

**Vivek Chibber**, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780674245136 (cloth); ISBN: 9780674269835 (ebook)

With *The Class Matrix*, Vivek Chibber has turned the argument for capitalism’s “stability” on its head. Its stability lies not in the proverbial superstructure, in culture,<sup>1</sup> but in the very base that was meant to bring about capitalism’s end.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, not only have proponents of cultural explanations got it wrong but so too have “classical Marxists misunderstood the implications of their own theory” (p.18). It is the material constraints of capitalism’s class structure that make it so difficult to supplant, *contra* culturalist explanations of workers’ indoctrination. But Chibber does not completely throw out the cultural turn’s “very exciting ... tectonic shift in social analysis” (p.4) and argues that it is *only* through culture that the structure’s constraints can be overcome. The critical difference, however, is Chibber’s assertion of the “explanatory primacy” of the structure, not culture (p.38). In *The Class Matrix*, he decisively demonstrates this.

Chibber’s reassertion of class, while retaining certain key insights of the cultural turn, will be welcomed by geographers, labour geographers especially, who’ve attempted to defend class—and Marxism more broadly—from the discipline’s post-structural and post-Marxist critiques (for a critical summary of such debates, see Rutherford 2010). The relegation of class coincided with questioning the relevance of trade unions and outright rejections of Marxist “totalisations” and “metanarratives” of capitalism. Geographers have

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<sup>1</sup> Chibber (p.ix) distinguishes between two broad understandings of culture. Raymond Williams’ “an entire ‘way of life’—the gamut of social practices that distinguish one social formation or one epoch from another” and the narrower definition that denotes “ideology, discourse, normative codes, and so on—together comprising the interpretive dimension of social practices”. For practical purposes, he and this review only refer to the latter.

<sup>2</sup> For Chibber, a base/superstructure model asserting that the economic base rolls over “all other social relations ... subsuming them under its own logic” is “obviously unsustainable (p.129). He rather advances an updated version of G.A. Cohen’s “restricted historical materialism” whereby the base only “transforms those aspects of the surrounding institutions that interfere with it” (p.132).

preferred the local and particular, over “the universalizing claims of traditional class theory” (Chibber 2017:27), and it’s not clear that the critiques of the former raised by Noel Castree (2005) have been addressed. Too often geographers deploy the concept of class as a “construction of agential identities” (Chibber 2017:28)—just one such identity among many “differences”, rather than as a materialist social relation based upon the “biggest binary of all: the division between capital and labor” (Houston and Pulido 2002:404). Proper theorisation and deployment of class analysis can provide a sophisticated and translatable way “for comparing apparently similar (or different) cases [of neoliberalism]” (Castree 2005:4). With the rich winning a class war, Raju Das’ (2012) call for reinvigorated “class analysis” within geography surely needs to be taken up. That said, while:

“[a] revived concern with the structure of capitalism is to be welcomed, ... to return to the status quo ante—to resume a theorization of class structure as if the turn to culture had never happened—would be a mistake. (p.15)

We need class analysis, but it needs the update provided by *The Class Matrix*.

In *The Class Matrix* Chibber is principally concerned with the debate on what “the fundamental source of stability” for capitalism is (p.19). And the stakes are high. Karl Marx’s prediction of the expropriators being expropriated has not materialised, and over 150 years later, capitalism, while it may be in question, has shrugged off recent challenges and crises. Contrary to the revolutionary fervour that surrounded Marx, Lenin, and Luxemburg, the New Left of the 1960s saw a relatively organised labour movement seemingly *consent* to its exploitation or, even with militant confrontation (like the UK miners), collapse to the neoliberal turn. For many, the working class could no longer be counted on as revolutionary agents, refuting classical Marxism altogether. Others, such as Edward Thompson and Stuart Hall, were unwilling to abandon the working class. Retaining “the basic anchor in class” they sought explanations in the “superstructure” and elevated “culture from its subordinate role to one of central importance” (p.79). But as Chibber points out, such a search for an explanation

in culture retains the classical Marxist mistake of believing that the class structure “ought to incite the working class into action” (p.88). It does the reverse.

In Chapter 1 Chibber demonstrates how a capitalist class structure is different from a religious one. Both structures require that the various actors accept their roles. This means that a structure will fail if an actor does not “adequately understand the details of the role” or if an actor chooses to “reject the role attached to the structure” (p.27). For culturalists, structures therefore require meaning formation, which in turn is vulnerable to rejection and “hence highly contingent” (p.28). For the religious congregation, an actor might not understand the rituals, or the priest may fail in properly conveying them. So too might an actor reject certain teachings, and find comfort in a different religion. But this is not the case for actors in the class structure. Starting with the working class, a peasant, someone who previously had access to their means of subsistence, is highly unlikely to not understand their role. “[E]very premodern culture with settled agriculture already has the codes needed to assimilate to” the demands of wage labour (p.31). What is more likely is that they reject their status as a labourer. But once proletarianised, to reject this status is to starve. So too the class structure “exercises its own discipline” on the capitalist (p.36). The capitalist is also dependent on the market in having to purchase inputs and generate sufficient revenue to stave off competition. The cost-cutting this requires inevitably leads to suppressing wages, and the market “selects against ... drives out ... and replaces” any capitalist that does not do so (p.37). This reality of the class structure accepts that it requires cultural meaning acquisition by agents, but rejects “the latter an explanatory primacy over structure” (p.38). It is the class structure “shaping the cultural codes” towards its own requirements that “radically reduces the contingency” of the structure’s activation by what cultural codes remain (p.40). Certainly, there will be actors who reject capitalism’s oppressive norms, but “the structure will simply weed them out—they will not survive” (p.40-41). Chibber’s argument is:

... a less ambitious claim—for the class structure being independent of culture but not determinative of it. This does require of it the power to overturn some aspects of

the surrounding culture—but not all of them. It only requires that class structure transform and subordinate those components of actors’ meaning orientation that block or interfere with their ability to participate in it. (p.130)

Classical Marxists were correct in expounding that capitalism locks workers and capitalists into conflict. But in Chapter 2 Chibber shows where they were critically wrong, namely in arguing that such conflict would generate working class formation and collective organisation. The class structure does the opposite. The same compulsions for the worker to accept their role as a wage labourer account for the exceptional risks of taking collective action. The prospective loss of income and employment makes “[i]ndividual contestation ... the norm and collective action the deviation from it” (p.48). This leads Chibber back in Chapter 3 to the post-war debates of hegemony and ideology and “their anchor in the work of Antonio Gramsci” (p.82). Gramsci’s proposition that capitalist stability required consent from the working class fit with their participation in the post-war capitalist order, and such consent was acquired through culture. Chibber covers the widely held culturalist reading of Gramsci which reversed the materialist understanding so that ideology constructed interests and thus “hegemony was based on consent, and consent was secured through culture” (p.85). But since such accounts accept the exploitative “elements of the employment relation”, they are suggesting that ideology “can inure workers” to such elements (p.90). This leaves culturalists:

... 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)

Chibber rather focuses on the materialist accounts of ideology, using Adam Przeworski’s *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (1986) and Gramsci himself. These argue that while “consent was articulated through an ideology ... [i]ts foundation was always and everywhere

economic” (p.92). However, Chibber still finds fault in their accounts. Przeworski’s proposition is that “workers offer their consent when they are able to bind capitalists to using a portion of current profits to generate future gains for them” (p.93). But this requires organisations such as trade unions which “leaves much of the global experience of capitalism out of its scope” (p.94). Gramsci does not require an organised working class. The capitalist class acquires consent “by the prestige (and consequent confidence) ... [it] enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci 1971: 12). The interests of the capitalist class prevail, “but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest”, where capitalists still coordinate “with the general interests of subordinate groups” (Gramsci 1971: 182). For Chibber, “this is the most convincing account” for consent (p.99). But history demonstrates that economic growth can generate strike action since improvements in productivity (and wages) can be offset by the “dramatic intensification of work” this entails (p.101). Further, the neoliberal era has overwhelmingly been a period characterised by “narrow corporate interests”. But Chibber’s principal critique of Gramsci’s account is that the stability of capitalism doesn’t even require consent. Consent is present and depending on the conjuncture, can play a significant role. But capitalism’s stability is rooted in the “silent compulsion of economic relations [that] sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker” (Marx 1976: 899). Workers “can neither opt out of their structural location nor overthrow it as and when they desire” (p.108). Rather than consent, it is workers’ *resignation* to this reality that is the basis of capitalist stability.

It is somewhat unfortunate that Chibber does not engage with geography’s debates on the cultural turn, most especially because of the rich contributions by Marxist geographers. Chibber’s argument fits with much of Don Mitchell’s in “There’s No Such Thing as Culture”, where “‘culture’ is an idea through which the various machinations of the ‘political economy’ are represented as culture” (1995: 110). A central argument of Chibber’s is that the universal tendency of capitalism to “naturalize and smooth out differences in the name of a certain social order [the market]” in a “differentiated society” (Mitchell 1995: 111). Harvey’s (1990)

*The Condition of Postmodernity* is entirely absent.<sup>3</sup> But geographers *must* engage *The Class Matrix*. Chapter 4 is especially pertinent to labour geography's agency debates. While Chibber's is a structuralist account, he maintains "it is a fuller account of how agency unfolds in a world of constraints" (p.123). I can imagine Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) nodding in agreement where Chibber states:

Indeed, where actors are, in fact, structurally constrained, such that they formulate their strategies in order to navigate those constraints, a structural theory does not efface agency so much as it helps us understand it. (p.125)

This necessitates "closely examining the actual constraints that labor faces" if they are to be overcome. At that point, it's back to culture, in developing "the collective identity ... the cultural accompaniment to class struggle" which the class structure incessantly dispels (p.69). On this Chibber also offers valuable insights. Reports of neoliberalism's death are greatly exaggerated. *The Class Matrix* makes it clear we cannot get beyond it without a revival of the Left. Its reinvigoration of class analysis, by retaining the best while rejecting the "excesses of the cultural turn", is essential reading.

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<sup>3</sup> Neither Chibber, Mitchell, nor Harvey suggest that capitalism mediates all culture, merely those ideas/meanings that interact with its structure.

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