

A (Tiny) Treatise on Human Nature

August 12, 2013

In the left-academic circles in which I travel, the March release of Vivek Chibber's book-length critique of Subaltern Studies caused quite a stir. Chibber debated one of his antagonists, Partha Chatterjee, at a plenary session of the Historical Materialism conference in May, a confrontation which provided endless fodder for debates on FB and within the Left blogosphere. For two examples, see Kafila.org's coverage (make sure to read the comments section), and the debate between Chris Taylor and Paul Heideman.

There's no doubt that, at times, some of this can be discouragingly parochial — intelligible only, perhaps, to people who've spent far too long with the relevant texts. This is exacerbated by some academics' habit of speaking in tongues. As Derrida was reported to have confessed, sometimes the ruling maxim is that you don't understand something unless you can't be understood while explaining it.

Nonetheless, Chibber's long interview in the most recent issue of Jacobin showed that there are real issues at stake, here. The debate has the virtue of demanding clarity from Marxists about Marxism's fundamentals: what we argue about human nature and thus the premises on which we rest our theory of history, how we make sense of the heterogenous development of capitalism around the world, how we understand divisions within the working-class, and much, much more.

Below, I've posted an excerpt from my own review of Chibber's work—the full piece is available at the Pakistani webzine, Viewpoint. The review covers many of the mentioned issues in some detail, but I'd like to note a few things about the argument about human nature, a dispute which took center-stage in the HM debate between Chibber and Chatterjee.

Chibber, as I write in the review, argues that Marxism's theory of historical change makes little sense unless one presumes an unchanging, 'transhistorical' core to human constitutions (i.e., a human nature). Marxists hold that the particular ways in which agents are arrayed with productive resources (peasants with usufruct rights to land versus proletarians with nothing to lose but their chains, say) shape the laws of motion of the social formation they comprise (feudalism versus capitalism). But this can only be true if these agents behave in predictable ways, across space and time. In short: without claims about invariant human drives, our theory of history flounders.

If left at this, though, one might not think the issue merits the hubbub it has inspired. Why should your non-academic take any interest, if all that's at stake is the internal consistency of this or that tweed-clad academic's account of the transition from feudalism to capitalism?

But there's more to this debate than meets the eye. At stake in this tussle are also, I think, intrinsically political questions of how one makes sense of socialization (i.e., the process by which individuals come to accept certain norms, and reject others). Arguments like Chibber's, which attributes to humans a ubiquitous interest in securing the satisfaction of our basic needs, suggests that, in effect, socialization can't go 'all the way down.' Norms incompatible with the struggle for one's daily bread will be resisted and re-shaped. This is, to make it explicit, the kernel of the Marxist defense of materialism. Life shapes consciousness, and not consciousness life.

One moment during the question and answer session at the HM plenary attests to the significance of this point. Chatterjee made an off-hand remark about the recent spate of farmer suicides in India. Suggesting that comparable levels of indebtedness in 'Western history' have inspired revolt, he

concluded that the absence of such resistance in India must have something to do with the content of peasant culture.

Those familiar with his work will notice that his argument here draws on larger claims about peasant consciousness in Indian history—that, pithily put, socialisation meets with no limits. There, he argues that it's only in cultures that celebrate individuals that one finds agents committed to the defense of their individual interests. In those places not (yet) steeped in the values of the self-regarding bourgeois, agents are composed of different stuff altogether. They are liable to put communities, elders, and/or the spiritual before themselves.

Now, in other contexts, related arguments meet with the ire of progressives. In debates about Chatterjee's claim, I referred to the parallels with rants attributing suicide bombing to Palestinian culture, so consider a different case: Bill O'Reilly's bilious harangues about Black culture. His tired, predictable thesis—that black culture encourages violence, discourages endeavour, fractures families, etc.—is, of course, an attempt to dress the political economy of white supremacy in the blind, happy tropes of Horatio Alger groupthink. But when we, as progressives, recoil, we summon certain convictions about human behaviour about which we may or may not be aware.

The counter-arguments take two forms: those that deny the premise, and those that explain it away. First, norms glorifying violence aren't at all unique to African American communities, and are anyway far more frowned upon than embraced; and norms discouraging enterprise don't really exist. These are lullabies the wealthy feed themselves about the poor and the disenfranchised in every society, at all times.

But on the assumption that less-exaggerated differences do exist, the argument from culture obviously inverts cause and effect. As Stephen Steinberg writes in a must-read review of the return to academic fashion of 'culture of poverty' arguments, critics do not always "deny that the culture of poor people is often markedly at variance with the cultural norms... in more privileged sectors of society. How could it be otherwise? The key point of contention [is] whether, under conditions of prolonged poverty, those cultural adaptations 'assume a life of their own.'" Children don't bear these norms as hand-me-downs from their parents, Steinberg insists, but because "the son goes out and independently experiences the same failures, in the same areas, and for much the same reasons as his father."

And critically, the argument continues with a counterfactual. Were available jobs remunerative and plentiful, the reigning culture would be readily cast aside—something progressives can argue precisely because we model modal behaviour on the assumption that people, everywhere, are animated by a more or less stable set of needs, a drive which trumps whatever cultural rationalizations their milieu might produce.

Note, also, that arguments like Chatterjee's don't really have the intellectual resources to make sense of social change. As many an undergrad in my intro sociology classes has observed, this problem bedevils all theories that see agents as nothing more than the repository of the norms they inherit or the structures they inhabit: how do agents transform a world that makes them entirely in its image? How could quiescence ever become resistance?

Well, if we agree that people aren't ever disabused of these drives to safeguard their livelihoods and their autonomy, norms are understood to go only so deep. On this model, quiescence in the face of obvious injustice is better understood as an index of the implausibility of resistance, rather than the swallowing whole of ruling norms. Revolt is precluded by the fact that the opposition is too strong, and/or our side too weak. And thus movements emerge not when norms change, but when the broader environment weakens one's enemies and strengthens one's allies. So, the Civil Rights

movement arose not because young men and women opted, one day, to no longer accept the rationalizations of the Southern power structure (after all, if that's the argument, what changed?), but because the transformation of the cotton economy led to the migration of masses of black people to Southern and Northern cities, in turn endowing them with the organizational resources to fight back. Which they promptly and heroically did.

There is, of course, always much more to say. Socialization is certainly more complicated than the simple reproduction of ruling-class ideas. But caveats aside, this is the primary dividend of this postulate about an invariant human nature: it anchors the materialist theory of history and historical change.

This disagreement about human nature extends, also, to the normative justification of our political project. We are, of course, outraged by institutions that deny to individuals the right to live free and full lives. But why? Obviously because something essential and common to all humanity, we think, is being stifled in a world in which not everyone has enough to eat, and in which the vast majority lack meaningful autonomy over their lives. Yet if, as Chatterjee would have it, Sanjay is constituted entirely by the injunctions of his elders, it would be difficult to protest, say, their decision to flog him for absconding with the love of his life. He has to care about his individual interests for us to be incensed by their non-satisfaction.

In the HM debate, Chatterjee responded to this point with some jibes about the larger, contractarian tradition of political philosophy with which he associated it. His argument was unclear, but the implication was straightforwardly mistaken: that because these premises are shared by people on the other side of the barricades, we are obligated to reject them. Arguments about individuals, invariant constitutions, and the priority of individual interests can of course sanction visions we reject, but this is a battle over the additional postulates that elaborate the content of justice. I challenge anyone to develop a way of thinking about what's just that doesn't take the interests of individuals (and thus, assumptions about the transhistorical existence of these interests) as its starting-point. Toss the bath water, sure, but you can't do without the baby.

There's more to say about this, too, but I'll save it for a future post. A relevant portion of my review of Chibber's book is posted below.

...Recall the second of Subaltern Studies' arguments about the bourgeois revolutions. What these were understood to have transformed, in Europe, was not just property arrangements and the political order, but agents' world-view. Because the bourgeoisie abandoned its tasks in India, the individualism that is the hallmark of bourgeois ideology never seeped into Indian culture. Put differently, bourgeois heroism in the West explained why Westerners are individuals before they're anything else; bourgeois timidity in India explained why brown people are community-oriented, first and foremost. On the terms of their argument, showing the bourgeoisie were never heroic invites confusion.

This is where Chibber's book is at its most important. Against the thesis that Western subalterns are made of different stuff, Chibber argues that human beings are, at their core, not that different across contexts. The winds of history and culture may change many things, but human constitutions do not. His defense of this argument sets the stage for what, in my opinion, is the most deliberate, careful explication of the key tenets of historical materialism that I have read.

This argument is that humans, everywhere, take an interest in defending their well-being

and their dignity. Chibber offers three reasons to believe this (though he doesn't say this explicitly). First, it's an entirely reasonable assertion about (gasp) human nature. Second, it seems inductively true—everywhere we look, people seem to act accordingly, when they're able. In one of the most gratifying parts of the book, Chibber shows that the evidence Partha Chatterjee advances to prove Indian peasants' non-bourgeois socialization actually illustrates the tenacity of individual interest. And third, it can be derived from another postulate about humans in society: namely, that individuals have to secure a basket of necessities if they're to survive, one day to the next. So, while it's undoubtedly true that individuals can assimilate all sorts of norms and injunctions, to the extent that this socialization interferes with the task of surviving to fight another day, it will have to be resisted. If it isn't, the agent who bears these norms (and thus these norms themselves) won't live on. All cultures have to accommodate themselves to this constraint.

In the debates that have followed this book's release, I've been struck by how much this argument seems to have bothered Chibber's antagonists. I can only interpret the anxiety as an index of the left's confusion. That claims about human behavior across time and space can trigger mass palpitation in a tradition that brought us 'the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle' is a sad sign. A Marxist without transhistorical commitments is a bit like the Pope in a world without God—feel free to go through the motions, but forgive the rest of us if we can't take you very seriously.

Some have perhaps confused Chibber's argument with the flagship postulate of neoclassical economics—that humans, everywhere and always, are utility-maximizers. But whatever we think of that argument (and I agree it's a stretch, though it's hardly the most unconscionable thing they've ever said), it is not Chibber's. To argue that individuals seek to maintain a basic level of well-being and defend it against attacks is a much weaker wager.

Nonetheless, what follows from this claim about human nature is actually quite profound. For if it's the case that individuals everywhere can be expected to behave in ways broadly consonant with a defense of their well-being, important aspects of their behaviour become explicable. Not everything, let me stress—historical materialism doesn't explain the sex appeal of skinny jeans. But the Marxist argument is that it explains much of what strikes us as politically and morally relevant, as revolutionaries: the pace of productivity improvements, the distribution of resources, the allocation of capacities with which to fight that distribution, the broad patterns of political contestation, the sorts of ideas that will circulate and thrive (more on this soon), etc. An excellent example of this approach is Robert Brenner's work on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, to which Chibber's debt is clear. Distinct social relations yield distinct 'rules of reproduction' for individuals, Brenner argues, which aggregate to explain distinct developmental trajectories.

This, then, is Marxism: an approach which is unabashed in its use of universalizing categories, which grounds this universalism in transhistorical expectations about individual agents, and which does it all for a good reason. It might well be possible that others have mounted as explicit and watertight a defense of its orienting propositions as Chibber has, in this book. My only claim is that, in several years of amateur Marxism and four years of graduate school, I have yet to come across them...