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provincializing ‘the west’ by essentializing ‘the east’?

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Postcolonial theorists illuminate the ways in which colonial powers’ practices of education functioned as tools of domination. They highlight that a school education that presented colonial powers’ knowledge as superior to that of colonized societies formed subjectivities that were susceptible to colonial rule. In that way postcolonial theorists offer an intriguing critique of schools’ involvement in the ideology of colonial powers’ epistemic and moral superiority. Thus, they reveal the nexus between knowledge, interests and power that crystallizes at the intersection of colonial and educational practices.

1. Introduction

Postcolonial theorists illuminate the ways in which colonial powers’ practices of education functioned as tools of domination. They highlight that a school education that presented colonial powers’ knowledge as superior to that of colonized societies formed subjectivities that were susceptible to colonial rule. In that way postcolonial theorists offer an intriguing critique of schools’ involvement in the ideology of colonial powers’ epistemic and moral superiority. Thus, they reveal the nexus between knowledge, interests and power that crystallizes at the intersection of colonial and educational practices.[1]

To illustrate, consider that Helen Tiffin (1995, p. 98) has suggested with reference to the work of *Robinson Crusoe*, that the study of “a canonical text at the colonial periphery […] continually displays and repeats for the colonized subject […] the processes of its annihilation, marginalization, or naturalization as if this were axiomatic, culturally ungrounded, ‘universal,’ natural.”[2] Likewise, Bill Ashcroft (1995, p. 55) has highlighted for the case of colonial India that “the ‘universal’ discourse of English literature […] was consciously adopted as the vehicle for educating the Indian élites in tenets of civilized morality.” In these ways the postcolonial theorists uncover the ideology of an education that presents itself as objective but serves the power and interests of the already more powerful and privileged actors within the colonial context.

Yet postcolonial theorists not only problematize the educational practices under colonial rule but also the educational practices that have emerged after the former colonies’ formal independence. A case in point are Ashcroft et al. (1995, p. 425) who hold that “education is perhaps the most insidious and in some ways the most cryptic of colonialist survivals, older systems now passing, sometimes imperceptibly, into neo-colonialist configurations.” In addition, postcolonial theorists examine contemporary educational practices of global citizenship education and analyze the ways in which these also reproduce asymmetric relations of power between the formerly colonizing and the formerly colonized societies. David Jefferess (2012, p. 33), for example, attempts to reveal that teaching certain understandings of foreign aid is ideological, such as when this aid is portrayed as a

gift of rich to poor societies, as if the fact that some societies are rich and others are poor would be unrelated to the colonial past and the asymmetric economic structures that it has brought about. These are invaluable contributions that postcolonial theorists have made to normative debates on global politics and educational policies. What is more – as Margaret Kohn (2013) and Johannes Drerup (in press) have also suggested – their contributions can complement and need not contradict or undermine the "analytic" normative philosophical positions of those who operate with universalist categories such as (global) justice or human rights.

However, despite the many insights that we can gain from a postcolonial perspective, I would like to put forward a warning regarding certain ways in which postcolonial theorists criticize a type of "Western" education that they hold must be provincialized. More specifically, the cases that I have in mind are those in which postcolonial theorists argue that certain forms of education, which they label as "Western," are inappropriate within the altogether differently constituted "Eastern" contexts and should hence be rejected because they represent nothing but another instantiation of the use of knowledge as power. My warning, to put it provocatively, is that some contemporary analyses of "Western education" from a postcolonial perspective might be themselves ideological because they might rely on a certain essentialization of the "East," which in turn might lead the postcolonial theorists to endorse a mistaken construction of the difference between the "West" and the "East."

My explanation of this warning and why I view this warning as justified will proceed in two steps. In a first step I will point to and explain the remarkable attempt that Vivek Chibber has undertaken in *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013) to unveil how postcolonial theory itself can become ideological. In a second step, I will argue that it is false to limit the validity of democratic understandings of justice and of citizenship education to "the West" on the ground that democracy would be a "Western" idea that is absent from "the East."[3] The upshot of my discussion will be that we cannot simply take for granted that there is a fundamental difference between "the East" and "the West," but have to engage in social-scientific and humanistic inquiry to identify which differences are real and which are merely imagined.

2. Provincializing "the West" by Essentializing "the East"?

In *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* Chibber aims to show that the fundamental logic of capitalism applies to both "the East" and "the West," and concludes that the failure of some postcolonial theorists to recognize the ways in which both contexts are subject to the same social processes in some cases amounts to an essentialization of "the East." Chibber's Marxist historiographical analysis of how capitalism has permeated both of these contexts is very rich and cannot be reconstructed here in great detail. One of Chibber's key observations, however, is that most of the postcolonial scholars that are associated with Subaltern Studies have adopted the position of Ranajit Guha (1983; 1997) on the development of capitalism in India. Yet Chibber maintains that several of Guha's historical claims are incorrect and that as a consequence of this postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies, in particular, rests on a weak foundation. Thus, it is necessary to analyze in some detail Guha's historiographical account and why Chibber finds it wanting.

According to Guha, capitalism has taken on a specific form in India that is distinct from the way in which capitalism has unfolded in Europe and cannot be adequately grasped with the conceptual vocabulary of "Western" Marxist thought. More specifically, Guha maintains that within Europe capital has been universalized through the society-wide institutionalization of the bourgeois cultural

and political order. The bourgeois order has permeated all sectors of society and replaced the feudal order, whereby capitalism has become hegemonic. In Europe, that is, the logic of capital has dominated not only the economic but also all of the cultural and political domains. By contrast, Guha argues, a comparable universalization of capital has not taken place in the Indian context, in which certain "subaltern" segments of society have remained unaffected by the supposedly unlimited expansion of capital. This is because the dominant classes in India have failed to institutionalize a hegemonic order of the kind that the European bourgeois cultural and political order has represented. In Guha's (1997, p. 5, quoted from Chibber, 2013, p. 49; emphases added) words:

"The *liberalism* they [the Indian bourgeoisie] professed was never strong enough to exceed the limitations of the half-hearted initiatives for reform which issued from the colonial administration. This *mediocre liberalism*, a caricature of the vigorous democratic culture of the epoch of the rise of the bourgeoisie of the West, operated throughout the colonial period in a symbiotic relationship with the still active and vigorous forces of the semi-feudal culture of India."

Guha's historical analysis, which justifies the necessity of introducing a distinct, postcolonial conceptual framework when analyzing capitalism in India, has eventually achieved axiomatic status within Subaltern Studies. For some of Guha's central claims were taken up by influential postcolonial scholars like Dipesh Chakrabaty (2000, p. 14), who has also maintained that "there was no class in South Asia comparable to European bourgeoisie of Marxist metanarratives."

Chibber criticizes Guha's (and Chakrabaty's) analysis in two ways. Firstly, Chibber offers fine-grained re-interpretations of the English and French Revolutions. In these interpretations he (2013, ch. 3) puts into question that the development of European capitalism has actually relied on the kind of hegemony of the bourgeois political and cultural order that Guha takes for granted. In the case of the English Revolution, Chibber (2013, pp. 56–66) argues that the Parliament's opposition to King Charles I had initially proceeded without the popular support of the masses. What is more, only parts of the Parliament coalesced with the laboring classes and many MPs did so because they saw it "as a necessary evil" (Chibber, 2013, p. 61). A considerable (aristocratic) part of the Parliament would have preferred reform or the continuation of Charles' rule instead of the realization of the radical reforms propagated by the popular masses. Based on this account of the role of the bourgeoisie in the English Revolution, it does not come as surprise that Chibber (2013, p. 66) concludes that "[t]he enduring political consequence of the English Civil Wars was a bourgeois oligarchy, not a new and expansive political nation."

Likewise, in the French case, Chibber (2013, pp. 66-76) maintains that it was not at all the project of capitalist leaders to bestow upon the masses civil, political and economic liberties. To that effect he (2013, p. 69) points out, for example, that in Abbé Sieyès *What is the Third Estate?* "there was an explicit rejection of political rights for those without property." What is more, the leaders of the revolution were of middle-class origin – often employees or self-employed – and hence not part of the exploiting "bourgeoise" class in the Marxian sense. Universal suffrage was enacted only due to the pressures exercised by the peasants and workers, not because of the efforts of the bourgeoise class. Hence the absence of bourgeois hegemony in India cannot explain the distinctiveness of Indian capitalism if the bourgeoisie in Europe has not been hegemonic.

Secondly, Chibber suggests an alternative understanding of the universalization of capital, an understanding that allows seeing this universalization taking place not only in the European but also

in the Indian context. Following this alternative understanding, "[what] is universalized under the rule of capital," according to Chibber (2013, p. 125), "is not the drive for a consensual and encompassing political order, but rather the compulsions of market dependence." Hence it is possible that the accumulation of capital takes place through the expansion of market relations, even if the cultural and political order in which this occurs is not of the liberal kind that Guha assumes must exist for the universalization of capital to develop. In particular, the universalization of capital may even unfold alongside the kind of interpersonal domination that existed inside Indian factories and which supposedly was incompatible with a consensual liberal order based upon the recognition of subjective rights. Thus, such interpersonal domination of the factory manager vis-à-vis the worker on the Indian subcontinent is not – *pace* Chakrabarty's (1988, p. 166) – evidence of the particularity of capitalism's development in colonial India.[4]

In sum, Chibber contests Guha's central marker of difference between "the East" and "the West" and provides a perspective through which capitalist development in both Europe and India can be viewed as operating in a similar manner. The upshot of Chibber's critique is hence that Guha as well as the postcolonial theorists from the Subaltern Studies movement that have relied on his work have exaggerated the extent to which "the East" differs from "the West." This is manifest, as Chibber (2013, p. 286) puts it, in postcolonial theory's "tendency to obscure or deny basic properties of capitalism, and the valorization of some profoundly Orientalist constructions of Eastern cultures." So the danger of a certain provincialization of "the West" is that it involves – at least at the extreme – an essentialization of "the East." This can happen when scholars avoid relying on "Western" – or, rather, universal – categories in their characterization of "the East," despite the explanatory power that these categories possess in these contexts.

3. Is Democracy an Exclusively "Western" Concept?

My presentation of Chibber's critique of the postcolonial theorists associated with Subaltern Studies focused primarily on the extent to which *empirical* processes such as the hegemony of the bourgeois cultural and political order or the universalization of capital may or may not be distinctively "Western." Yet the postcolonial theorists' call to provincialize "the West" also concerns the use of normative concepts such as justice and democracy. What Chibber's discussion of postcolonial theory suggests is that in the case of normative concepts it is necessary as well to investigate carefully whether they rightfully claim universal validity or must be provincialized. The postcolonial theorists' moral critique that those who arbitrarily extend "Western" concepts and ideas to the world at large are complicit in neo-imperialism must not prevent us from a careful inquiry regarding the potentially global scope of validity of certain normative concepts.

Elsewhere (Culp, 2019, ch. 7; 2020) I have already explored the questions to what extent, if at all, a democratic understanding of justice and a democratic understanding of citizenship education would have to be regarded as distinctively "Western."[5] The aim of these explorations has been to consider whether democratic understandings of educational justice and citizenship education could become fundamental building blocks of theories of educational justice and citizenship education with global scope. In both cases – that of democratic justice as well as that of democratic citizenship education – I have suggested that there are relevant normative sources in the South and East Asian traditions of ethical and political thought that would justify denying that said democratic understandings are exclusively "Western."

For the democratic tradition in the South Asian context I have relied primarily on Amartya Sen's

characterization of the Indian democratic tradition in *The Argumentative Indian*. In that book Sen (2006, p. 13) maintains "that democracy is intimately connected with public discussion and interactive reasoning. Traditions of public discussion exist across the world, not just in the West." More specifically, Sen (2006, p. 15) points out that in India as early as the 4th century BCE so-called "Buddhist councils" have relied on deliberation in order to solve conflicts. This dialogic approach to problem-solving has lasted over several centuries so that in India, Sen (2006, p. 12) concludes, "the tradition of argument […] shapes our culture. It has helped to make heterodoxy the natural state of affairs in India […]. [P]ersistent arguments are an important part of our public life." Hence it would be a mistake to view democracy exclusively as a "Western" concept.

In the East Asian context, by contrast, the situation might appear to be more complicated. The prevalence of Confucianism may suggest that the absence of democracy is a characteristic feature of the East Asian context. Indeed, Samuel Huntington (1996, p. 238) has claimed that "[the] Confucian heritage, with its emphasis on authority, order, hierarchy, and supremacy of the collectivity over the individual, creates obstacles to democratization." Likewise, scholars like A. T. Nuyen (2000, pp. 135-136) also emphasize the incompatibility of Confucianism and democracy: "Confucian society is like a family and there is no place for [democratic] rights in a family. [In addition,] […] Confucian values of unity and harmony conflict with the democratic values of plurality and choice."

However, Francis Fukuyama (1995, p. 28) contests this characterization of East Asia and China, in particular, because "Chinese Confucianism […] does not legitimate deference to the authority of an all-powerful state that leaves no scope for the development of an independent civil society." What is more, Keqian Xu (2006, p. 137) even holds that "Confucian principles […] are not only compatible with the value and idea of modern democracy, providing certain foundations for it, but will also possibly support the construction of a modern democratic system with Chinese features." Thus, we cannot simply take for granted that the East Asian political culture is void of any democratic ideas.

To sum up, it is inadequate to insist that democratic understandings of justice and citizenship education are entirely absent or foreign in "the East." This is why postcolonial theorists' call to provincialize "the West," as important as it is, must not lead to an *a priori* affirmation of a fundamental difference between "the East" and "the West" – for that would involve an essentialization of "the East." What is needed is humanistic and social-scientific inquiry of the ideas, norms and processes that characterize these contexts and their interdependencies.

4. Conclusion

Like other educational theorists that have employed poststructuralist ideas, postcolonial theorists provide important insights into how seemingly innocuous educational practices can become effective tools of domination by using knowledge as power. Misrepresentations of the difference between "the West" and "the East" have done important work for the colonizers. Under contemporary conditions such misrepresentations are, once again, prone to serve those who occupy the more privileged and powerful social positions. Despite the undeniable importance of such postcolonial analyses of education, I have warned that we must tread carefully when limiting the scope of supposedly "Western" ideas, norms and processes such as capitalism or certain understandings of democracy and justice. Social-scientific and humanistic inquiry is needed in order to determine what does and what does not belong to "the West" and "the East," respectively. Otherwise the attempts to provincialize "the West" may end up essentializing "the East."

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1. In that way the aims of the postcolonial theorists in the domain of education are very similar to those of many educational theorists in German speaking academia that have explored the relevance of Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's work for understanding the ways in which power is exercised through education; see Ricken and Rieger-Ladich (2004) as well as Ricken and Balzer (2012).
2. Similarly, Tiffin (1995, p. 97) maintains that through the colonial educational practices "the very texts which facilitated such material and psychic capture were those which the imposed European education systems foisted on the colonized as the 'great' literature which dealt with 'universals'; ones whose culturally specific imperial terms were to be accepted as

axiomatic at the colonial margins."

3. I lay out a similar argument in Culp (2019, ch. 7; 2020).
4. In addition, Chibber (2013, p. 122) also claims that interpersonal domination was also present in the US "well into the 1930s," and that "in much of the American industrial economy, workers were pressed into 'company towns,' in which much of their daily reproduction was directly under the influence, if not control, of their employer, and where all the instruments (of domination; J.C.) just enumerated (of domination; J.C.) were enforced with brutal tenacity."
5. I articulate and defend a democratic, or discourse-theoretic, understanding of global justice in Culp (2014, ch. 5).