

SYMPOSIUM PRESENTATION (MARCH 24, 2017) – MURRAY E.G. SMITH
“Dialectics of Social Development: Marxist vs. Postcolonial Perspectives”

1. My interest in Professor Chibber’s book stems less from any abiding preoccupation with postcolonial theory than from my long-time interest in sustaining the theoretical foundations of Marx’s revolutionary socialist political project – one predicated on a *scientific* critique of capitalism, on a profoundly internationalist vision, and an insistence that *the wage-earning working class* is the only social force with a consistent interest and capacity to end the rule of capital and construct a socialist society. As the young Marx observed, the proletariat has ‘radical chains’ – and the task of revolutionary socialists, that is to say, of genuine communists, must be to help working people in their struggles to transgress the limits of capitalist social relations and defy what Professor Chibber calls the ‘logic of capital’. Marx’s theoretical contributions are in the service of a program of working class political independence and workers’ power, encapsulated in the slogan that ‘those who labour must rule’ ... not with a view to reducing class inequalities and antagonisms but with a view to creating a *classless future*, a project achievable only on a world scale.
2. Faced with the challenge of confining my remaining remarks to ten minutes, I’ll concentrate on two issues, one that might be called ‘meta-theoretical’ and the other ‘programmatically’.
3. The first question pertains to whether we can speak of a ‘dialectic’ at work in history that is rooted in universal human propensities

(or perhaps, an essential ‘human nature’) – one that points toward a universalization of human experiences and interests, even while remaining marked by great variations and mediated by a myriad of specific socio-historical, geographical and cultural particularities. (Such a notion, I note parenthetically, is a key element of Leon Trotsky’s ‘law of uneven and combined development’ and his theory and strategic perspective of Permanent Revolution – a body of thought that is too often ignored, unfortunately, in the current debate.)

4. In my own work, I’ve tried to show that the idea of human social development – ‘progress’ if you like – *can* be sustained, but not on the one-sided theoretical grounds that have been proposed by Marxists committed to ‘productive-forces’ or technological determinism or by those who focus no less one-sidedly on class struggle, conceptualized as a conscious struggle between agents rationally pursuing individual or collective interests. To be sure, there are important elements of truth in both of these approaches. But each is one-sided and each operates, to some extent and often quite unconsciously, within a shared dualism. Neither approach is dialectical, if by dialectical we understand a *consistent* opposition to *idealist metaphysics* that regards ‘ideas’, ‘values’ and ‘subjectivities’ as somehow existing *independently* of the material world (in both its ‘natural’ and ‘social’ dimensions). In other words, neither approach upholds a dialectical and materialist *monism* that recognizes that the human condition – and therefore human history and the human prospect – is shaped by and

depends upon the interplay of three distinguishable but also *interpenetrated* ontological fields: the natural realm, conscious activity, and changing ensembles of social production relations. Now, the definitions of all three of these terms are certainly subject to theoretical contestation – an issue I lack the time to explore here. But my key point is that this triadic ontological structure, foundational to Marx’s materialist conception of history, is the necessary starting point for resisting theoretical strategies that *reduce* ‘the social’ to a mere *effect* of either ‘natural laws’ or ‘the ideal-cultural’.

5. Central to the Marxian theoretical strategy is its insistence upon recognizing the irreducibility of *the social relations of production and reproduction* to either pole of the dualist ontology, as well as its focus on the relatively autonomous and often decisive role of those relations in constituting and animating an ever-changing ‘human condition’ – one that in the course of history, and particularly in the capitalist era, has taken on an increasingly ‘universal’ dimension.
6. Social Production Relations play a determining and mediating role in Marx’s triadic ontology, even as they also engender ‘real contradictions’ that propel change – and, one hopes, ‘progress’, defined as an improvement in human wellbeing and the flourishing of human capacities, both individually and collectively. When grasped by conscious human beings, however imperfectly, the maturation of these contradictions can create the ground for social revolution – the overturning of a determinate social

formation (a mode of production or an articulated ensemble of modes of production) and the inauguration of a new, more progressive epoch in what Marx calls 'the economic formation of society'.

7. This points toward a key argument I've long made against postmodernist theories: their general underestimation or omission of the *determinate role* of historically specific social relations of production and reproduction in both advancing and retarding human development. The consequence of such a move is to sustain a dualistic ontology that allows for a never-ending oscillation of analytical interests between the 'material-natural' (for example, technology) on the one side, and the 'ideal-cultural' (for example, spiritual values) on the other. So, how does all this relate to the debate over postcolonial theory?
8. One of Chibber's most important arguments is his defense of the proposition that, regardless of the cultural differences dividing and distinguishing them, working people (the 'subaltern') *everywhere* share common universal interests. In this connection, he emphasizes, and makes a convincing case for, a universal interest in 'physical well-being'. Now I have no quarrel with this. All the same, it seems an inadequate response to the postcolonial argument that the pursuit of so mundane an interest is always and necessarily culturally mediated. Now, Marx is by no means blind to the importance of cultural mediation; and to say that Marxian theory cannot accommodate the diverse cultural phenomenology of everyday life is really an outrageous red herring. *My main*

point, however, is that the post-colonialists' indictment needs to be turned against them. The stakes must be dramatically raised when Marxists respond to the post-colonialist challenge to the idea of universal working-class interests.

9. My argument is that it is precisely postcolonial theory that misses a key 'mediation' in the dialectics of social development – namely, the decisively important mediating *and indeed dominating* role of the social relations of capitalism and its derivatives: the law of value, the law of capital accumulation, and the law of falling profitability. The actuality of these laws point to an intensifying contradiction between capitalist imperatives (above all the production and accumulation of surplus value) and the productive forces, not to mention what Marx calls 'the natural conditions of production'. Global capitalism is therefore manifestly incapable of providing a framework within which the specters of world war, ecological devastation and worsening economic malaise can be exorcised. *Postcolonial theorists! Do you deny this? If not, what are you saying about it? More importantly, what are you doing about it?*
10. These considerations, which suggest the need for an understanding of 'the logic of capital' that actually goes well beyond what Professor Chibber has provided, point unmistakably toward a universal interest of 'the subaltern' – the 'wretched of the earth' referred to in the socialist anthem, *The Internationale* – in achieving a global socialist civilization capable of securing the conditions of human survival and 'real human development'.

11. In reality, the postcolonialists appear quite determined to either deny or obscure all this in their theoretical practice, and the evidence for this denial is unmistakable in their inchoate but clearly anti-Marxist programmatic perspectives. For the *maximum program* of postcolonial theory seems to be centered on promoting respect for *cultural differences*, one linked to a valorization of traditional, non-capitalist practices, cosmologies and value systems that are sometimes held up as potential resources of 'resistance' to dominant colonialist and/or capitalist ideas and practices. At the same time, postcolonial theory's strident criticism of (a usually) undifferentiated 'Marxism' clearly serves to deflect attention from the many profound problems uniquely addressed by Marxists. Indeed, its real import, as with post-al theory in general, is to provide rationales for the rejection of Marx's revolutionary socialist political project, while still affecting a posture of 'radical critique' that may even appropriate certain theoretical concepts of Marxian (or Gramscian) provenance. Having been severed from Marx's own unity of theory and practice, however, these concepts are pressed into the service of a clearly *anti-Marxist-socialist* perspective, the horizon of which would seem to be the attainment of a more perfect liberal democracy ... and the simple celebration of cultural pluralism in a world still shot through with the antagonistic and historically bankrupt social relations of capitalism. Viewed in this way, postcolonial theory emerges as just one more 'intellectual' rampart of those social relations – another, albeit relatively minor,

fortification in a long line of ideological defense of a capitalist order that is now in rapid decay and needs urgently to be replaced by world socialism.