



Vivek Chibber. *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022. 224 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-24513-6.

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Class and Theory after the Cultural Turn

In the ideological disciplines—the humanities and social sciences—it is rare to come across a theoretical work that doesn't seem to fetishize verbiage and jargonizing for their own sake. From the relatively lucid analytical Marxism of an Erik Olin Wright to the turgid cultural theory of a Stuart Hall, pretentious prolixity is, apparently, seen as an end in itself.[1] In such an academic context, one of the highest services an intellectual can perform is simply to return to the basics of theoretic common sense, stated clearly and concisely. Society is very complex, but, as Noam Chomsky likes to say, insofar as we understand it at all, our understanding can in principle be expressed rather simply and straightforwardly. Not only is such expression more democratic and accessible, thus permitting a broader diffusion of critical understanding of the world; it also has the merit of showing that, once you shed the paraphernalia of most academic writing, nothing particularly profound is being said. Vivek Chibber's *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* constitutes an exemplary demonstration of this fact, and of these virtues.

Chibber has been waging a war against post-modern theory for some time now, ably defending Marxian common sense against generations of

carping culturalist critics. His *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013) brilliantly showed that the Marxian “metanarrative” that has come under sustained attack by poststructuralists and postmodernists retains its value as an explanation of the modern world, and that many of the (often highly obscure) alternative conceptualizations of postcolonial theorists are deeply flawed. More recently, in an article published in 2020 in the journal *Catalyst* (“[Orientalism and Its Afterlives](#)”), Chibber has persuasively criticized Edward Said's classic *Orientalism* for its idealistic interpretation of modern imperialism as emanating in large part from an age-old European Orientalist discourse, rather than from a capitalist political economy that—as materialists argue—merely used such a discourse to rationalize its global expansion. In more popular venues too, notably *Jacobin*, Chibber has argued for the centrality of materialism to the projects of both interpreting and changing the world.

The Class Matrix continues his engagement with these issues, this time in the form of a systematic critique of cultural theory, specifically of its inability to explain the sources of stability and conflict in modern society. Materialism, in contrast—i.e., an emphasis on class structures and ob-

jective economic interests rather than such concepts as discourses, cultures, identities, and meanings—is quite capable of explaining society, and can rather easily be defended against the criticisms of culturalists. The book’s admirable lucidity serves several functions: first, Chibber is able to present the arguments of a variety of culturalisms, from Gramscians’ to the Frankfurt school’s to those of the post-1970s cultural turn, very clearly and in a way that illuminates the stakes of the debate; second, his eloquent reconstruction of (aspects of) cultural theory lays the ground for an equally eloquent, and much more thorough, exposition of structural class theory, which is shown to have no difficulty (contrary to the claims of culturalists) in explaining the longevity and stability of capitalism; third, the discarding of all unnecessary verbiage and jargon makes it clear just how intellectually trivial these long-running theoretical debates are in the first place. One can have a perfectly defensible and sophisticated understanding of the modern world on the basis of a little critical common sense and knowledge of history.

Chibber starts by presenting the culturalist case. Why didn’t the West become socialist in the twentieth century, as Marxists predicted? Evidently Marx had gotten something wrong. In fact, it was argued (in the postwar era), he neglected the role of *culture* in forming the consciousness of the working class. Mass culture and the diffusion of dominant ideologies were able to reconcile the working class to capitalism, indeed, to generate active popular consent for it. This analysis amounted to a demotion of the classical Marxist emphasis on the conflictual dynamics of the class structure—which supposedly would naturally lead to proletarian class consciousness and thereby revolution—in favor of the cohesive functions of mid-twentieth-century culture. Later culturalists took this argument a step further by rejecting the Marxian theory altogether, arguing that culture is actually *prior* to structure: what people are really presented with are not unmediated structures or objective material interests but “constellations of

meaning,” social identities, local cultures, contingent processes of socialization that shape how actors understand the many structures they are located in (p. 6). One cannot (*pace* classical Marxism) predict behavior from people’s structural locations and the interests they supposedly define, because people first have to *interpret* structures, a process that is highly contingent and variable. Subjectivity, therefore, is primary, and the objectivity of class structures tends to evaporate.

Chibber’s response to this postmodernist argument, in effect, is that while it is perfectly true every structure is steeped in culture and agents’ subjectivity, this hardly implies the causal inertness of class location. Capitalist institutions do not exactly impose high interpretive requirements: everyone is capable of understanding “what it means” to be a worker or a capitalist. If you lack ownership of the means of production, you either submit to wage labor or you starve. The economic structures force themselves on you. For Chibber, “the proletarian’s *meaning orientation* is [therefore] the effect of his *structural location*” (p. 34). Similarly, the capitalist has to obey market pressures (structures) in order to survive as a capitalist, so he, too, is compelled to subordinate his normative orientation to objectively existing capitalist institutions. In fact, it is the culturalists who are in the weaker position: how can they explain “the indubitable fact of capitalism’s expansion across the globe and the obvious similarity in its macrodynamics across these regions” without accepting materialist assumptions (p. 45)?

Having dispatched this particular objection to materialism, Chibber moves on to other difficulties. Given the antagonistic relations between worker and capitalist (which Chibber elaborates on in detail), why hasn’t collective resistance, and ultimately revolution, been more common? The obvious answer, contrary to cultural theory, is that the asymmetry of power between worker and capitalist is so great that workers find it quite difficult to fight successfully for their collective interests.

The insecurity of the worker's position (for example, he can be fired for union activity) makes it easier and safer to pursue *individualized* modes of advancement or resistance. Moreover, the intrinsic problems of collective action—free rider problems, difficulty in securing agreement among large numbers of workers, etc.—militate against class consciousness and collective resistance. Classical Marxists were wrong to assume that the most rational path for workers would always be the collective path. In fact, contingent cultural considerations play an important role in the formation (in any given case) of class consciousness—although culture always remains constrained by material factors.

Having successfully and eloquently deployed common sense in his first two chapters, Chibber now turns, in the lengthy third chapter, to an explanation of how capitalism has endured. Here, too, he prefers common sense to the idealistic arguments of many Gramscians and New Left theorists, who pointed to bourgeois cultural hegemony and ideological indoctrination as having manufactured consent among the working class. One problem with this theory is its dim view of workers: "Culturalists are in the embarrassing position of claiming implicitly that while *they* can discern the exploitative—and hence unjust—character of the employment relation, the actors who are, *in fact*, being exploited, who are experiencing its brute facts, are not capable of doing so" (p. 91). There are, admittedly, other possible understandings of the basis of mass consent, more materialistic understandings, but in the end Chibber rejects these as the primary explanation for capitalist stability. Instead, he argues that workers simply *resign* themselves to capitalism—they "accept their location in the class structure because they see no other viable option" (p. 106). What Marx called "the dull compulsion of economic relations" keeps the gears of capitalism grinding on, generation after generation, including in the absence of workers' consent to their subordination.[2] In short, the class structure itself—the enormous power asym-

metry between employer and employee—underwrites its own stability, and there is no need to invoke consent at all (even if such consent does, perhaps, exist in certain periods).

There remain a couple of other issues Chibber has to address in order for his defense of materialism to be really systematic. First, what about the old, E. P. Thompsonian charge that "structural theories bury social agency" (p. 122)? Is this necessarily the case, this conflict between structure and agency? No, as long as one acknowledges the role of *reasons* in motivating people's actions. "The structure is not reproduced because it turns agents into automatons but because it generates good *reasons* for them to play by its rules" (p. 123). A structural process may be rather deterministic in its outcome, but it "is generated by the active intervention of social agency" (p. 126). Given the structures of capitalism, people rationally adapt to them, regulating their behavior in accord with them. Structure thus exerts its causal force precisely through agency.

Of course, agency also exists in tension with structure insofar as agents can flout institutional norms or even rebel against particular structures. This point brings us to another question Chibber considers, namely the relation between structural determinism and *contingency*, another favorite concept—along with agency—of the postmodern cultural turn. His argument here is quite rich and nuanced, much too subtle, in fact, to be summarized in a short book review. (It goes without saying that I have merely been outlining his arguments, hardly doing justice to their richness). One might think that such an austere structuralism as Chibber defends would be unable to account for the contingency of social processes, but through a fairly ingenious analysis he is able to answer this objection, too. Even *prima facie*, however, the objection does not hold much water, because capitalist relations are evidently compatible with an immense variety of social structures, such that between nations and even within a nation there

can be great heterogeneity of local cultures. In a world of infinitely many structures and cultures interacting and overlapping, all of them being activated and enlivened by countless individual free wills, there is clearly a place for contingency on both small and large scales. Materialism can therefore accommodate the argument from contingency.

The Class Matrix, in short, is a quite thorough and impressive work, not only a compelling defense of materialism but also a fair-minded if highly critical engagement with cultural theory. It is not clear how culturalists can effectively respond to this broadside, tightly and cogently argued as it is. They might, perhaps, be able to make the case that there is a greater role for culture than Chibber allows (although he does grant the importance of cultural considerations at many points in his arguments), but they certainly can no longer sustain the claim that materialism is deeply flawed.

In fact, that claim could never have been sustained anyway, because, in the end, materialism—the causal primacy of class structures—is little more than common sense. The average member of the working class, more insightful (realistic) in many ways than most intellectuals, could tell you about the fundamental importance of economic institutions. If classical Marxism got certain predictions wrong, that was not because of any inherent flaws in historical materialism; as Chibber shows, it was because the original theorists misunderstood the implications of their own theory. There was never a good reason to think socialist revolution would naturally happen as workers naturally achieved greater class consciousness. These predictions were but a projection of the hopes of Marxists, not logical entailments of materialism. In our own day, when the historic achievements of Western labor movements have been or are in the process of being destroyed, it is unclear what the way forward is—except, as ever, for working-class self-organization and critical

materialist understandings of society. Toward this latter task, at least, *The Class Matrix* makes a valuable contribution.

Notes

[1]. See Russell Jacoby's savage review of Wright's *Envisioning Real Utopias* entitled "[Real Men Find Real Utopias](#)," *Dissent* (Winter 2011), for an exposure of the intellectual emptiness of a certain type of theoretical sociology.

[2]. This argument—indeed, much of the book—is anticipated not only, as it were, by common sense (most workers could tell you they don't *embrace* their position but simply find it inescapable), but also by a brilliant book Chibber doesn't cite: *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, by Nicholas Abercrombie et al. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980). Incidentally, I myself have grappled with the question of why socialism hasn't happened yet and have offered a quite different, and perhaps more original, explanation than Chibber. See my paper "[Marxism and the Solidarity Economy: Toward a New Theory of Revolution](#)," *Class, Race and Corporate Power* 9, no. 1 (2021), as well as the shorter articles "[Revolution in the Twenty-First Century: A Reconsideration of Marxism](#)," *New Politics*, May 5, 2020; and "[Eleven Theses on Socialist Revolution](#)," *Socialist Forum* (Summer 2021).

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