The Project of Provincialising Europe: Reading Dipesh Chakrabarty

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This essay explores the distinctive way in which Dipesh Chakrabarty’s writings, especially Provincialising Europe, have engaged in both questioning “European thought” (its Eurocentrism) and seeking to renew it.

What is perhaps distinctive about postcolonial thought (indeed, what perhaps defines it as postcolonial) is its somewhat contradictory relation with the Enlightenment traditions that we sometimes refer to in shorthand as “European thought”. On the one hand, postcolonial thought insistently probes the complicity between European thought and modern European imperialism. For it, Eurocentrism is constitutive of the Enlightenment categories that constitute our world – categories such as equality, democracy, human rights, or citizenship, to name but a few. On the other hand, postcolonial scholarship cannot and does not dismiss these categories if only because of their centrality to debates about the modern anywhere in the world. The universal significance of the intellectual traditions that went into the making of European “modernity” cannot be easily denied.

If Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work presses in so urgently on the intellectual and political horizons of our time, this is because it doggedly explores this aporetic relation with the Enlightenment. As the “Introduction” to his Provincialising Europe (henceforth PE) says:

the phenomenon of “political modernity” – capitalist enterprise – is impossible to think of anywhere in the world without invoking certain categories and concepts, the genealogies of which go deep into the intellectual and even theological traditions of Europe. Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice, scientific rationality and so on all bear the burden of European thought and history. One simply cannot think of a political modernity without these and other related concepts that found a climactic form the course of the European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century (4).

Therefore,

provincialising Europe is not a project of rejecting or discarding European thought... European thought is at once indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-western nations, and provincialising Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody’s heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed from and by the margins (emphasis added) (16).

This passage stresses a double task that organises Chakrabarty’s writings. First, there is the simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of European thought, or more precisely of the abstract universalism that is everywhere the mark of this thought. The indispensability is in part because such universalism can be politically very empowering. As Ashis Nandy (1983) pointed long back in his classic The Intimate Enemy:

Modern colonialism won its great victories not so much through its military and technological prowess as through its ability to create secular hierarchies incompatible with the traditional order. These
hierarchies opened up new vistas for many, particularly for those exploited or cornered within the traditional order. To them the new order looked like – and here lay its psychological pull – the first step towards a just and equal world. This was why some of the finest critical minds in Europe – and in the East – were to feel that colonialism, by introducing modern structures into the barbaric world, would open up the non-West to the modern critical-analytic spirit (x).

In other words, colonial categories are, despite their violence, inviting subaltern groups at least in part because they embody a vision of justice and freedom which subaltern groups often find empowering.

And yet, despite this indispensability, for thinkers like Nandy and Chakrabarty European thought is also “inadequate”. It is inadequate because its abstract universalism is necessarily linked to a certain exclusionary and historicist vision of modernity, where Europe is seen as the pinnacle of a process of historical development, and other societies are defined by an inevitable lack. This produces what Pe resinously describes as a “imaginary waiting room of history” (8). Over and again, postcolonial scholarship has pointed to the exclusions of universalist categories – how these categories are raced, gendered, and classed so as to exclude many. Exemplary of this kind of exclusion is the widespread argument that societies have to fulfil certain criteria before they are ready for democracy – they must have a substantial middle class, have a reasonably non-violent civil society, share some values, be educated in tolerating minorities, and so on.

The passage stresses, second, that precisely because European thought is simultaneously indispensable and inadequate, a subaltern perspective that seeks to question it nevertheless cannot simply reject it. Rather, it has to seek another relation with Euro
tern perspective that seeks to question it nevertheless cannot some values, be educated in tolerating minorities, and so on. The passage above that “provincialising Europe becomes the task of
classical minds in Europe – and in the East – were to feel that colonialism, by introducing modern structures into the barbaric world, would open up the non-West to the modern critical-analytic spirit (x).

1 Transition Narratives and the Work of ‘Culture’

In his early writings, it is through attentiveness to the category “culture” that Chakrabarty registers his discontent with the writing of working class histories of India. In these histories, he points out, a certain conception of culture is a pervasive referent. His first book, Rethinking Working Class History (henceforth rwch), thus begins by pointing out that Marxist thought presumed that it was not only abstraction that was necessary for capital to function, but a culture of abstraction or more specifically abstract equality. Marx himself, rwch points out, situated the working class within a framework of bourgeois relationships.

The figure of the worker invoked in his exposition of the category of “capital” was that of a person who belonged to a society where the bourgeois notion of equality was ingrained in culture… Until this was ensured and so long as precapitalist, particularistic ties made up and characterised the relations of production, capital, as Marx understood it, was “not yet capital as such”. This is why Marx thought that the logic of capital could be best deciphered only in a society [such as Eng
ter, democracy, citizenship or human rights. In other words, post
colonial thought has to question Enlightenment categories –
what they presumed to be the canonical European experience of
working class and modern class consciousness? (Chakrabarty
1988: 21). In rwch, Chakrabarty succinctly describes how this failure was explained.

In the case of Indian labour history … [e]ither it is argued … that workers in India did not develop a full-fledged “class consciousness” because colonialism foreclosed the possibility of an industrial revolution; or we argue that Indian workers retained their religious, linguistic, or other ethnic ties because it was “rational” for them to do so, that is, the organisation of the labour market made these ties essential to the workers’ survival. The workers acted, in other words, from a deeply “rational” appreciation of their “material interests […]. The second … assumes that the bourgeois notion of “utility” is the dominant form of “rationality” in all cultures (223).

2 Empiricist Resolutions and Minority Histories

Anti-colonial formulations such as those that Chakrabarty identifies here avoid the most obvious Orientalism. Unlike Orientalist accounts, where historical “failure” is explained by assuming the
colonised do not share the same rationality as Europeans (the colonised have culture, and the colonisers have reason), such formulations insist that the colonised too share the same rationality as the colonisers. Only, their rationality is deformed and repressed by colonialism – hence the failure of transition.

But over and again in his writings, Chakrabarty questions this idea of transition to “modernity”. And he does so while distinguishing his questioning from the empiricist critique of such narratives. This critique, already influential at the time when Chakrabarty ventured, for example, the empiricist historian might argue that class consciousness existed no more amongst the English working classes than it did amongst Indian working classes, that the latter too organised around concrete grievances rather than around an abstract class identity. The empiricist tradition thus gives up on conceptual thinking itself, treating its as no more than a preliminary approximation which receives its always variable content from specific cultures. Here thus, there would never be a concept of capital or of equality – there are only multiple cultures of capital and of equality, all ethnographically and culturally specific.

At least one influential strand of empiricist history is driven by an inchoate democratic impulse that questions the privileging of Europe. The apparent radicalism of this empiricist tradition is evident in its critique of Eurocentrism. From an empiricist perspective, Eurocentrism is a cognitive error caused by deep-rooted prejudices and preconceptions that blind rational thinking. When understood in this way, getting away from Eurocentrism and Orientalism is simply a matter of abandoning the essentialist opposition between the rational West and the cultural Rest. In this spirit, many scholars have sought to undo the opposition between the West and the Rest by insisting that the West has never been modern just as the Rest has never been traditional, by producing new disciplinary knowledge that is more sensitive to contingent empirical details and the power relations.

In *rwch* as in other articles around the time, Chakrabarty regards this empiricist solution as quite simply muddled and inadequate, as even more confused than the transition narratives it criticises, and as reproducing the very Eurocentrism that it thinks itself to have broken away from. For this empiricist, *rwch* remarks, “if workers evince both class and, say, caste loyalties, then they are both class and caste conscious, one form of consciousness being mediated by the other” (220). *rwch* points out that while observations such as those about the miscibility of caste class and religion are “blindly obvious”, they do not “address the question of ‘transition’ or ‘change’ …[or] the question of narrative” (220f) that is posed by dominant forms of European thought. As such, these denials of telos remain shaped by the very concept of telos that they reject. Indeed, historical narratives cannot easily get away from these questions of change or narrative, not even texts that “expressly abandon unilinear notions of progress” (224). Even these “allow for a return of the master narrative through their conceptualisation of ‘time’ itself. In certain accounts of ‘popular consciousness’, ‘time’ is allowed to stand in as a silent but unflagging guarantor of ‘progress’ or ‘development’, …assuming the role that once belonged ‘material base’ or ‘economic structure’.”

By the time of *pe*, Chakrabarty’s engagement with questions of the transition to modernity takes a different form. To begin with, his object of critique is now the “historicism” that marks not only Marxist transition narratives but more broadly the narratives of the transition to modernity. *pe* begins by pointing to how “historicism” places all societies in an unfolding and continuous narrative of development of which Europe and the West is both the vanguard and the terminus.

Historicism – and even the modern, European idea of history – one might say, came to non-European peoples in the nineteenth century as somebody’s way of saying “not yet” to somebody else. … [For example, according to John Stuart] Mill, Indians and Africans were not yet civilised enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilisation (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task. Mill’s historicist argument thus consigned Indians, Africans, and other “rude nations” to an imaginary waiting room of history. In doing so, it converted history itself into a version of this waiting room… (8).

The primary concern of *pe* is to question this historicism. At the same time, he explicitly distinguishes his argument from empiricist anti-historicism that usually opposes the historicist narrative of one unfolding rationality by insisting on plural rationalities (Chakrabarty 2007).

But *pe* questions empiricism in more sympathetic terms than *rwch* did. Consider the example of “the agency of supernatural beings” during the Santhal rebellion of 1855. “Santhal leaders explained the rebellion in supernatural terms, as an act carried out at the behest of the Santhal god Thakur”. And yet, even radical scholars who wish to take the subaltern’s views seriously can go against the rules of evidence that give historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past (104).

Consequently, the democratically minded historian must transfer agency back to the subaltern, must anthropologise state- ments such as those by the Santhal leaders. Chakrabarty describes the histories that the democratically minded historian produces as minority histories – while they might eschew “any claims to a superior overarching grand narrative”, “democracy requires hitherto neglected groups to tell their histories, and these different histories come together in accepting the shared rational and evidentiary rules” (100).

In such formulations, the empiricist tradition, especially in its “minority histories” iteration, is no longer simply dismissed as a logical error that subaltern historians correct and move beyond. Rather, it is seen as doing a distinctive and even necessary work
that of articulating a democratic impulse, and making possible a politics that attempts to more systematically include groups that are left out of the traditional grand narratives of history. This has involved not only a discovery of new sources where marginal voices can be heard, but the creation of more complex historical narratives which stress the causal centrality of the marginalised. Thus, for example, the minority histories tradition has argued on many registers for the intertwined nature of the histories of Europe and the colonies, and of the crucial role played by the colonies in many developments usually associated with the metropole.

3 The Culture of Difference

The distinctiveness of Chakrabarty's argument can be brought out by counterpointing it simultaneously to historicism and to the empiricist tradition of criticising historicism. In rwch, he both identifies the historicist deployment of the term "culture" (as in Marx's formulation, "the culture of equality") and deploys the term himself in another way – to identify a moment of resistance to both historicism and empiricism. This other sense of culture emerges when rwch insists that it does not stress culture in order to "revert back to seeing 'culture' in a causal, determining relation with 'history'" (5). Rather, having to interpret is primordial to our understanding of capital.

rwch identifies a similar acknowledgement of the interpretive dimension in Marx's distinction between real and abstract labour, which enables him to place "the question of subjectivity right at the heart of his category 'capital'" (225). For Marx, real labour refers to the essential heterogeneity of individual capacities, and abstract labour "is what makes labour measurable and what makes possible the generalised exchange of commodities" (226). rwch insists that recognition of an interpretive dimension transforms our understanding of capital:

It follows that the "universal" categories of Marx's thought, such as "capital" and "labour", considered in their interrelationship, offer us no master narrative of the "history of consciousness" or "culture" (and, by extension, of "politics"). To write "history" using these categories is also to interrogate the nature of these categories themselves, to question the project that stamps itself on their usage (6).

But despite its questioning of narratives of lack, despite its emphasis on culture as interpretation, despite its insistence that difference was internal to capital, rwch perhaps did not break forcefully enough from the more conventional notion of culture – culture as the substantive marker of a reasonably unified and definable community. In this sense, as Chakrabarty himself remarks in Pe, rwch remained "hopelessly historicist", "My narrative [in rwch] never quite escaped the (false) question, Why did the Indian working class fail to sustain a long-term sense of class consciousness?" (91). In his interview with Saurabh Dube, Chakrabarty understands this persistence of the false question in terms of his continued reliance on an inadequate concept of community: "In rwch, 'community' was opposed to what Marx called 'the dot-like isolation' of the modern individual/worker that his theory of capital assumed. In Pe, I see community as an always-already fragmented phenomenon."

These remarks could be extended further. The inadequate theorisation of community was itself perhaps only part of the reason for the persistence of the false question of failure in rwch. More fundamentally, it is because any rigorous challenge to historicist narratives has to conceptualise the politics and ethics of these places intimate with capital that yet resisted capital. And in rwch itself Chakrabarty does not conceptualise any such ethics and politics. All it concretely identifies as resisting the logic of capital are "precapitalist" relations that are so defined from the point of view of capital. But rwch points to their inequalitarian nature and quite emphatically refuses to "celebrate" them "as a site of resistance to capital" (226). For while rwch over and again points to the exclusionary and violent nature of abstract universalism, it sees no sustainable politics or ethics that does not function by the terms of this universalism. Indeed, even its criticisms of universalism are organised by the very terms of the universalism it criticises.

Thus, rwch did not and perhaps could not address the question of how "that which is interpretive" potentially enables another politics and ethics. And as long as this question was not addressed, the narrative necessarily had to be cast within the terms of abstract universalism, and thus necessarily had to be cast as one of failure, even if as a failure of this universalism to live up to itself.

It is precisely this question of a resistance to capital internal to it that Chakrabarty turns to in his later formulations. In "Culture in Working Class History", he identifies such a moment in Marx himself.

But the interesting thing for me in reading Marx was then to discover, in volume 3 of Theories of Surplus Value, him talking about two kinds of histories associated with capital. One, he says, capital itself posits a certain kind of history, which is the universal history of capital. He would argue, in my reading, that the abstraction belongs to what capital universally does. It does not matter whether before you became a worker you were a tribal. It is about abstracting and it is done by factory discipline, it is done by law, it is done by knowledge systems. I agree entirely. But then Marx says capital also has another kind of history. Capital encounters other kinds of its past as antecedents to itself. It tries to subjugate these histories....Capital tries to dominate...[them] but they do not belong to capital. In other words he is leaving room, within his own understanding of capital, for practices that are not logically capitalist to be in proximity with capital. He is not talking about human consciousness. In fact two of his examples of such frisson in the intimate bonding of capital, and ...startling[ly], [they] are money and commodity. He says money and commodity always involve practices that do not belong to capital's life process. In other words, what I am saying is that the opportunity of producing non-capitalist activity is part of capitalism. Or, sometimes I say, that it is within capital that there can be difference in the sense that if you slash within with an in [with/in] then you can say that difference in capital could also be difference with capital (ibid).

Here, Chakrabarty reformulates the relation between the modern practice of abstraction (which he associates with capital) on the one hand, and other forms of life on the other. Other forms of life are no longer alien to capital. They are rather in an intimate relation where capital itself needs these relations in order to function, and where even as it tries to dominate these relations it
never does succeed in doing so. This intimacy and impossibility is well indicated by the examples Chakrabarty cites. If money and the commodity are not internal to capital, it is no longer possible to talk of a “culture of capital” or a “culture of equality”: culture is necessarily the name of a difference. Hence Chakrabarty’s formulation about the difference with/in capital: there is a difference in capital that is also a difference with capital.2 Here, rather than either deterministic historicist logic or a conceptually and politically untenable emphasis on pluralising capital, reason or modernity, there is a distinctive binary relation where historicism is constantly supplemented by its other. He returns to this argument in Chapter 2 of PE, this time through a critical reconsideration of his analysis in rwch of the distinction between real and abstract labour:

But my larger failure [in rwch] lay in my inability to see that if one reads the word “real” not as something that refers to a Rousseauian “natural”, that is, the naturally different endowments of different, and ahistorical, individuals but rather as something that questions the nature-culture divide itself, other possibilities open up….The transition from “real” to “abstract” labour is thus also a question of transition/translation from many and possibly incommensurable temporalities to the homogeneous time of abstract labour, the transition from non-history to history. “Real” labour, the category, itself a universal, must nevertheless have the capacity to refer to that which cannot be enclosed by the sign “commodity” even though what remains unenclosed constantly inheres in the sign itself. In other words, by thinking of the category commodity as constituted by a permanent tension between “real” and “abstract” labour, Marx, as it were, builds a memory into this analytical category of that which it can never capture (94).

“Real labour” comes here to signal that which not only cannot be subsumed within “abstract labour” but that which signals the limits of abstract labour as a concept and practice. The point of Chakrabarty’s move is not to deny the transition from real to abstract labour but rather to point out that this transition is always a translation. It is not merely that something is lost in this translation, but that this translation remains in a supplementary relation to the transition, a relation where the translation always points to the inadequacy and injustice of the transition narrative.

4 A Province Called Europe

This emphasis on a translation that resists the straightforward sociology of transition is the governing metaphor of Chakrabarty’s argument about the relation between abstract universalism and that which, while partaking of this universalism, nevertheless resists it. Abstract universalism is never in Chakrabarty’s formulations rejected or transcended; it is rather supplemented and “provincialised”. PE thinks this supplementation through various phrases, perhaps most notable amongst them “concrete/real labour”, “performative politics”, “History 2”, “subaltern pasts”, and the Derridean term “trace”. Thus, PE posits an opposition between the pedagogic or historicist understanding of politics on the one hand (where education and myriad other factors are needed to make one ready for democracy, sovereignty, rights and so on) and a “performative” understanding of politics. Performative politics is that moment “when the peasant or the subaltern emerges in the modern sphere of politics, in his or her own right…” It is that moment when “anticolonial democratic demands for self-rule…harped insistently on a ‘now’ as the temporal horizon of action” (10f). This performative dimension was what Ranajit Guha, for example, pointed to when taking issue with historians like Hobsbawm who described peasant struggles as prepolitical.

PE develops the contrast later through a focus on two different kinds of politics, now named History 1 and History 2. History 1 is the history internal to the life processes of capital, it is the history of both capital and the Europe that is the capital of capital; yet it is also the history which at its most democratic and radical can include “minority histories”. So History 1 needs in many contexts to be affirmed.

Chakrabarty says in one essay: “in modern societies there are institutions in which the language through which one wants to live in many situations is precisely the language of those rights and property and contract and all of those things”. Thus “even in the family the language might be one of affect, and love and loyalty, etc, but the reality of it is power and inequality. Therefore, one needs to be given the rights, which will at least help restore some balance” (Chakrabarty 1998).

But History 2 consists of the histories that capital cannot subsume within itself, which remain heterogeneous to it. History 2 is not organised along the usual abstract terms of History 1 or even the apparently less abstract and terms of empiricism. Whereas for abstract narratives, events must be measured in terms of demonstrable effect and causality, this is not so for History 2. Examples of this are the Santhal leaders’ statements that explained the rebellion in supernatural terms, as an act carried out at the behest of the Santhal god Thakur. The Santhal leaders’ explanations, Chakrabarty points out, do not belong to minority histories; they cannot be justified within “the logic of secular rational calculations”. Rather, they constitute “subaltern pasts, pasts that cannot ever enter academic history as belonging to the historian’s own position”. Subaltern pasts “represent moments or points at which the archive that the historian mines develops a degree of intractability with respect to the aims of professional history [and, I would add, with respect to the metaphysical tradition of abstract universalism itself]” (101). Similarly, while by secular rational calculations some countries or people may not be ready for democracy or self-rule, anticolonial movements over and again have refused to accept these calculations.

Why does Chakrabarty use the verb “provincialise” to describe the way in which subaltern pasts supplement historicism and its universalist ethics? Perhaps because that word indicates the centrality of place to the politics of supplementation that he identifies. As the preface to the new edition of PE remarks:

To provincialise Europe was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity. It was to ask a question about how thought was related to place. Can thought transcend places of origin? Or do places leave their imprint on thought in such a way as to call into question the idea of purely abstract categories? (xiii).

Here, place carries quite a different connotation from what it does in historicist narratives. In PE, Chakrabarty cited Paul Veyne as an example of how historicist thinking dismisses place and the individuality that place necessarily involves: “History is
interested in individualised events – but it is not interested in their individuality; it seeks to understand them – that is, to find among them a kind of generality or, more precisely, of specificity...” (82). Chakrabarty returns to this theme again in the preface to the new edition, where he points out that many Marxist theorists share “the idea that any sense of the ‘local’ is a surface phenomenon of social life; it is, in the ultimate analysis, some kind of an effect of capital” (xvi).

Chakrabarty finds this kind of reading, which he identifies in the work of Hardt and Negri, “oblivious of history itself”. This phrase “history itself” occurs also in the second sentence of the preface’s introduction: “Provincialising Europe is not a book about the region of the world that we call ‘Europe’. That Europe, one could say, has been provincialised by history itself” (xvii). What “history itself” names on both these occasions is the democratic politics of the discipline of history, the politics that leads it to incessantly produce “minority histories”, that lead it to constantly recognise that local detail is crucial even to causal narratives of capital.

The argument of PE is thus that the abstract universalism which it names as Europe and as History 1 may be globally dominant, but it is never hegemonic, neither in the colonies nor even in the place called Europe. History 1 always subsists along with other modes of thinking and being, modes that question its dominance, that seek in various ways to displace it. Chakrabarty traces these various histories of belonging in the second part of PE, which he says is organised under the sign of Heidegger.

Exemplary of these histories in PE is his discussion of suffering in Chapter 5. As he argues at length there, the narratives about the suffering of widows in Bengal intertwine within them several ways of experiencing compassion that have little in common with the classical Enlightenment way in which one is supposed to feel compassion. The latter sees the capacity for sympathy as inherent in every human being:

The capacity to notice and document suffering (even if be one's own suffering) from the position of a generalised and necessarily disembodied observer is what marks the beginning of the modern self. This self has to be generalisable in principle; in other words, it should be such that it signifies a position available for occupation by anybody with proper training. If it were said, for instance, that only a particular type of person – such as a Buddha or a Christ – were capable of noticing suffering and of being moved by it, one would not be talking of a generalised subject position (119).

This Enlightenment understanding was argued by reformists like Rammohun Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar who sought to draw attention to the suffering of widows. But, he adds, commentators on Vidyasagar and Roy also located the source of their compassion elsewhere – as a “special quality of their hriday or heart” (125). And “possessing a hriday was a matter of exception rather than rule” (127); it was “a rare gift from the world of the gods”. Chakrabarty traces, in this vein, different voices that supplemented that of the modern citizen: “the voice of the subject whose cry of pain was addressed to the exceptional subject (not the normalised citizen)...somebody with hriday”; “the voice that addresses itself to gods in search of strength and support”; and the voice that appealed “to an ideal subject of the extended family” (146). Each of these voices involves a way of thinking ethical action that is quite distinct from any abstract and universal ethics.

5 The Limits of the Social

But what are the political and ethical implications of this insistence on a translation that always supplements narratives of transition? Perhaps, it lies in what the new preface to PE argues:

there is nothing like the ‘cunning of reason’ ensuring that we all converge at the same terminal point in history in spite of our apparent, historical differences. Our historical differences actually make a difference. This happens because no human society is a tabula rasa. The universal concepts of political modern encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently.

In such arguments being-from-a-place seems to be about the uniqueness of every situation in which abstract capitalism is received. When understood this way, the deconstructive charge which elsewhere drives the project of provincialising Europe is itself defused. Of such an understanding of provincialising, one could well say with Vinay Gidwani:

Chakrabarty – after a brilliant denouement of Eurocentric history, including the metanarrative of capital – can only muster a halfhearted politics of accommodation to capital’s rule. Hence, the homosocial practice of adda (loosely, “the practice of friends getting together for long, informal, and unrigorous conversations”) that Chakrabarty discusses in Chapter 7 – ostensibly as an instance of History 2 – is in the end nothing more than “a particular way of dwelling in modernity, almost a zone of comfort in capitalism” (…213). The political imaginary here is a non-secular but toothless variant of liberalism. Spivak cautions that “deconstruction cannot found a politics...[it can only] make founded political programs more useful by making their in-built problems more visible”. Chakrabarty appears to lose sight of this in the latter part of Provincialising Europe, when he anchors deconstruction to an existential politics by giving the “trace” an empirical referent – an impossibility since the “trace” is the name for the radically other within the structure of difference that is the sign (Gidwani 2004: 538).

But as Gidwani himself would possibly also argue, the problems he identifies are not intrinsic to the concept of provincialising Europe. Indeed, it is possible to discern in PE itself, and perhaps even more forcefully in some of Chakrabarty’s recent writings, an attempt to think the political resistance necessarily involved in the provincialising of Europe. Two registers of this resistance are especially noteworthy.

First, there is his insistence that to be attentive to History 2 is to significantly interrupt the causal narratives of History 1, even where these narratives are expanded by “minority histories”. In his essay on Bandung and Indian democracy, Chakrabarty traces the growing force of this interruption from the late 20th century (Chakrabarty 2005b). The Bandung conference of 1955 of newly independent nations from Africa and Asia was in part the occasion already for a performative politics that opposed the old imperial and Eurocentric agenda that these nations would simply follow along European paths. But performative politics was still often subordinate to pedagogic politics. Nehru and Nyerere, for instance, were deeply concerned with Bandung also as a way of making “their respective nations take their pride of place in the global order of nations”.

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Since then, however, Chakrabarty goes on to point out in his 2005 essay on Bandung that pedagogic politics have come under increasingly serious challenge. At a world conference in 2001 at Durban, for example, dalit leaders argued “that caste-oppression was no different from the oppression related to race, that caste, in effect, was the same as race”. Similarly, “tribal groups in India have increasingly sought the appellation ‘indigenous’ in order to make use of the [UN] Charter on Indigenous Peoples’ Rights”. Such arguments are difficult to justify by the usual social scientific criteria, where “words like ‘Muslim’, ‘Scheduled Caste’, ‘tribal’” need to be “backed up … by academic studies in disciplines like history and anthropology”. For Chakrabarty, these moves are indicative of how marginal groups are challenging the pedagogical delimiting of these terms, and are appropriating these terms for quite different projects. The essay “In the Name of Politics” (Chakrabarty 2005a) traces a similar process in the working of Indian democracy.

6 The Gift of the Province

A second and even more suggestive register of Chakrabarty’s work emerges in those moves where the concept of provincialising Europe works towards another universalism, a universalism that is the other of abstract universalism, and that, perhaps, can no longer go under the name of universalism. For as is suggested by all the examples of History 2, it is not at all the case that subaltern pasts or History 2 simply evacuate the space of the universal. No ethics and politics can ever afford to do that: it would no longer then remain an ethics and politics. Rather, History 2s claim another universalism. In the violent mobilisations of Indian democracy, for example, there is quite clearly a certain concept of “good” and “people’s power” at work, whatever reservations one may have about it. Running through all the innumerable History 2s, in other words, is another thinking of ethics and politics itself. Unlike the ethics and politics of abstract universalism, this ethics and politics is founded on finitude or “being-from-a-place”.

This insistence on another universalism emerges already in the formulation at the beginning of PE: “provincialising Europe is not a project of rejecting or discarding European thought…. provincialising Europe becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody’s heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed by and from the margins” (16). With a heritage, of course, one cannot have an agential relation. Whether one likes it or not, one receives equally not only European thought’s abstract logic of rights and emancipation but also its hierarchies of domination and subordination, the hierarchies well summed up in the phrase “not yet”. And because heritages are not abstract, every heritage is received in a place, and both this abstract logic of not yet and rights are made unique.

But here uniqueness and the zone of comfort it might provide is not enough to think of the distinctiveness of the work of provincialising Europe. Here, instead, there is an emphasis on how the heritage is to be renewed. As that word suggests, the focus here is no longer only on how particular places may make very different homes or zones of comfort within capitalism and abstract universalism. Rather, it is on conceptualising relations that rethink abstract universalism. In this spirit, the essay on the Bandung conference, the focus is on “the dialogical side of decolonisation” on “whether or how a global conversation of humanity could genuinely acknowledge cultural diversity without distributing such diversity over a hierarchical scale of civilisation – that is to say, an urge towards cross-cultural dialogue without the baggage of imperialism…. Whatever the meaning of the term ‘imperialism’, there was an absolute unanimity among the participants of the conference that they were all opposed to ‘it’.” And in the later dalit and tribal iterations of this dialogue that Chakrabarty traces, terms from abstract universalism are appropriated and deployed as part of a “global and de-territorialised form of political imagination that precisely breach these [usual Eurocentric] connections between signs and their assumed historical/social references.”

How is this other universalism to be thought? It is best to begin with a caveat: as examples such as the suffering of widows or violent democratic mobilisations suggest, it is not at all Chakrabarty’s argument that History 2s are non-violent, or are “more” ethical (even in some minimal sense) than the abstract universalism of History 1. Indeed, as his discussions in PE indicate, History 2s can in every case be as violent as History 1.

It is because Chakrabarty is acutely aware of these concerns that he does not ever in any unequivocal sense affirm History 2 over History 1. Rather, he affirms the project of provincialising Europe. The term “project” is especially appropriate because what is pursued here is a possibility that opens up with History 2 (though it is by no means either the only possibility or the possibility most proper to History 2 as a concept). This is the possibility of a universalism that, precisely because it is finite, because it is marked a being-from-a-place, sees itself as existing along with other universalisms and engages with them. Such a possibility cannot even be entertained within the terms of abstract universalism, which must always seek to dominate other ethics and cannot allow for another universalism. To provincialise Europe would be to seek to make “European thought” into one of these other universalisms, into one more province in a world without a capital.

Because it is simultaneously finite and yet universal, such provincialising is quite unlike any emphasis on multiple or plural ethics or modernities, and the other universalism it involves is quite different to conceptualise. In thinking about provincialising and this other universalism, one trope that Chakrabarty resorts to is that of the gift. In this vein, PE remarks: “provincialising Europe cannot ever be a project of shunning European thought. For at the end of European imperialism, European thought is a gift to us all. We can talk of provincialising it only in an anti-colonial spirit of gratitude” (255).

Here, “European thought” is renewed by receiving it as a gift. This is quite in contrast to the usual radical response to historicism. In rejecting historicism, subalterns have usually sought to exercise a power equal to that of Europe. They have responded to Europe’s “not yet” with a “right now”, denouncing the domination and violence of European categories, and insisting on an autonomy and independence from these categories, even insisting on the uniqueness of the colony. But they do so within the terms of historicism: by demonstrating that they have the power to be included within the historicist “now”, by establishing an economy of balance with Europe. Within these terms, Chakrabarty’s “gratitude” might seem suspicious, indicative that he has not broken decisively enough with European thought.
Conceptually too, it seems inappropriate to treat historicism as a gift. For it is axiomatic that it is not possible to receive a gift where there are relations of power operative. In the aneconmic relation that is the mark of a gift, there can be no place for relations of domination or subordination. Nor indeed can there be place for relations of measured equality, for such relations too are not aneconomic: they are only economically balanced. And by their own terms, what historicism and European thought bring to the world is an economy organised around such measured and abstract equality. Our institutional practices of democracy, citizen­ship, civil rights, freedom and so on are all organised by this concept of abstract equality. Such abstract equality is antithetical to the very concept of a gift, for it is centrally organised around the measuring of relations of power, and all the concomitant hierarchies of “not yet”. If I may draw on the insights of my colleague Gloria Goodwin Raheja, the poison in the gift that historicism gives makes it everything but a gift – such a gift is a gift only sociologically, not conceptually.

What sense then does it make to argue that European thought – inseparable from historicism – is a “gift to us all”? In the spirit of Chakrabarty’s remarks, I would suggest that to make historicism into such a gift is to bring about another kind of “end of European imperialism”, an end that is more than the historical process by which Europe has become less dominant and relinquished its formal colonies. This other kind of “end of European imperialism” would be a categorial matter, a refusal to accept the very terms of historicism.

If historicism, which is never given as a gift, can nevertheless be made a gift, this is because what is central to the making of a gift is not how the giver gives but how the recipient receives. By extrat­ing what is given from relations of power, the recipient can always make it something quite different from what it was. This is pre­cisely what the project of provincialising Europe seeks to do. What is given is abstract equality. But because the project of provincialising Europe receives abstract equality as a gift, what it receives is not abstract equality. Rather, it receives another equality – no longer the equality of abstraction and sameness, but rather an equality of difference. It claims to be equal to the colonisers, it participates in the institutions of abstract equality such as citizenship, democracy, civil rights and so on. But it does without claiming an abstract equality to the colonisers. To the institutions of abstract equality, thus, it gives quite another equality, an equality that does not transcend abstract equality but supplements it and refuses to be defined by its terms. This is the sense in which it renews European thought, gifting European thought what that thought by itself finds difficult, even perhaps impossible, to think.

This other equality is performed in the very giving of the gift; indeed, the gift as a concept is always organised around this other equality. Over what is given, the giver no longer retains control. Nor however does the recipient gain control over the gift. Thus, to receive a gift is to always impose on oneself and the giver a loss of control over the gift. It is within this context of loss of control and agency that the relation between the recipient and the giver is forged. Precisely because they lack agency and control, the relation that giver and recipient seek to establish with one another cannot be one of domination, subordination, or even of a measured equality that maintains an economy or balance between domination and subordination. Rather, they are marked by another equality – the equality of aneconomy. By provincialising Europe, by receiving European thought as a gift, it is precisely this relation of aneconomy that is established with Europe.

And what is enacted in this relation is also another universal­ism. By receiving European thought as a gift, its abstract universal­ism and its power to dominate is refused. At the same time, the gift is centrally about establishing a relation with the other, in this case with European thought. In this relation, a global conversation takes place. That conversation is premised on receiving the other’s singularity – here, Europe as a place, a province. This singularity is precisely what European thought has, in exercising domination, obscured also from itself. To renew Europe and European thought by giving it the singularity which it can never by itself access – this is the gift of gratitude that the colonised give to Europe by provincialising Europe. The being-from-a-place involved in provincialising Europe thus necessarily always involves also a being-given-to-a-place. It is precisely because Chakrabarty’s writings seek tena­ciously to think what is involved both in European thought as “a gift to us all” and in the “anti-colonial spirit of gratitude” that his work presses in so urgently on us, a gift we cannot refuse.

NOTES
1 At the time, Chakrabarty’s use of the expression “pre-capitalist culture” gave rise to quite misplaced accusations that Chakrabarty was practis­ing a certain kind of Orientalism in his own anal­ysis (by allegedly imprisoning workers in an un­changing “pre­capitalist” culture, much like, it was said, colonial administrators did in describ­ing the peasant­mentality of Indian workers). But “pre­capitalist,” for Chakrabarty, was a theoreti­cally-analytical, and not a descriptive, category. Something could be “pre­capital” only from the point of view of “capital”. It is a category that emerges after the coming of the rule of capital. It is only after we acknowledge the relevance of the category “capital” that the question of labelling something as “pre­capital” can arise. This, pre­cisely, was the understanding that would later define the predication that Chakrabarty addressed in PE.
2 I take my inspiration here not only from Cha­krabarty’s own writings but the very astute reading of Chakrabarty by my colleague at the University of Minnesota, Vinay Gidwani. See especially Gidwani (2004). Here, he draws on Chakrabarty’s arguments to critically analyse the work of David Harvey, and then turns to a critical analysis of Chakrabarty. In a more recent essay, Gidwani (2008) has also provided an insightful analysis of sections of Grundrisse which break from historic­ism in a vein very similar to what Chakrabarty traces here.
3 Chakrabarty uses the words peasant and subal­tern not in a sociological sense but “as a short hand for all the seemingly non-modern, rural, non-secular relationships and life practices that constantly leave their impress on the lives of even the elites in India and on their institutions of gov­ernment” (PE, 11).

REFERENCES