

Title—Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference

Author—Dipesh Chakrabarty

Year—2000

Categories: Theory, Colonialism, Politics, Modernity

Place: South Asia

Time: 1800-1960

Argument Synopsis:

Chakrabarty's book is a continuation of the work he began in his contribution to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, in particular he critiques Western social science thought, especially historicism, in its application towards South Asia. He begins by noting how it is impossible to think of political modernity without concepts such as citizenship, the state, democracy, human rights, etc. which all bear the burden of European thought and history. He argues that historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century by positing that historical time is a measure of the cultural distance assumed to exist between the West and the non-West. This theory undergirded the claims that Indians were not **yet** civilized enough to rule themselves in the colonial period. His critique of historicism lies at the heart of the question of political modernity in non-Western societies. Chakrabarty argues that through recourse to some version of a stagist theory of history that European political modernity and social thought made room for the political modernity of the subaltern classes. The book is theoretical but relies on the Indian subcontinent for its cases. The book is not an attempt to represent the life practices of subaltern classes, rather the purpose is to explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity in the context of non-European worlds.

He claims that it is impossible to think of the plural history of power and provide accounts of the modern political subject in India without at the same time radically questioning the nature of historical time. Chakrabarty posits that the task of conceptualizing practices of social and political modernity in South Asia often requires an assumption of historical time as not integral and out of joint with itself. The opposite assumption, that there is a unitary historical time, underscores the current view of modern politics. He attempts to bring together important strands of European thought, specifically bringing Marx and Heidegger into conversation, within the context of making sense of South Asian political modernity. The first part of the book is focused on the ideas of Marx, presenting critical reflections on historicist ideas of history and historical time and their relationship to narratives of capitalist modernity in colonial India. The second part of the book is focused on the ideas of Heidegger and presents some historical explorations of certain themes in the modernity of literate upper-caste Hindu Bengalis. This section attempts to demonstrate concretely how the categories and strategies from European thought are both indispensable and inadequate in representing this particular case of a non-European modernity. The first part draws more from historical and ethnographic studies of peasants and tribes, while the second part concentrates on the history of educated Bengalis, often described as 'elites.'

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The task of conceptualizing practices of social and political modernity in South Asia requires the assumption that historical time is not integral, that it is out of joint with itself
- Historicism undergirds the claims that Indians were not *yet* civilized enough to rule themselves
- Historicism enabled European dominance of the world in nineteenth century