



Provincializing History

A conversation with Dipesh Chakrabarty on
the 20th Anniversary of *Provincializing Europe*

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Editorial

On the 20th Anniversary of *Provincializing Europe*

José Neves e Marcos Cardão

In 2000, when Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe - Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* was published, the scientific authority of History as a discipline was already being called into question from a standpoint generally labelled as postmodern, in the wake of seminal interventions such as Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, of 1973. The publication of Chakrabarty's best known book contributed to the consolidation of these perspectives, but also to the opening of a new angle from which to challenge the discipline, by confronting historians with post-colonial criticism, then in the midst of its affirmation in Anglo-Saxon academia, undermining the Eurocentric assumptions of various disciplines in the field of social sciences and the humanities.

Twenty years after the publication of *Provincializing Europe*, we proposed a special issue to the journal *Práticas da História – Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past*, one dedicated to the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty and, more specifically, to the above-mentioned book. Our reasons for putting together this issue are rooted in the impact that reading Chakrabarty had on our own intellectual trajectory, but they are also spurred by recent anti-racist struggles and the fact that they have stirred a series of debates around the decolonisation of historical knowledge, collective memory and the remnants of the colonial past that linger in the present. We are pleased to register that the year in which so many statues celebrating the heroes of European colonialism were toppled coincides with the twentieth anniversary

of *Provincializing Europe*, a text that continues to challenge the limits of modern European thought by sparking debates on historicism, the writing of history and the politics of time, problematising categories central to social and political theory, such as modernity, universalism, capitalism or difference.

Professor of History, South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, Dipesh Chakrabarty's academic background is marked by the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, from a degree in Physics (University of Calcutta) to an MBA (Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta), and finally a PhD in History at the Australian National University (Canberra). Upon his move to Chicago, where he has lived since the 1990s, he became one of the foremost authors in the fields of History and Postcolonial Studies, and nowadays is a key voice in discussions on climate change and its implications for historical and political thought.

Born in Calcutta in 1948, one year after India's independence, in the early 1980s Dipesh Chakrabarty joined the emerging Subaltern Studies group, which included historians such as Ranajit Guha, at the time at the University of Sussex¹. The group would carry out various original studies on Indian pasts while simultaneously questioning the protocols that governed the discipline of History and their adequacy for the study of non-Western pasts. Swarming with gods and spirits, these pasts were at one time represented and belittled by secularised Western histories, which took them as a mystification of social phenomena deemed – unlike its more shadowy counterparts – worthy of historiographical analysis. The attention of subaltern studies researchers, namely Chakrabarty, to the disciplinary limits of History also came into play in their examination of the political agency of subaltern groups, in particular the peasants' role in social uprisings and popular protests.

¹ On the formation and development of *Subaltern Studies*, as well as on its global academic dissemination, see Vinayak Chaturvedi's introduction to the anthology *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000). For a political and scientific genealogy of *Subaltern Studies*, see "Revolution and History: Maoism and Subaltern Studies", *Storia Della Storiografia*, volume 62 (2012): 131-150.

On this last topic, it should be noted that even within the Marxist historiographical tradition, whose ideological framework would seem to imply an identification with the political actions of subalterns, a developmentalist conception of time prevailed. The latter, as Chakrabarty argued in *Provincializing Europe*, hindered knowledge, representation and historiographical interpretation of those actions, and downplayed the political importance of the agency of subaltern groups. In its crudest version, the Marxist historiographical tradition postulated that humanity would be all the more conscious of itself the more modern it was – and would be all the more modern the closer it was to the regions of the world where capitalism was at its most mature. In its more elaborate versions, while the Marxist historiographical tradition did seek to unfasten subaltern groups from the “enormous condescension of posterity” (to borrow E.P. Thompson’s famous phrase in the opening of *The Making of the English Working Class*), it also tended to decompose the revolutionary crowd into faces and proper names, thus subordinating its agency to one of the hegemonic forms through which Western modernity shaped humanity: the individual.²

Yet *Provincializing Europe*, rather than a critique levelled specifically at Marxist historiography (all the more since Chakrabarty found inspiration in authors such as Thompson and Rudé), tried to question the universalism of the discipline of History as a whole. Against the illusion of a universally valid historiographical knowledge, suitable to all times and all places, Chakrabarty presents the discipline as a form of knowledge emanating from a specific space and time, the modern West. And he suggests that the fact that the discipline nowadays enjoys a universal status, more often than not forgetting its situated origin, should be perceived as an epistemic privilege inseparable from the process of imperial domination undertaken by that same West.

² See Dipesh Chakrabarty, “História subalterna como pensamento político”, in *A Política dos Muitos: Povo, Classes e Multidão*, ed. Bruno Peixe Dias, José Neves, 281-307 (Lisbon: Tinta-da-China, 2010). See, in particular, Chakrabarty’s critique of George Rudé, 299-230. An earlier and slightly different version of this text is to be found in Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Subaltern History as Political Thought”, in *Political Ideas in Modern India: Thematic Explorations*, edited by V. R. Mehta and Thomas Pantham, 93-109 (New Delhi: Sage, 2006).

However, it should be stressed that this questioning of the universalism of the discipline of History, distancing us from its ambition to produce a progressively truer knowledge, is also concerned with making the discipline permeable to other understandings of time, as well as to the matter of cultural difference³. In other words, “provincializing Europe” implies contesting those Western categories that wish to translate the non-Western worlds in their entirety, exposing the “inadequacy” of such categories⁴, but it also paves the way to a renewal of the processes of knowledge production, placing them in a state of permanent precariousness and tension. To gain distance from the ambition of total knowledge that characterises Western historiography can thus be understood as an invitation to the practice of a History that is inescapably fragmentary. History should be seen not as the proper and universal way of reading and interpreting the past, but as a situated and particular form of “knowledge”, an awareness that also helps us to refrain from definitive solutions or answers.

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Composed of ten articles and essays⁵ by researchers from various disciplinary and geographical backgrounds, the present issue also includes a previously unpublished interview with Dipesh Chakrabarty, which we

3 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The difference-deferral of a colonial modernity: Public debates on domesticity in British Bengal”, in *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in honor of Ranajit Guha*, ed. David Arnold and David Hardiman, 50-88 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

4 One of the most famous formulations in “Provincializing Europe”, to the point where it has become a kind of shorthand for the whole of Chakrabarty’s work, claims that the thinking of the social sciences is simultaneously indispensable and inadequate: “It is both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India. Exploring—on both theoretical and factual registers—this simultaneous indispensability and inadequacy of social science thought is the task this book has set itself”. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6.

5 In this special issue, unlike in previous ones, there are no separate sections for essays and articles: essays are duly signalled in a footnote. We also publish texts at the invitation of the editors that were not submitted to a peer-review process; this is also signalled in a footnote.

conducted in January 2020, when he came to Lisbon to give a talk on the Anthropocene.⁶ The interview covers a variety of topics that may contribute to a genealogy of *Provincializing Europe*, from the author's formative years to his relationship with Marxism. The issue also includes the Portuguese translation of "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History", the first chapter of *Provincializing Europe*, and a version of an article published in 1992.⁷

Among the articles and essays included in this special issue, several of them attempt to reread Chakrabarty by striking a dialogue between his work and that of other thinkers. In the article "Reading Provincializing Europe as a Missed Opportunity", Réal Fillion addresses the challenge posed by *Provincializing Europe* in terms of thinking about the universal and the particular simultaneously. To this end, Fillion engages in a dialogue with Hegel's philosophy of history, suggesting that the distinction between a (universal) History 1 and a (particular) History 2 may be clarified by a confrontation with the German philosopher, who examines precisely how universality is particularised. In the article "Más allá del orientalismo: leer a Marx entre Chakrabarty y Aricó", Marcelo Starcenbaum observes how both Chakrabarty and the Argentine José Aricó try to intervene in the discussion on Marx's Orientalism: the former by opening up the Marxist corpus to the question of historical and cultural difference; the latter by seeking to displace the Marxist tradition through the recuperation of a particular aspect of Marx, his interest in the specificities of non-European societies. In the article "Scientific Humanisms and the Anthropocene, Or the Dream of Steering the Evolution of the Human and Natural World", Marianne Sommer calls upon the work of the biologist Julian Sorell Huxley, in particular the idea of humanism that emerges from the history of science and evolutionary

6 The conference was organised by Fundação Culturgest and the Centro Interuniversitário de História das Ciências e da Tecnologia (CIUHCT), whom we thank for their support to our interview. We should also add that, on that same occasion, we conducted another interview with Chakrabarty focused exclusively on the topic of the Anthropocene and on his reflections on the challenges climate change poses to the discipline of History. This interview can be read (in Portuguese and English) in issue 11 of the magazine *Electra*.

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?", *Representations* 37 (1992): 1-26.

biology, to question the categories of progress, teleology, universalism and eurocentrism that govern some of the ways of making history. Marianne Sommer discusses these categories through Dipesh Chakrabarty's recent work on climate change and the Anthropocene, highlighting the problematic nature of the notion of "anthropos".

Other texts address Chakrabarty and his *Provincializing Europe* from the point of view of the specific geographies that ground the authors' teaching experience or research areas. Saurabh Dube offers a first-person account of his encounter with the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty and how it presented him with a challenge that was both intellectual and pedagogical. In the article "Historicism and Modernity in the Wake of Provincializing Europe", Dube tells us how his experience as a Professor of History in El Colegio de México allowed him, on the one hand, to test the problems and possibilities of postcolonialism as a concept and point of view, and, on the other hand, to look at modernity as a historical process and a form of power. In "Rethinking Medieval Japan", Rajyashree Pandey takes up the famous formula from *Provincializing Europe*, already mentioned above, according to which the thinking of social science is both indispensable and inadequate to understand non-Western worlds, particularly when it comes to areas that have remained virtually untouched by Western thought, such as medieval Japan, and that have not been captured by Eurocentric binaries such as sex/gender or nature/society. Rather than arguing that the "inadequacy" of Western categories renders the hermeneutic task impossible, or that it is a source of anxiety, Rajyashree Pandey suggests that one of the pleasures of analysing the texts of medieval Japan is precisely their strangeness, which calls for a defamiliarisation of categories that have become obvious and unquestionable in Western thinking. In her turn, Patricia Martins Marcos seeks to denaturalise the legacies of imperialism inscribed in ideas about place (Europe or the nation-state) and time (the universal chronology of modernity). In the article "Decolonizing Empire: Corporeal Chronologies and the Entanglements of Colonial and Postcolonial Time", the author seeks to provincialize the political chronology that binds the colonial past to the (post-) colonial present,

and to challenge “sovereignist” forms of periodisation, countering them with the bodily or corporeal chronologies one finds in Amerindian forms of colonial resistance, so as to consider how the past is embodied and reiterated through memory, trauma and disability.

Finally, the issue also includes a collection of essays and articles that focus more on how we understand Europe, its histories and legacies. In the article “Provincializing for a Planetary Perspective”, Bo Stråth extrapolates the analysis of the dynamics of Enlightenment modernity to the present time, highlighting how these dynamics have been interrupted by the growing polarisation between the narrative of globalisation, which may be equated with a new ‘history 1’, and the forms of ethnic nationalism that emerged in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, which may be identified with ‘history 2’. Stråth appropriates both these forms of historical time to discuss the persistence, in our day, of a presentist temporal regime. The absence of a mobilising future and the discursive construction of an idealised past, driven largely by the new xenophobic nationalism and right-wing extremism, can be read as the expression of the lack of horizons of expectation and of the breakdown of the category of progress.

Manuela Ribeiro Sanches addresses *Provincializing Europe* from the point of view of the practice of translation, signalling the way in which the latter may function as a point of departure to tease out the ambiguities of Chakrabarty’s work. Having translated two of his texts into Portuguese, in the article “Traduzir o que ainda não compreendo” [Translating what I am yet to understand], Ribeiro Sanches stresses that the project of “provincializing Europe” should not be equated with a rejection of Europe, as an imagined entity, but rather with an effort to translate between European thought and other ways of seeing and being in the world⁸. Following the Chakrabartian gesture of placing apparently irreconcilable worlds into permanent tension, Manuela Ribeiro

⁸ Manuela Ribeiro Sanches translated one of the chapters of “Provincializing Europe”, in a 2003 book that aimed to make both Chakrabarty and postcolonial thought more widely known in Portugal. Cf. Manuela Ribeiro Sanches, *Dipesh Chakrabarty, História subalterna como pensamento político* (Lisbon: Tinta da China, 2010); Manuela Ribeiro Sanches, *Dipesh Chakrabarty, Histórias de minorias, passados subalternos* (Lisbon: Livros Cotovia, 2005).

Sanches suggests that translation is precisely an attempt to negotiate meanings, to accommodate opposites and to position oneself in such a way that one may embrace an ethical horizon and “listen to what one is yet to understand”.

In his turn, in the article “Misreading Provincializing Europe”, Christopher L. Hill underlines the ambiguities and contradictions of a work that proposes to deal with a problem that is methodological, institutional and political at one and the same time. Recalling the impact of reading Chakrabarty’s book on his own trajectory, namely in his doctoral research on the development of national histories (cf. *National History and the World of Nations - Capital, State, and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States*)⁹, Hill pinpoints the various biased interpretations to which the idea of provincializing Europe has been subjected, putting forward the transnational perspective as a way of exploring and seeking to resolve those ambiguities and contradictions. Finally, in her commentary on “Provincializing Europe”, Montserrat Galceran notes how European thought, marked though it is by deviations and disjunctions, is nonetheless exported in bulk, making it appear more homogeneous than it really is, as a result of a geopolitics of knowledge that is bound to the history of imperial domination. Galceran also argues that Chakrabarty’s work contributes to a break with the single and linear temporality inherited from the Enlightenment and historicism, which implies, for example, no longer thinking of politics as a future to come, but approaching it on the basis of the notion that events are not predetermined.

Finally, we would also like to highlight two reviews related to the topic that brings us together in this issue. António de Carvalho reads a very recent work that pays homage to Chakrabarty, *Dipesh Chakrabarty and the Global South. Subaltern Studies, Postcolonial Perspectives, and the Anthropocene* (published by Routledge, coordinated by Saurabh Dube, Sanjay Seth and Ajay Skaria), while Sara Araújo

⁹ Christopher L. Hill, *National History and the World of Nations - Capital, State, and the Rhetoric of History in Japan, France, and the United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

offers us her reading of a less recent publication that mounts a critique of the project of provincializing Europe: Vaisant Kaiwar's *The Post-colonial Orient - The Politics of Difference and the Project of Provincialising Europe*.¹⁰

10 Among the critiques levelled at Dipesh Chakrabarty's work, one should single out, given its impact and the responses it elicited, Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London, Verso, 2013). For a critique from a radically different angle, dealing not only with Chakrabarty's work under analysis in this issue but also with his more recent reflections on the Anthropocene and his work on the Indian historian Jadunath Sarkar (D. Chakrabarty, *The Calling of History: Sir Jadunath Sarkar and His Empire of Truth* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015)), see Suman Seth, "The Politics of Despair and the Calling of History", *History and Theory*, Volume 56, n. 2 (2017): 241-257.