

CAPITALISM, CLASS AND UNIVERSALISM: ESCAPING THE CUL-DE-SAC OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

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After a long, seemingly interminable hiatus, we appear to be witnessing the re-emergence of a global resistance to capitalism, at least in its neoliberal guise. It has been more than four decades since anti-capitalist movements exploded with such force on a global scale. To be sure, there were tremors every now and then, brief episodes that temporarily derailed the neoliberal project as it swept the globe. But not like that which we have witnessed in Europe, the Middle East and the Americas over the past two years. How far they will develop, how deep will be their impact, it is still impossible to predict. But they have already changed the complexion of left discourse. Suddenly, the issue of capital and class is back on the agenda, not as an abstract or theoretical discussion, but as an urgent political question.

But the re-emergence of movements has revealed that the retreat of the past three decades has exacted a toll. The political resources available to working people are the weakest they have been in decades. The organizations of the left – unions and political parties – have been hollowed out or worse yet, have become complicit in the management of austerity. But the left's weakness is not just political or organizational – it also extends to theory. The political defeats of the past decades have been accompanied by a dramatic churning on the intellectual front. It is not that there has been a flight away from radical theory or commitments to a radical intellectual agenda. Arguably, self-styled progressive or radical intellectuals are still very impressive in number at a good many universities, at least in North America. It is, rather, that the very meaning of radicalism has changed. Under the influence of post-structuralist thinking, the basic concepts of the socialist tradition are either considered suspect or rejected outright. To take but one example, the idea that capitalism has a *real* structure which imposes real compulsions on actors, that class is rooted in real relations of exploitation,

or that labour has a real interest in collective organization – all these ideas, which were the common sense of the left for almost two centuries, are taken to be hopelessly outdated.

Whereas these criticisms of materialism and political economy came out of the post-structuralist milieu generally, they have found a particular sharp expression in the most recent product of that current, which has come to be known as postcolonial theory. Over the past couple of decades, it is not the Francophone philosophical tradition that has been the flag-bearer of the attack on materialism or political economy. It is, interestingly enough, a clutch of theorists from South Asia and other parts of the Global South that have led the charge. Perhaps the most conspicuous and influential of these are Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Ranajit Guha and the *Subaltern Studies* group, but it also includes the Colombian Anthropologist, Arturo Escobar, the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano and the Argentine literary theorist Walter D. Mignolo, among others. The most common target of their criticism is Marxist theory, of course; but their ire extends to the Enlightenment tradition itself. Of all the weaknesses of Enlightenment radicalism, what most agitates postcolonial theorists is its universalizing tendencies, i.e. its claims for the validity of certain categories, regardless of culture and of place. Marxism figures in their analysis as the theory that most pointedly expresses this aspect of the Enlightenment's deadly intellectual inheritance.

Marxists insist that certain categories like class, capitalism, exploitation and the like have cross-cultural validity. These categories describe economic practices not just in Christian Europe, but also in Hindu India and Muslim Egypt. For postcolonial theorists, this kind of universalizing zeal is deeply problematic – as theory, and just as important, as a guide for political practice. It is rejected not just because it is wrong, but also because it supposedly deprives actors of the intellectual resources vital for effective political practice. It does so in two ways: because in being misleading, it is a questionable guide to action – any theory that is wrong will perform poorly in directing political practice. But also, because it refuses to recognize the autonomy and the creativity of actors in their particular location. Instead, these universalizing theories shoehorn the local and the particular into the rigid categories that are derived from European experience. They deny local agents recognition of their practice, and in so doing, marginalize their real agency. This worry about the use of universalizing categories is so strong that it often appears, not as a criticism of illicit or unwise generalizations, but as a general injunction against universalisms.

Postcolonial theory presents itself as not just a criticism of the radical

enlightenment tradition, but as its replacement. In this essay I will critically examine the basis of postcolonial theory's claim to be a guiding framework for radical politics. I will show that, ironically, it is the very elements of its framework that postcolonial theorists present as genuine advances that count it out as a serious political theory.

I am going to argue, in particular, that the strictures against universalizing categories ought to be rejected. I will show that they are both incorrect and contradictory. My argument is not, of course, that all universalizing claims are defensible. They may or not be, and some of them will be quite problematic. My argument, rather, is that there are some universal categories that are defensible. More importantly, I will suggest that certain of the key concepts that postcolonial theorists question or reject are not only legitimate, but are essential for any progressive politics. These are concepts that have been at the very heart of radical politics since the birth of the modern left – and are the ones that have, after a long hiatus, reemerged in the global organizing against austerity in the past few years.

THE TURN AGAINST UNIVERSALISM

In one of the most widely used texts on postcolonial studies, the editors explain the motivation behind the turn against universalizing categories. It turns out that European domination of the colonial world was based in part on just these sorts of concepts. 'The assumption of universalism', we are told, 'is a fundamental feature of the construction of colonial power because the "universal" features of humanity are the characteristics of those who occupy positions of political dominance.' The mechanism through which universalism abets colonial domination is by elevating some very specific facts about European culture to the status of general descriptions of humanity, valid at a global scale. Cultures that do not match these very specific descriptions are then consigned to the status of being backward, needing tutoring in civilization, incapable of governing themselves. As the editors describe it, 'the myth of universality is thus a primary strategy of imperial control ... on the basis of an assumption that "European" equals "universal"'.¹

We see in this argument two of the most commonly held views by postcolonial theorists. One is a formal, meta-theoretical idea – that claims to universality are intrinsically suspect because they ignore social heterogeneity. This is why, in postcolonial texts, we often find critiques of universalism cashed out in terms of its homogenizing, leveling effects. The worry is that it ignores diversity, and in so doing, it marginalizes any practice or social convention that does not conform to what is being elevated to the universal.

And the act of marginalization is an act of suppression, of the exertion of power. The second view is a substantive one – that universalization is complicit with European domination in particular. This is so because in the intellectual world, Western theories are utterly dominant. Insofar as they are the frameworks that guide intellectual inquiry, or the theories that inform political practice, they imbue it with an enduring Eurocentrism. The frameworks and theories inherited from the Enlightenment bear the mark of their geographical origin. But the mark is not easily discerned. It operates insidiously, as the hidden premise of these doctrines. The task of postcolonial criticism is to expunge it, by exposing its presence and highlighting its effects.

Owing to its assigned complicity with colonial domination, anti-universalism has become a watchword among postcolonial theorists. And because of the enormous influence of postcolonial theory in academic culture, it has become the common sense of many on the left. So too the hostility to the ‘grand narratives’ associated with Marxism and progressive liberalism. The action these days is in ‘the fragment’, the marginal, the practices and cultural conventions that are unique to a particular setting and cannot be subsumed into a generalized analysis – as Dipesh Chakrabarty describes them, the ‘heterogeneities and incommensurabilities’ of the local.² This is where we are directed to search for political agency.

The hostility to universalizing theories carries some interesting implications. The radical tradition since Marx and Engels’ time has relied on two foundational premises for all of its political analysis. The first is that as capitalism expands across the globe, it imposes certain economic constraints – one might even call them compulsions – on the actors that come under its sway. Hence, as it takes root in Asia, Latin America, Africa and elsewhere, economic production in all these regions is forced to abide by a *common* set of rules. How the regions develop, what the tempo of growth is, will not be identical – it will proceed unevenly, at different rates, with considerable institutional variation. They will not all look the same. But their differences will be worked out in response to a common set of compulsions, coming from the underlying capitalist structure. On the other side of the analysis, it is taken for granted that as capitalism imposes its logic on actors, as it exercises its economic and political domination, it will elicit a response from labouring groups. They will resist its depredations in order to defend their well-being. This will be true regardless of the cultural or religious identity of these groups. The reason for their resistance is that, whatever the facts about their local culture, whatever its ‘incommensurabilities’ with respect to other ways of being, capitalism generates an assault on some basic needs that all people have in common. So just as capitalism imposes a common

logic of reproduction across regions, it also elicits a common resistance from labour. Again, the resistance will not take the same form, it will not be ubiquitous, but the potential for its exercise will be a universal one, because the wellspring that generates it – workers' drive to defend their well-being – is common across cultures.

These two beliefs have been foundational to much of radical analysis and practice for more than a century. But if we accept postcolonial theory's injunctions against universalism, they must both be rejected, for they are both unabashedly universalistic. The implications are profound. What is left of radical analysis if we expunge capitalism from its theoretical tool kit? How do we analyze the global depression since 2007, how do we make sense of the drive for austerity that has swept the Atlantic world, if not by tracing the logic of profit-driven economies and the relentless struggle to maximize profits? And what do we make of the global resistance to these impositions, how do we understand the fact that the same slogans can be found in Cairo, Buenos Aires, Madison and London, if not through some universal interests that are being expressed in them? Indeed, how do we generate *any* analysis of capitalism without recourse to at least some universalizing categories?

THE UNIVERSAL COMPULSIONS OF CAPITAL

The stakes being rather high, one would think that postcolonial theorists might grant amnesty to concepts like capitalism or class interests. Perhaps these are examples of universalizing categories that have some justification, and might therefore escape the charge of Eurocentrism. But as it happens, not only are these concepts included in the list of offenders, but they are singled out as *exemplars* of all that is suspect in Marxist theory. Gyan Prakash expresses the sentiment well in one of his broadsides against Enlightenment (e.g. Marxist) thought. To analyze social formations through the prism of capitalism, or capitalist development, he suggests, inevitably leads to some kind of reductionism. It makes all social phenomena seem as if they are nothing but reflexes of economic relations. Hence, he argues, 'making capitalism the foundational theme [of historical analyses] amounts to homogenizing the histories that remain heterogenous within it'.³ This tendency blinds Marxists to the specificity of local social relations. They either fail to notice practices and conventions that are independent of capitalist dynamics, or simply assume that whatever independence they have will soon dissolve. Even more, the very idea that social formations can be analyzed through the lens of their economic dynamics – their mode of production – is not only mistaken, but also Eurocentric and complicit with imperial domination. 'Like many other nineteenth-century European ideas', Prakash notes, 'the

staging of the Eurocentric mode-of-production narrative as history should be seen as an analogue of nineteenth-century territorial imperialism.⁴

Dipesh Chakrabarty has given this argument some structure in his influential book, *Provincializing Europe* (2007). The idea of a universalizing capitalism, he argues, is guilty of two sins. The *first* is that it denies non-Western societies their history. This it does by squeezing them into a rigid schema imported from the European experience. Instead of respecting the autonomy and specificity of regional experiences, Marxists turn regional histories into so many *variations on a theme*. Every country is categorized on the extent to which it conforms with, or departs from an idealized concept of capitalism. In so doing, regional histories never are able to escape from being footnotes to the European experience. The telos of all national histories remains the same, with Europe as their endpoint. The *second* error associated with the idea of capitalism is that it evacuates all contingency from historical development. The faith that Marxists repose in the universalizing dynamic of capitalism blinds them to the possibility of ‘discontinuities, ruptures, and shifts in the historical process’, as Chakrabarty puts it.⁵ Freed from interruption by human agency, the future becomes a knowable entity, drawing toward a determinable end.

Chakrabarty is crystallizing a view held by many postcolonial theorists, that if they allow categories like capitalism a central place in their tool kit, they also commit to a historical teleology. Taken together, the two criticisms I have outlined suggest that the universalizing assumptions of concepts like capitalism are not just mistaken, but politically dangerous. They deny non-Western societies the possibility of their own history, but they also disparage the possibility of their crafting their own futures. In so doing, they impugn the value of political agency and struggle.

The fact that postcolonial theorists include the concept of capitalism in their list of offending ideas bequeathed by the Enlightenment would seem to generate a conundrum. Surely there is no denying the fact that, over the course of the past century, capitalism really has spread across the globe, imbricating itself in most all of the postcolonial world. And if it has taken root in some areas, whether in Asia or Latin America, it must also have affected the actual institutional make-up of those regions. Their economies have been transformed by the pressures of capital accumulation, and many of their non-economic institutions have been changed to accommodate to its logic. There is, therefore, a common thread that runs through these regions, even though they remain highly diverse, and this thread does bind them together in some way. Because it speaks directly to this, the category of capitalism surely has some purchase in the analysis of their economic and

political evolution. For any such analysis to be taken seriously at all, it has to recognize this simple and basic fact – because it *is* a fact. But the rhetoric of postcolonial theory seems perilously close to denying this very fact, when it castigates Marxists for abiding by ‘universalizing’ concepts like capitalism. The conundrum, then, is this: postcolonial theory seems to be denying the reality of capitalism having spread across the world; and if it is not denying it, then what are the grounds on which it can criticize Marxists for insisting that the concept has cross-cultural validity?

In *Provincializing Europe* Chakrabarty affirms that capitalism has in fact globalized over the past century or so. But while he acknowledges the fact of its *globalization*, he denies that this is tantamount to its *universalization*.⁶ This allows him, and theorists who follow this line of thinking, to affirm the obvious fact that market dependence has spread to the far corners of the world, while still denying that the category of capitalism can be used for its analysis.⁷ For Chakrabarty, a properly universalizing capitalism is one that subordinates all social practices to its own logic. A capitalism that spreads to any particular corner of the world can be said to have globalized. But it cannot have universalized unless it transforms all social relations to reflect its own priorities and values. In so far as there are practices or social relations that remain independent, that interrupt its totalizing thrust, its mission remains incomplete. Indeed, it can be judged to have failed. ‘No historic form of capital, however global in its reach’, Chakrabarty argues, ‘can ever be a universal. No global, or even local for that matter, capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital, for any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise’ between its totalizing drive, on the one hand, and the obduracy of local customs and conventions, on the other.⁸ The basic idea here is that the abstract logic of capital is always modified in some way by local social relations; in so far as it is forced to adjust to them in some way, the description of capitalism that is contained in abstract, general theories, will not map onto the way in which people are actually living their lives on the ground. There will be a gap between the description of capitalism in the abstract, and the really existing capitalism in a given region. This is how it can globalize, but without ever universalizing itself – it could be said to have universalized only if it properly universalized certain *properties*.

In purely formal terms Chakrabarty’s arguments are sound. It is an entirely justified argument to insist that an object should be classified as belonging to a certain kind of thing, or a category, only if it exhibits the properties associated with that kind of thing. If what we call capitalism in its Peruvian instance does not have the same properties as in its classic examples, then we might justifiably say that to classify what we find in Peru

as ‘capitalist’ is misleading, and that the category is potentially misleading. The question, of course, is whether or not the properties we are identifying with the universal can be justified. It could be that Chakrabarty is formally correct, but substantively mistaken. He is right to insist that capitalism must properly transmit certain properties to new regions if it can be said to have universalized – but he might be mistaken in the properties on which he bases his judgments. And this is in fact what I will show in what follows.

Chakrabarty’s entire case rests on one question: is it in fact justified to require that all social relations become subordinated to capitalism, for us to be able to use the category of capital? Chakrabarty’s argument is not all that idiosyncratic. He is drawing on a tradition within Marxian theorizing itself, which has consistently described capitalism as a totalizing system, driven to expand, to subordinate all social relations to its own logic. But it is one thing to point to capitalism’s corrosive effect on social conventions. It is quite another to build the strongest version of that observation into one’s definition of capitalism itself. Postcolonial theorists make a subtle, but crucial error. They accept the description of capitalism by Marx, in which he characterizes it as having an internal drive for self-expansion. Thus Ranajit Guha summarizes Marx as arguing the following:

This [universalizing] tendency derives from the self-expansion of capital. Its function is to create a world market, subjugate all antecedent modes of production, and replace all jural and institutional concomitants of such modes and generally the entire edifice of precapitalist cultures by laws, institutions, values, and other elements of a culture appropriate to bourgeois rule.⁹

Marx is making two claims here: first, that capitalism is driven to expand, and it is this relentless pressure to press toward ever new regions that is behind its universalization; second, that the universalizing drive also impels it to dismantle any legal or cultural conventions that are inimical to its dominance. Postcolonial theorists tend to focus on the second clause in this passage – the idea that capitalism, as it universalizes, will replace ‘the entire edifice’ of pre-capitalist values and laws with new ones. This is what is behind Chakrabarty’s denial that capital has universalized, since it is clear to him that there are many institutions in capitalism, especially in non-Western societies, that cannot be derived from the logic of capital, and indeed, which have a reproductive integrity of their own. That being the case, is it not legitimate to conclude that universalization has failed?

Now it could be that there is an overly narrow fixation here on Marx’s

characterization. One way to proceed, if we wanted to reject Chakrabarty's argument, is to simply set aside Marx's passage and argue for a new criterion for successful universalization. But a case can be made that even this passage does not lend itself to postcolonial theorists' reading of it. Marx is not arguing that capital requires a root-and-branch transformation of all institutions, but that the institutions in place will be those that are 'appropriate to bourgeois rule'. It is true that this might call for a dismantling of very many parts of the pre-capitalist legal and normative conventions – but whether or not it does, and how far the call for dismantling goes, will be decided by what is needed for capitalism to reproduce itself – for its self-expansion to proceed. It is entirely possible that this expansion of accumulation could proceed while leaving intact a great many aspects of the *ancien regime*. At least, this is one reading of the passage.

It is also a more plausible way to understand what is involved in capitalism's expansion. Nobody, including Chakrabarty, Guha and other postcolonial theorists, disputes that capitalism is, in the first instance, a way of organizing economic activities – the production and distribution of goods. In an economy organized along capitalist lines, economic units are compelled to focus single-mindedly on expanding their operations, in an endless cycle of accumulation. Capitalists pursue profits because if their firms fail to do so, they are overtaken by their rivals in the market. Wherever capitalism goes, so too does this imperative. This is what Marx was referring to in the first part of the passage quoted above and neither Guha nor Chakrabarty questions it. All that is required for capitalism to reproduce itself is for this imperative to be followed by economic actors – the imperative for firms to seek out greater markets, more profit, by out-competing their rivals.

Now, if capitalists are single-mindedly driven to accumulate, then their attitude toward cultural and legal institutions will be instrumental toward the achievement of this goal. If the institutions in place inhibit the accumulation of capital, if they do not respect private property or if they insulate labour from having to seek out waged work, then those institutions will most likely come under attack, as Marx suggests. Capital will carry out a campaign to overturn them. But what if existing institutions do not come into conflict with accumulation? What if they are neutral with respect to capitalist interests? This is the crucial question, which Chakrabarty simply ignores. In his argument, a universalizing capitalism must internalize all social relations to its own logic. It must be a totalizing system, which refuses to allow any autonomy to other social relations. Chakrabarty does produce a reason for this. So long as social practices refuse to conform to the direct needs of capital, so long as they refuse to reflect capital's own values and priorities,

they carry the threat of disrupting its reproduction. They embody ‘other ways of being in the world’ than as a bearer of labour power, or a consumer of commodities.¹⁰ Capital cannot tolerate the possibility of ‘ways of being in the world’ that are not aligned with its own logic. It therefore seeks what he calls their ‘subjugation/destruction’.¹¹

This whole argument rests on the assumption that if a practice does not *directly* advance capitalism’s reproduction, by being part of what Chakrabarty calls its ‘life-process’, it must elicit a hostile response from capital. But we might ask, why on earth would this be so? Returning to the question I posed in the preceding paragraph, if a practice is simply neutral with respect to accumulation, wouldn’t the natural response from capital be one of indifference? Chakrabarty makes it seem as though capitalist managers walk around with their own political Geiger counters, measuring the compatibility of every social practice with their own priorities. But surely the more reasonable picture is this: capitalists seek to expand their operations, make the best possible returns on their investments, and as long as their operations are running smoothly, they simply do not care about the conventions and mores of the surrounding environment. The signal, to them, that something needs to be changed is when aspects of the environment disrupt their operations – by stimulating labour conflict, or restricting markets, and such. When that happens, they swing into action, and target the culprit practices for change. But as for other practices – which may very well embody other ‘ways of being in the world’ – capitalists simply would be indifferent.

As long as local customs do not inhibit or undermine capital accumulation, capitalists will not see any reason to overturn them – this is the conclusion we have reached. This has two immediate implications. The first has to do with Chakrabarty’s grounds for denying the universalization of capital. On his argument, the reason we cannot accept that it has universalized is that the pure logic of capital is modified by the local customs of the regions into which it spreads. But we have just seen that a mere modification of a practice does not constitute grounds for rejecting its viability. As long as its basic rules and compulsions remain intact, we are justified in regarding it as a species of its earlier, unmodified, ancestor. It therefore follows – and this is my second point – that if what has been globalized really is capitalist economic relations, then it makes little sense to deny that those relations have also been universalized. We can reject Chakrabarty’s claim that globalization does not imply universalization. How could it not? If the practices that have spread globally can be identified as capitalist, then they have also been universalized. It is the fact that we can recognize them as distinctively capitalist that allows us to pronounce capital’s globalization. If we can affirm that they are in

fact capitalist, and that they therefore have the properties associated with capitalism, how can we then deny their universalization? The very idea seems bizarre.

THE UNIVERSAL GROUNDS FOR RESISTANCE

Capitalism spreads to all corners of the world, driven by its insatiable thirst for profits, and in so doing, in bringing an ever-increasing proportion of the global population under its sway, it creates a truly universal history, a history of capital. Postcolonial theorists will often give at least some lip service to this aspect of global capitalism, even if they deny its substance. What makes them even more uncomfortable is the second component of a materialist analysis, which has to do with the sources of resistance. There is no dispute around the idea that as capitalism spreads it meets with resistance – from workers, from peasants fighting for their land, from indigenous populations, etc. Indeed, the celebration of these struggles is something of a calling card for postcolonial theorists. In this, they would seem to be of a piece with the more conventional Marxist understanding of capitalist politics. But the similarity in approaches is only at the surface. Whereas Marxists have understood resistance from below as an expression of the real interests of labouring groups, postcolonial theory typically shies away from any talk of objective, universal interests. The sources of struggle are taken to be local, specific to the culture of the labouring groups, a product of their very particular location and history – and not the expression of interests linked to certain universal basic needs.

The hostility to analyses that see resistance as an expression of common universal drives is that they impute to agents a consciousness that is peculiar to the developed West. To see struggles as emanating from material interests is ‘to invest [workers] with a *bourgeois rationality*, since it is only in such a system of rationality that the ‘economic utility’ of an action (or an object, relationship, institution, etc.) defines its reasonableness’.¹² All of this is part of the escape from essentializing categories handed down by Enlightenment thought, initiated by post-structuralist philosophy. As Arturo Escobar explains, ‘with poststructuralism’s theory of the subject we are ... compelled to give up the liberal idea of the subject as a self-bounded, autonomous, rational individual. The subject is produced by/in historical discourses and practices in a multiplicity of domains.’¹³

So, whereas traditional Marxist and materialist theories hew to some conception of human needs, which constitute the basis on which resistance is built, current avatars of post-structuralism – postcolonial theory being the most illustrious – reject this idea in favour of one in which individuals are

entirely constituted by discourse, culture, customs, etc. In so far as there is resistance to capitalism, it must be understood as an expression of local and very particular conceptions of needs – not only constructed by geographically restricted histories, but working through a cosmology that resists translation. In Chakrabarty's expression, what drives the struggle against capital is the 'infinite incommensurabilities' of local cultures¹⁴ – something that he posits outside of the universalizing narratives of Enlightenment thought.

The question, then, is whether it is unwarranted to assign some universal needs and interests to agents, which span across cultures and across time. There is no doubt that, for the most part, the things that agents value and pursue are culturally constructed. In this, postcolonial theorists and more traditional progressives are of one mind. But is Escobar right in arguing that agents are not just influenced, but entirely *produced* by discourse and custom? Surely we can recognize the cultural construction of many, even most, of our values and beliefs, while also recognizing that there is a small core of the latter that humans hold in common across cultures. To give one central example, there is no culture in the world, nor has there ever been one, in which agents did not give regard to their physical well-being. A concern for certain basic needs – for food, shelter, safety, etc. – is part of the normative repertoire of agents across localities and time. There has never been a culture that has endured over time which erased or ignored the valuation of basic needs, since the fulfillment of these needs is a precondition for the culture's reproduction. Hence, we can affirm that there are some aspects of human agency that are not entirely the construction of local culture, if by that we mean that they are specific to that culture. These aspects are rooted in aspects of human psychology that extend across time and space – they are components of our human nature.

Now to say that social agents are oriented to give due regard to their physical well-being is not to insist that culture has no influence in this domain. What they consume, the kinds of dwellings they prefer, their sartorial inclinations – all these can be shaped by local custom and the contingencies of history. It is common to find cultural theorists pointing to the variability in forms of consumption as evidence that needs are cultural constructions. But this is a bogus argument. The fact that the *form* of consumption is shaped by history – which it might be to some extent – is no evidence against the view that there is a need for basic sustenance. They are, after all, presented as forms *of* something. The language is a signal to the common factor – to label them forms of consumption is to say that they are species of a common genus. The question is whether the higher-order need for sustenance is itself a cultural construction. Or, correspondingly, whether culture can erase the

recognition of basic needs. To even pose the question shows how absurd it is.¹⁵

It is the agential concern for well-being that anchors capitalism in any culture where it implants itself. As Marx observed, once capitalist relations are in place, once agents are subsumed under its imperatives, the ‘dull compulsion of economic relations’ is all it takes to induce workers to offer themselves up for exploitation. This is true regardless of culture and ideology – if they are in the position of being a worker, they will make themselves available for work. This claim presumes the facts about human nature I have just defended, namely, that agents in any culture are motivated to defend their physical well-being. The reason they make their labour-power available to employers is that this is the only option that they have open to them if they are to maintain their well-being. They are free to refuse of course, if their culture tells them that such practices are unacceptable – but as Engels pointed out in his earliest writings, this only means that they are free to starve.¹⁶ I belabour this point only for the following reason – postcolonial theorists cannot affirm the globalization of capital, the spread of wage labour across the world, while also denying the reality of basic needs and people’s regard for their physical well-being. If they continue to insist on a thoroughly constructionist view, they must explain why the ‘dull compulsion of economic relations’ can be effective wherever capitalist class relations are secured, regardless of culture or ideology or religion.

Now, while this one aspect of human nature is the foundation on which exploitation rests, it is also a central fount for resistance. The same concern for well-being that drives workers into the arms of capitalists also motivates them to resist the *terms* of their exploitation. Employers’ remorseless drive for profits has, as its most direct expression, a constant search for minimizing the costs of production. The most obvious such cost, of course, is wages. But the reduction of wages, while a condition for increased profit margins, necessarily means a squeeze on workers’ standards of living – and hence an assault, in varying degrees of intensity, on their well-being. For some workers in high-end or unionized sectors, the squeeze can be contained within tolerable limits, so that it amounts to struggle around their standard of living, but not necessarily around their basic needs. But for much of the Global South and an increasing range of sectors in the developed world, the stakes are much higher. Now add to this the drive the need for employers to manage other costs associated with production – trying to squeeze out extra time from outdated machinery, hence increasing the risk of injury to workers, the drive to speed-up the pace and intensity of work, the lengthening of the working day, the raids on pensions and retirement benefits, etc. – and we

can see that accumulation comes up systematically against workers' interest in their well-being. Workers' movements are often going to be geared simply at securing the basic conditions for their reproduction, not just higher standards of living.

The concern for their well-being, then, is the reason why proletarians offer themselves up for exploitation, and why, having done so, they proceed to struggle around its terms. This particular aspect of their human nature locks them in a condition of *antagonistic interdependence* with capital. It is in their interest to seek out employment, in order to reproduce themselves; but the condition for securing employment is that they must submit to the authority of their employer, who is driven to undermine their well-being, even while he uses their labouring activity. The first dimension of this process – their submission to the labour contract – explains why capitalism can take root and secure itself in any and all corners of the globe. The second dimension – of fighting around the terms of their exploitation – explains why class reproduction begets class *struggle* in every region where capitalism establishes itself.¹⁷ The universalization of capital has as its dual the universal struggle for workers to defend their well-being.

We have derived both of these universalisms from just one component of human nature. This does not in any way suggest that that is all there is to it. Most progressive thinkers have believed that there are other components to human nature, other needs that span across regional cultures. Thus, for example, there is the need for autonomy or freedom from coercion, for creative expression, for respect – just to name a few. My point is not that human nature can be reduced to one basic, biological need. It is, rather, that this need does exist, even if it is less exalted than some others; and, more importantly, that it can account for a startling range of practices and institutions that radicals are concerned with. It is a sign of how far left thinking has fallen, how degenerate the intellectual culture has become, that it would even be necessary to defend its reality.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

Whatever their many disagreements may have been over the past century or so, radicals and progressives have almost always agreed on two basic postulates – that as capitalism spreads, it subordinates all parts of the world to a common set of compulsions; and that wherever it spreads, those whom it subjugates and exploits will have a common interest in struggling against it, regardless of culture or creed. Has there ever been a time when both of these claims are more obviously true? For more than five years now, a tremendous economic crisis has roiled global markets and convulsed national economies

from the United States to East Asia, from Northern Europe to Southern Africa. If there was ever a doubt that capital has universalized, surely we can put it to rest now. Correspondingly, movements against neoliberalism have broken out across the globe, organized around a set of demands that converge around a strikingly small set of concerns – for economic security, greater rights, for protecting basic services, and for respite from the unrelenting demands of the market. This is perhaps the first time since 1968 that there is a real glimmer of a global movement emerging again. It is only a hint, of course, of what many of us hope it can become. But it is more than we have had in quite some time.

It seems quite bizarre, at a time like this, to find ourselves saddled with a theory that has made its name by dismantling some of the very conceptual pillars that can help us understand the political conjuncture, and to devise effective strategy. Postcolonial theory has made some real gains in certain domains, especially in its mainstreaming of literature coming out of the global south. Over the 1980s and 1990s, it played an important role in keeping alive the idea of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism; and of course it has made the problem of Eurocentrism a watchword among progressive intellectuals. But these achievements have come with a steep price tag. Giving up on the concept of universalism, as many of the leading lights of this theoretical movement have, is hardly a step toward a more adequate theorization of the times in which we live.

I have shown that the arguments against universalism – at least the ones that have greatest currency – are without merit. The two most salient universalisms of our time – the spread of capitalist social relations and the interest that working people have in resisting this spread – stand affirmed. Postcolonial theorists have spilled a great deal of ink tilting against windmills of their own creation. In so doing, they have also given license to a massive resurgence of nativism and Orientalism. It is not just that they emphasize the local over the universal. Their valorization of the local, their obsession with cultural particularities, and most of all, their insistence on culture as the well-spring of agency, has given license to the very exoticism that the left once abhorred in colonial depictions of the non-West.

Throughout the twentieth century, the anchor for anti-colonial movements was, at least for the left, a belief that oppression was wrong wherever it was practiced, because it was an affront to some basic human needs – for dignity, for liberty, for basic well-being. But now, in the name of anti-Eurocentrism, postcolonial theory has resurrected the very cultural essentialism that progressives viewed – rightly – as the ideological justification for imperial domination. What better excuse to deny peoples their rights

than to impugn the very idea of rights, and universal interests, as culturally biased? But if this kind of ideological manoeuvre is to be rejected, it is hard to see how it could be, except through an embrace of the very universalism that postcolonial theorists ask us to eschew. No revival of an international and democratic left is possible unless we clear away these cobwebs, thereby affirming the two universalisms – our common humanity, and the threat to it posed by a viciously universalizing capitalism.

NOTES

- 1 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Triffin, eds., *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 55.
- 2 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, Second Edition, p. 95.
- 3 Gyan Prakash, 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography', *Social Text*, No. 31/32, 1992, p. 13.
- 4 Prakash, 'Postcolonial Criticism', p. 14.
- 5 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 23.
- 6 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 71.
- 7 Chakrabarty's is not the only argument for the failure of capital's universalization or for the suspect nature of Marxism's universalizing framework. But it is one of the most influential. For a more detailed analysis of Chakrabarty's work, and of other theorists associated with the *Subaltern Studies* project, see my *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, London: Verso, 2013.
- 8 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 70. This argument is embedded in a complicated discussion of two different kinds of histories – History1, which embodies the universalizing drive of capital, and History2, which embodies those practices that manage to retain their own integrity. I have refrained from using this jargon because it would needlessly complicate the exposition, without adding any content. For a discussion and extended critique of the conclusions that Chakrabarty draws from the History1/History2 dual, see my *Postcolonial Theory*, especially Chapter 9.
- 9 *Dominance without Hegemony*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, pp. 13-14.
- 10 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 66.
- 11 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 67.
- 12 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 212, emphasis added.
- 13 Arturo Escobar, 'After Nature: Steps to an Anti-essentialist Political Ecology', *Current Anthropology*, 40(1), February 1999, p. 3.
- 14 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 254.
- 15 Another argument against basic needs is that we typically consume a great deal that has no connection with our needs. This is of course true, but even sillier than the objection I have described in the main text. The fact that much of what we consume is unnecessary, or is culturally shaped, hardly overturns the

fact that we still need to have some basic needs met in order to survive.

- 16 Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, New York: Penguin Books, 1987 [1844].
- 17 To be precise, what it begets is the *motivation* to struggle. Whether or not the motivation generates actual resistance, in the form of collective action, depends on a host of additional and contingent factors.
- 18 What is most shocking of all is to find self-styled Marxists denying the universality of basic needs as a component of human nature. This was a subject of some controversy in the 1980s, and one might be forgiven for thinking that the matter had been settled. But, perhaps owing to the continuing (and rather baffling) influence of Althusser, especially among younger intellectuals, the denials persist. For the definitive textual evidence on Marx, see Normal Geras' *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend*, London: Verso, 1983. More recently, see on the young Marx, the superb study by David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, and Human Flourishing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; more globally, see John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978. The only serious recent attempt I know of to raise doubts about Marx's commitment to a human nature is Sean Sayers, *Marxism and Human Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1998, but Sayers qualifies his argument by categorically denying the case for an anti-humanist Marx (the Marx of Althusser) and affirming that 'Marxism... does not reject the notion of a universal human nature' (p. 159).