in the archive, wherever and whenever it is fabricated. For, after all, what may be most egregious about the "old lie" that "of all the continents Africa has no history" is the presumption that Europe does have one. Whether, in the aftermath of 9/11, we can continue to toy with "the politics of despair" that such a statement as this might imply, however, remains to be seen.

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Notes

1. Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 101.

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