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Dipesh Chakrabarty: Provincializing Europe

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INTRODUCTION

The Idea of Provincializing Europe

Europe . . . since 1914 has become provincialized, . . .
only the natural sciences are able to call forth a
quick international echo.

(Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1977)

The West is a name for a subject which gathers itself in
discourse but is also an object constituted discursively;
it is, evidently, a name always associating itself with
those regions, communities, and peoples that appear
politically or economically superior to other regions,
communities, and peoples. Basically, it is just like the
name “Japan,” . . . it claims that it is capable of
sustaining, if not actually transcending, an impulse to
transcend all the particularizations.

(Naoki Sakai, 1998)

PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE is not a book about the region of the world we call “Europe.” That Europe, one could say, has already been provincialized by history itself. Historians have long acknowledged that the so-called “European age” in modern history began to yield place to other regional and global configurations toward the middle of the twentieth century.¹ European history is no longer seen as embodying anything like a “universal human history.”² No major Western thinker, for instance, has publicly shared Francis Fukuyama’s “vulgarized Hegelian historicism” that saw in the fall of the Berlin wall a common end for the history of all human beings.³ The contrast with the past seems sharp when one remembers the cautious but warm note of approval with which Kant once detected in the French Revolution a “moral disposition in the human race” or Hegel saw the imprimatur of the “world spirit” in the momentousness of that event.⁴

I am by training a historian of modern South Asia, which forms my archive and is my site of analysis. The Europe I seek to provincialize or

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decenter is an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd and shorthand forms* in some everyday habits of thought that invariably subtend attempts in the social sciences to address questions of political modernity in South Asia.⁵ The phenomenon of “political modernity”—namely, the rule by modern institutions of the state, bureaucracy, and 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.⁶ Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between 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 political modernity without these and other related concepts that found a climactic form in the course of the European Enlightenment and the nineteenth century.

These concepts entail an unavoidable—and in a sense indispensable—universal and secular vision of the human. The European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice. But the vision has been powerful in its effects. It has historically provided a strong foundation on which to erect—both in Europe and outside—critiques of socially unjust practices. Marxist and liberal thought are legatees of this intellectual heritage. This heritage is now global. The modern Bengali educated middle classes—to which I belong and fragments of whose history I recount later in the book—have been characterized by Tapan Raychaudhuri as the “the first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West.”⁷ A long series of illustrious members of this social group—from Raja Rammohun Roy, sometimes called “the father of modern India,” to Manabendranath Roy, who argued with Lenin in the Comintern—warmly embraced the themes of rationalism, science, equality, and human rights that the European Enlightenment promulgated.⁸ Modern social critiques of caste, oppressions of women, the lack of rights for laboring and subaltern classes in India, and so on—and, in fact, the very critique of colonialism itself—are unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how Enlightenment Europe was appropriated in the subcontinent. The Indian constitution tellingly begins by repeating certain universal Enlightenment themes celebrated, say, in the American constitution. And it is salutary to remember that the writ-

ings of the most trenchant critic of the institution of “untouchability” in British India refer us back to some originally European ideas about liberty and human equality.⁹

I too write from within this inheritance. Postcolonial scholarship is committed, almost by definition, to engaging the universals—such as the abstract figure of the human or that of Reason—that were forged in eighteenth-century Europe and that underlie the human sciences. This engagement marks, for instance, the writing of the Tunisian philosopher and historian Hichem Djait, who accuses imperialist Europe of “deny[ing] its own vision of man.”¹⁰ Fanon’s struggle to hold on to the Enlightenment idea of the human—even when he knew that European imperialism had reduced that idea to the figure of the settler-colonial white man—is now itself a part of the global heritage of all postcolonial thinkers.¹¹ The struggle ensues because there is no easy way of dispensing with these universals in the condition of political modernity. Without them there would be no social science that addresses issues of modern social justice.

This engagement with European thought is also called forth by the fact that today the so-called European intellectual tradition is the only one alive in the social science departments of most, if not all, modern universities. I use the word “alive” in a particular sense. It is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times but also as though they were our own contemporaries. In the social sciences, these are invariably thinkers one encounters within the tradition that has come to call itself “European” or “Western.” I am aware that an entity called “the European intellectual tradition” stretching back to the ancient Greeks is a fabrication of relatively recent European history. Martin Bernal, Samir Amin, and others have justly criticized the claim of European thinkers that such an unbroken tradition ever existed or that it could even properly be called “European.”¹² The point, however, is that, fabrication or not, this is the genealogy of thought in which social scientists find themselves inserted. Faced with the task of analyzing developments or social practices in modern India, few if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with, say, the thirteenth-century logician Gangesa or with the grammarian and linguistic philosopher Bartrihari (fifth to sixth centuries), or with the tenth- or eleventh-century aesthetician Abhinavagupta. Sad though it is, one result of European colonial rule in South Asia is that the intellectual traditions once unbroken and alive in Sanskrit or Persian or Arabic are now only

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matters of historical research for most—perhaps all—modern social scientists in the region.¹³ They treat these traditions as truly dead, as history. Although categories that were once subject to detailed theoretical contemplation and inquiry now exist as practical concepts, bereft of any theoretical lineage, embedded in quotidian practices in South Asia, contemporary social scientists of South Asia seldom have the training that would enable them to make these concepts into resources for critical thought for the present.¹⁴ And yet past European thinkers and their categories are never quite dead for us in the same way. South Asian(ist) social scientists would argue passionately with a Marx or a Weber without feeling any need to historicize them or to place them in their European intellectual contexts. Sometimes—though this is rather rare—they would even argue with the ancient or medieval or early-modern predecessors of these European theorists.

Yet the very history of politicization of the population, or the coming of political modernity, in countries outside of the Western capitalist democracies of the world produces a deep irony in the history of the political. This history challenges us to rethink two conceptual gifts of nineteenth-century Europe, concepts integral to the idea of modernity. One is historicism—the idea that to understand anything it has to be seen both as a unity and in its historical development—and the other is the very idea of the political. What historically enables a project such as that of “provincializing Europe” is the experience of political modernity in a country like India. European thought has a contradictory relationship to such an instance of political modernity. It is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India. Exploring—on both theoretical and factual registers—this simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of social science thought is the task this book has set itself.

THE POLITICS OF HISTORICISM

Writings by poststructuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault have undoubtedly given a fillip to global critiques of historicism.¹⁵ But it would be wrong to think of postcolonial critiques of historicism (or of the political) as simply deriving from critiques already elaborated by postmodern and poststructuralist thinkers of the West. In fact, to think this way would itself be to practice historicism, for such a thought would merely repeat the temporal structure of the statement, “first in the West, and then elsewhere.” In saying this, I do not mean to take away from the recent discus-

sions of historicism by critics who see its decline in the West as resulting from what Jameson has imaginatively named “the cultural logic of late-capitalism.”¹⁶ The cultural studies scholar Lawrence Grossberg has pointedly questioned whether history itself is not endangered by consumerist practices of contemporary capitalism. How do you produce historical observation and analysis, Grossberg asks, “when every event is potentially evidence, potentially determining, and at the same time, changing too quickly to allow the comfortable leisure of academic criticism?”¹⁷ But these arguments, although valuable, still bypass the histories of political modernity in the third world. From Mandel to Jameson, nobody sees “late capitalism” as a system whose driving engine may be in the third world. The word “late” has very different connotations when applied to the developed countries and to those seen as still “developing.” “Late capitalism” is properly the name of a phenomenon that is understood as belonging primarily to the developed capitalist world, though its impact on the rest of the globe is never denied.¹⁸

Western critiques of historicism that base themselves on some characterization of “late capitalism” overlook the deep ties that bind together historicism as a mode of thought and the formation of political modernity in the erstwhile European colonies. Historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Crudely, one might say that it was one important form that the ideology of progress or “development” took from the nineteenth century on. Historicism is what made modernity or capitalism look not simply global but rather as something that became global *over time*, by originating in one place (Europe) and then spreading outside it. This “first in Europe, then elsewhere” structure of global historical time was historicist; different non-Western nationalisms would later produce local versions of the same narrative, replacing “Europe” by some locally constructed center. It was historicism that allowed Marx to say that the “country that is more developed industrially only shows, to the less developed, the image of its own future.”²⁰ It is also what leads prominent historians such as Phyllis Deane to describe the coming of industries in England as the *first* industrial revolution.²¹ Historicism thus posited historical time as a measure of the cultural distance (at least in institutional development) that was assumed to exist between the West and the non-West.²² In the colonies, it legitimated the idea of civilization.²³ In Europe itself, it made possible completely internalist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment.²⁴ These “events” in turn are all explained mainly with respect to “events” within the geographical confines of Europe (however fuzzy its exact boundaries may have been). The

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inhabitants of the colonies, on the other hand, were assigned a place “elsewhere” in the “first in Europe and then elsewhere” structure of time. This move of historicism is what Johannes Fabian has called “the denial of co-evalness.”²⁵

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.²⁶ Consider the classic liberal but historicist essays by John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty” and “On Representative Government,” both of which proclaimed self-rule as the highest form of government and yet argued against giving Indians or Africans self-rule on grounds that were indeed historicist. According to Mill, Indians or Africans were *not yet* civilized enough to rule themselves. Some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be considered prepared for such a task.²⁷ 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. We were all headed for the same destination, Mill averred, but some people were to arrive earlier than others. That was what historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait. Acquiring a historical consciousness, acquiring the public spirit that Mill thought absolutely necessary for the art of self-government, was also to learn this art of waiting. This waiting was the realization of the “not yet” of historicism.

Twentieth-century anticolonial democratic demands for self-rule, on the contrary, harped insistently on a “now” as the temporal horizon of action. From about the time of First World War to the decolonization movements of the fifties and sixties, anticolonial nationalisms were predicated on this urgency of the “now.” Historicism has not disappeared from the world, but its “not yet” exists today in tension with this global insistence on the “now” that marks all popular movements toward democracy. This had to be so, for in their search for a mass base, anticolonial nationalist movements introduced classes and groups into the sphere of the political that, by the standards of nineteenth-century European liberalism, could only look ever so unprepared to assume the political responsibility of self-government. These were the peasants, tribals, semi- or unskilled industrial workers in non-Western cities, men and women from the subordinate social groups—in short, the subaltern classes of the third world.

A critique of historicism therefore goes to the heart of the question of political modernity in non-Western societies. As I shall argue in more detail later, it was through recourse to some version of a stagist theory of history—ranging from simple evolutionary schemas to sophisticated understandings of “uneven development”—that European political and social thought made room for the political modernity of the subaltern classes. This was not, as such, an unreasonable theoretical claim. If “political modernity” was to be a bounded and definable phenomenon, it was not unreasonable to use its definition as a measuring rod for social progress. Within this thought, it could always be said with reason that some people were less modern than others, and that the former needed a period of preparation and waiting before they could be recognized as full participants in political modernity. But this was precisely the argument of the colonizer—the “not yet” to which the colonized nationalist opposed his or her “now.” The achievement of political modernity in the third world could only take place through a contradictory relationship to European social and political thought. It is true that nationalist elites often rehearsed to their own subaltern classes—and still do if and when the political structures permit—the stagist theory of history on which European ideas of political modernity were based. However, there were two necessary developments in nationalist struggles that would produce at least a practical, if not theoretical, rejection of any stagist, historicist distinctions between the premodern or the nonmodern and the modern. One was the nationalist elite’s own rejection of the “waiting-room” version of history when faced with the Europeans’ use of it as a justification for denial of “self-government” to the colonized. The other was the twentieth-century phenomenon of the peasant as full participant in the political life of the nation (that is, first in the nationalist movement and then as a citizen of the independent nation), long before he or she could be formally educated into the doctrinal or conceptual aspects of citizenship.

A dramatic example of this nationalist rejection of historicist history is the Indian decision taken immediately after the attainment of independence to base Indian democracy on universal adult franchise. This was directly in violation of Mill’s prescription. “Universal teaching,” Mill said in the essay “On Representative Government,” “must precede universal enfranchisement.”²⁸ Even the Indian Franchise Committee of 1931, which had several Indian members, stuck to a position that was a modified version of Mill’s argument. The members of the committee agreed that although universal adult franchise would be the ideal goal for India, the general lack of literacy in the country posed a very large obstacle to its

implementation.²⁹ And yet in less than two decades, India opted for universal adult suffrage for a population that was still predominantly nonliterate. In defending the new constitution and the idea of “popular sovereignty” before the nation’s Constituent Assembly on the eve of formal independence, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, later to be the first vice president of India, argued against the idea that Indians as a people were not yet ready to rule themselves. As far as he was concerned, Indians, literate or illiterate, were always suited for self-rule. He said: “We cannot say that the republican tradition is foreign to the genius of this country. We have had it from the beginning of our history.”³⁰ What else was this position if not a national gesture of abolishing the imaginary waiting room in which Indians had been placed by European historicist thought? Needless to say, historicism remains alive and strong today in the all the developmentalist practices and imaginations of the Indian state.³¹ Much of the institutional activity of governing in India is premised on a day-to-day practice of historicism; there is a strong sense in which the peasant is still being educated and developed into the citizen. But every time there is a populist/political mobilization of the people on the streets of the country and a version of “mass democracy” becomes visible in India, historicist time is put in temporary suspension. And once every five years—or more frequently, as seems to be the case these days—the nation produces a political performance of electoral democracy that sets aside all assumptions of the historicist imagination of time. On the day of the election, every Indian adult is treated practically and theoretically as someone already endowed with the skills of a making major citizenly choice, education or no education.

The history and nature of political modernity in an excolonial country such as India thus generates a tension between the two aspects of the subaltern or peasant as citizen. One is the peasant who has to be educated into the citizen and who therefore belongs to the time of historicism; the other is the peasant who, despite his or her lack of formal education, is already a citizen. This tension is akin to the tension between the two aspects of nationalism that Homi Bhabha has usefully identified as the pedagogic and the performative.³² Nationalist historiography in the pedagogic mode portrays the peasant’s world, with its emphasis on kinship, gods, and the so-called supernatural, as anachronistic. But the “nation” and the political are also *performed* in the carnivalesque aspects of democracy: in rebellions, protest marches, sporting events, and in universal adult franchise. The question is: How do we *think* the political at these moments when the peasant or the subaltern emerges in the modern sphere of politics, in his or her own right, as a member of the nationalist movement

