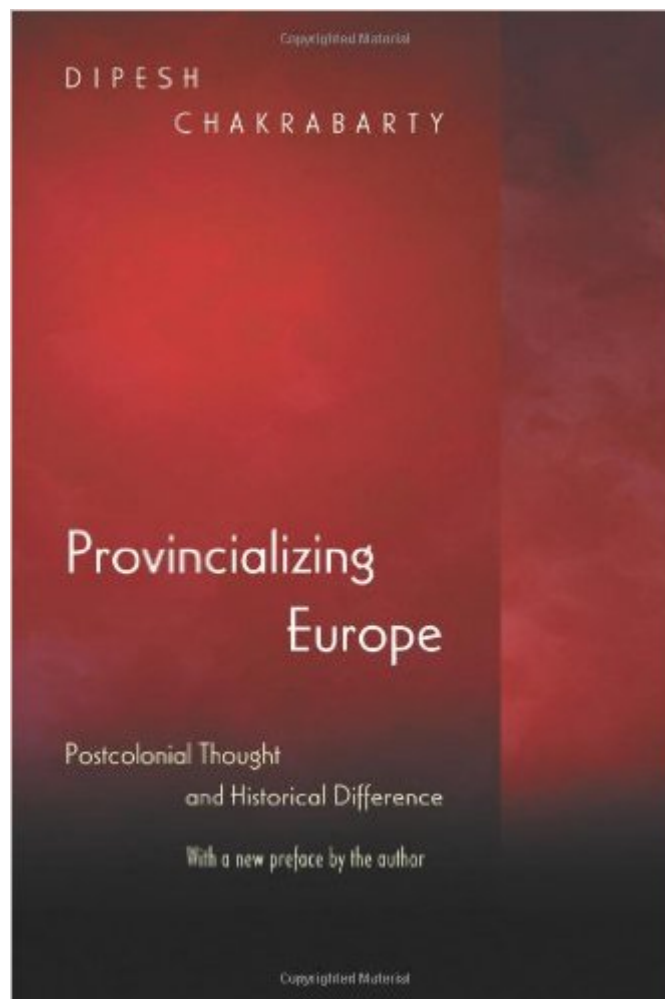


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Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought And Historical Difference (Princeton Studies In Culture/Power/History)



Synopsis

First published in 2000, Dipesh Chakrabarty's influential *Provincializing Europe* addresses the mythical figure of Europe that is often taken to be the original site of modernity in many histories of capitalist transition in non-Western countries. This imaginary Europe, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, is built into the social sciences. The very idea of historicizing carries with it some peculiarly European assumptions about disenchanted space, secular time, and sovereignty. Measured against such mythical standards, capitalist transition in the third world has often seemed either incomplete or lacking. *Provincializing Europe* proposes that every case of transition to capitalism is a case of translation as well--a translation of existing worlds and their thought--categories into the categories and self-understandings of capitalist modernity. Now featuring a new preface in which Chakrabarty responds to his critics, this book globalizes European thought by exploring how it may be renewed both for and from the margins.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A scholarly work that both accepts and rejects the the European concept of modernity. It recognizes the impact of modernity on Indian society but argues that modernity and traditions can and should co-exist in the mind of each modern individual. Warning: Reading this author requires either a strong academic background or a thesaurus.

Pace Chakrabarty, "Provincializing Europe" is replete with intellectual antics, including an inventive chapter devoted to re-reading "Das Kapital", and charged with 'ubiquitous obliquity' (to borrow Tom Stoppard's phrase from another context). However, it is not the detailed argumentation of the book that concerns us here; its essence will suffice to indicate the direction neo-Subalternism has taken. Chakrabarty's book aims to dismantle historicism itself, identified as that evil of the Enlightenment which views social phenomena as unities and historically developed. To achieve this, it proposes the disruption of metanarratives grounded in a 'single and secular historical time' (Chakrabarty 2000, 16 et passim) - (neo)colonial, nationalist, Marxist, whatever - by introducing authentic 'difference' thereto. This difference is sought in religion and the inclusion of gods and spirits as agents of history. Meanwhile, despite the repeated insistence that this is still Subalternist historiography, the subaltern meanders in the wings of Chakrabarty's stage, while his world of the Bengali middle-class male comes to constitute his 'archive' (Chakrabarty 2000, 117-236). As for the question of power, the analysis of relations of domination and subordination internal to society has given way to the power struggle between the oppressive Enlightenment and the recalcitrant historian in the new brand of "Subaltern Studies". Here, power is indeed entirely dispersed and only appears to coalesce in the Enlightenment and its intellectual heritage. While enticing in its intellectual sharpness and breadth (Chakrabarty discusses Einstein and Marx in one fell swoop), there are a number of problems with this approach. The most urgent among these is that it paralyzes organized secular politics, lends credence to the politics of the religious right wing, and hence legitimates communal and sectarian carnage - a fact of life in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Furthermore, the fact that religion is the traditional stronghold of patriarchy as well as exploitation based on caste appears to escape Chakrabarty's notice. Only intellectuals located at a distance of oceans and continents from the destructive forces they valorize can afford to be so blasé about the very real threat of annihilation faced by minority groups in the context of an ascendant right. Polemics and reality (that specious construct) aside, and on a more scholarly note, the problematic of power stands sidelined. Subscribing to the idea that power is universal, and refusing to acknowledge that it coheres in concentrated form at certain sites (between subaltern and elite) is counterproductive to understanding power as it is exercised in systems of domination and subordination. By no means is such anxiety limited to the scholarship being released under the banner of Subaltern Studies. Susan Pedersen recently voiced similar concern over the direction of feminist history. Her eloquence merits citation in extenso: "[I]nsights that have proven so productive for cultural analysis - insights about the multivalent, collaborative and web-like nature of power - tend to be less useful for the study of narrower political processes. For, once we assume power is everywhere, it usually turns out to be

nowhere very much; if it is analytically directionless, it scarcely needs to be taken into account. Our acceptance [...] of the truth that power is everywhere and that the weak, like the strong, play the game of power, has led us away from grasping the other truth that the players are not equal, that even multivalent systems can have internal movements preponderantly in one direction or another, that there are degrees of power, that a middle ground exists between an assumption of total agency and an assumption of total fixity - and that it is on this crucial middle ground that the most interesting questions are found and much interesting history happens."Finally, the fact that Chakrabarty's archive is the Bengali middle-class male and that he, along with his associates, is mired in theorizing to the neglect of substantive research of subaltern history speaks for itself.

Provincializing Europe is a kind of intellectual pleading that Dipesh has undertaken to include an Indian and specifically a Bengali case, within wider circle of post-modern studies. However, the 'subaltern history' discussed in this book, is not taken to its desired conclusion. It just stands like a hanging data, with not much concrete theoretical matter required to lay a solid foundation of a perspective .Secondly, it looks like Dipesh is struggling to enunciate what he really wants to say. He is standing right in the middle of western academics and his experience as a student of Marxism in Bengal. His subconscious realization of interplay between political power, Marxism and religion, that reflects in his work, unfortunately takes a discursive turn, to wander in 'adda stories of Bengal', discussed in wide details. As an author, he continues to discuss details of Bengali life and its currents and yet fails to come out of these details to study it from a subjective height, for making a crucial argument in defense of subaltern history. Such a move actually proves to be counter productive to the real intent of his soft worded and somewhat (un)enunciated arguments. Overall, I would see this book as a work done in haste to publish. Although the subject has a potential to open up much wider areas, but that is perhaps an opportunity missed. It would be nice if Dipesh could include the works of other Bengal thinkers like Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda etc. Further, he can also open up his discussions to include areas like caste as a special feature of Indian society, that continues to exist vividly in modern India. This study can be easily taken deeper with the help of psychoanalytical tools and undertaking ontological studies in exploring formation of being that can supplement the data of subaltern studies. All these areas left behind, I believe, should help to make a stronger revised edition of this book.

Chakrabarty lucidly summarizes the ways in which history-writing and historical thinking in Third-World countries is hopelessly based on European historical concepts, since "history" has

come to mean, not a story, but a teleological account of how all events everywhere fit into a pattern of modernization. His concept of "subaltern pasts" for fragments and practices that will not fit into that "history" has promise, but his exploration of some of those fragments in Indian history does not quite fulfill that promise

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