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PLURALIZING REASON

PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE: POSTCOLONIAL THOUGHT AND HISTORICAL DIFFERENCE. By Dipesh Chakrabarty. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000. Pp. xii, 298.

I

This is to a certain extent an unfinished book, and therefore somewhat difficult to read and synthesize. One half of it, consisting of the general introduction and the first part entitled "Historicism and the narration of modernity", is made up of five texts, including three previously published and subsequently reworked articles, which do not represent successive stages in a coherent argument, but each of which develops the same general problematic with varying accents and particularities. Whether this reflects an intellectual bias of the author in favour of a fragmentary, undogmatic, non-totalizing mode of exposition, I am unable to say (although I doubt it considering the resolute theorizing stance of the epilogue of the book, which again rehearses the main argument in a more philosophical mode). But the fact is that the reader is constantly forced to navigate from one chapter to another in his effort to reconstruct the line of reasoning of the book in all its dimensions, work that it would surely have been safer for the author to do himself if he wanted to be correctly understood. The second part ("Histories of belonging"), which consists of four self-contained essays illustrating the author's understanding of cultural difference and his conception of non-historicist history writing entirely escapes this reproach, but it is inevitably the theoretical argument developed in the rest of the work on which the reader's attention is mainly focused.

The central object of Chakrabarty's critique is what he calls the master narrative of European modernity, which remains the dominant paradigmatic framework of the social sciences the world over. The historical trajectory of the essentialized "Europe" of political theory from Ancient Regime to capitalism and modernity remains everywhere, he says, the "silent referent" of the academic discourse of history, all non-European histories being analyzed from the vantage point of this ideal type, and characterized in terms of their differences from it. The hegemony

(which means domination by consent) of imperialism was precisely at least partly based on the imposition of this model of European modernity as a universal ideal on the colonized (to whom it was denied in practice), to such an extent that third-world nationalisms, most of which were modernizing ideologies, often rehearsed this theory of the necessary historical transition toward bourgeois individualism, modern law and the nation-state to their own subaltern classes, assuming that individual rights and abstract equality were universals that could find a home anywhere in the world (27-30, 47). The foundation of this model is the rational, secular and universalist humanism of the European Enlightenment, of which both liberalism and Marxism, with its teleology of the emancipation of human kind, are legatees. Socialist or nationalist third-world histories, Chakrabarty remarks, are still written from within this implicit paradigm of a history whose theoretical subject is a modeled Europe. Hence the persistent tendency of many contemporary historians to read Indian history as a process of incomplete or inadequate modernization, which has both imperialist and nationalist precedents (the author, in this regard, notably refers to pronouncements published by two first rate living Indian historians, Ranajit Guha and Sumit Sarkar) (34). That the claim of bourgeois equality, citizenship and self-determination through a sovereign nation-state has empowered many marginal social groups across the world is undeniable, but what is underplayed is the fact that this idealism of "freedom", "civilization", "progress", and latterly "development" has been and still is constantly and everywhere connected with one form or another of repression and violence (41-6).

As everyone knows, modernity, the 18th-century philosophers' critique of the Ancients, has degenerated into this Eurocentric metanarrative of modernization through the subsequent theorizing of progress by nineteenth-century historicism. Historicist historiography, Chakrabarty says, claims that modernity or capitalism has originated in Europe at a particular period of world history, and has become global by spreading outside it over time, encountering and negotiating historical differences in the process, and that the whole of human kind is headed for the same destination and along a uniform scale of stages, only some (notably the colonized) peoples being to arrive later than others (47). It assumes that people, places and objects exist in a natural, continuous flow of time, independent of culture or consciousness, irrespective of each society's own mode of historicity, the "homogeneous and empty" time of history which Walter Benjamin twice denounces in his dense and at times hermetic theses "On the Concept of History" of 1940 (72-4). In developing this strong line of argument, Chakrabarty follows the central and most vigorous tradition of the antimodern critique of historicism of the last century, nurtured on

Nietzsche and partly on Freud, and widely popularized by the Frankfurt school, Heidegger and more recently Foucault, until a combination of extreme leftism and new liberalism has given it its postmodernist expression.

With this complex of critical thought Chakrabarty, as a postcolonial thinker, entirely concurs while bringing into play a different and powerful set of arguments structured around the theme of subalternity. He rightly denounces the historicist urge to force the infinite diversity of human experience into a single historical context, and shows how non-modern modes of historicity are inferiorized as nonrational by a discourse which discards what it calls unreason and superstition as backwardness (243). The Indian peasant, he says after Ranajit Guha, was not an archaic anachronism in colonial India, but a real contemporary and a constitutive part of the modernity that colonial rule brought to India (34, 251) – a statement which Chakrabarty seeks to connect with the notion of the irreducibly discontinuous and plural nature of the "now" in Heideggerian ontology (108-9), or more simply relates to the idea that reason is only one among many other ways of being in the world (249). This sets him on the path of a determined critique of the historicist narrative strategies of social science in general and of history in particular, which deny the discourse of the non-modern subject the status of "theory", and still tend to view non-modern societies from within an implicit metanarrative of modernization and transition. And he observes that the historians who enjoy theoretical preeminence on the world academic scene are mostly Western historians who write in total or relative ignorance of non-Western histories (the realm of "specialists"), an indisputably shocking asymmetry which exposes, beyond the question of the geopolitics of the production of scientific knowledge, the enduring eurocentrism of the historical discipline.

All this, after all, is only mainstream anti-modernism and postcolonial criticism, on which a fair amount of consensus could probably nowadays be achieved among intellectuals on either side of the North-South divide. Where Chakrabarty makes a theoretical leap is when he capitalizes on Paul Veyne's argument that history by definition overlooks the "singular", which is ineffable, and only retains from it that which is "specific" (or susceptible of generalization, and thereby rationally intelligible), to condemn all attempt at translation or generalization as an act of intellectual oppression.¹ He denounces the objectifying procedures of academic social science, in

¹ Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essays on Epistemology* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 56.

contrast to the subjectivist approach which purports to speak from the point of view of the individual actor, as reification. This is only partly a version of the well-worn opposition between structure and representation in the social sciences, which various authors have shown to be an artificial dismemberment of two necessary and dialectically related moments in the genesis of sociological knowledge,² because Chakrabarty also sees it as a question of political ethics. "At a certain point", he says, "the archive of subaltern pasts becomes intractable to the aims of professional history, and the world remains opaque to the generalities inherent in language" (101, 82-3), and yet the imperialist discourse of academic historicism "pretends to assimilate those memories that defy sociological generalization and resist historicization". Such is even the case when democratically minded academic historians produce what they call "minority" histories, which concern pasts excluded or omitted from mainstream narratives of the nation, because they do so without questioning the dominant understandings of what constitutes fact and evidence in the practices of professional history (97-100). Thus what is at question here is the apriori valorization of "reason", understood as a liberal-secular form of reasoning, the underlying principle of rationality which is built into the knowledge protocols of the social sciences, and which is grounded in a historicist understanding of history. With this totalizing principle, the social scientist can only create a subject-object ("anthropologizing") relationship between himself and the evidence: he cannot write history from within what he calls the "beliefs" of the people he studies if he is to produce "good" history according to the canons of academic scientificity (106-7).

By so doing, Chakravarty says, the historian reifies the past, treats it as a dead object of investigation (243). He translates a diversity of human life-worlds and conceptual horizons into the rationalizing categories of Enlightenment thought, and this is what makes the emergence of the universal language of the social sciences possible. But the analytical kind of history produced through these abstracting categories tends to make all places interchangeable (70-1). How then to accommodate the sovereignty of reason while acknowledging the diversity of cultural modes of being and their equal dignity? The argument that reason is transcendental and can be shared by all humans because of their shared ability to communicate does not imply that all cultures are sooner or later bound to surrender heart and soul to a universal liberal and rational way of being

² See, for instance, Pierre Bourdieu, "Espace social et pouvoir symbolique", in *Choses Dites* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1987), 148-56.

human in accordance with the historicist story of modernity, that of the liberation of the mind from the bondage of superstition and custom. "To struggle against historicism, then, is to try and tell a different history of reason" (236). As an example of the mockery that the apparent global triumph of modernity represents, Chakrabarty remarks that the coming of "mass democracy" has not meant anything in India like a final triumph of reason and European emancipatory political thought, but has only given rise to a case of "mimicry" (a key concept of postcolonial theory) (235): Indian public life only mimics on paper the bourgeois legal fiction of citizenship, which, he says, is "usually performed as a farce in India" (35). He also mentions that while Indians were certainly capable of acting as subjects endowed with a sense of history, there were also, in the many popular struggles of the colonial period, powerful forms of collective memory based on antihistorical constructions of the past. (40). The overarching general language of science, which pretends to mediate between the infinite diversity of particular languages, effectively suppresses cultural differences which, by essence, are untranslatable, "incommensurable" (74-6). In other words, the problem of capitalist modernity should not any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition, but as a problem of translation as well (17).

II

This proposition of radical untranslatability, this refusal to take the modern historical consciousness for granted, is certainly not to be taken lightly. Globalisation in its present initial stage, when the historical inevitability and limitless creativity of cultural hybridization have not been generally integrated, generates the world over a sense of cultural loss, even in the West where there is talk of European "cultural exceptions" in the face American cultural influence, and in North America itself where the question of the preservation of the rights of ethnic minorities is a permanently sensitive spot of public life. This sense of loss is understandably especially intolerable in countries of the South when the appearance of cultural homogenization is experienced as a cultural remake of the physical subjection of colonialism, or as a by-product of economic subordination, and it may be even more acute than anywhere else among communities of expatriates from the South in countries of the North, where the deep buried and hallowed treasure of childhood memories and sense of belonging is day after day confronted to the deculturating pressure of exile, and sorely experienced as threatened and uncommunicable. This fantasm of a pure, originary and intangible cultural difference is of course not without risks as it

may serve to fuel in certain circumstances a dangerous obsession of communal identity. But it would surely be wrong to be content with a reductionist psychologizing understanding of this intellectual attitude. Chakrabarty himself specifies that his aim is not "to express an incurable nostalgia for a long-lost world", it is to defend the right to existence in historical theory of other ways of being human (94, 45). He does say, in a psychological vein, that we must make room for more *affective* narratives of human belonging (18, 71), but this is another way to question the rationalistic fundamentalism which affirms that reason can enable us to solve the secrets of reality, and that nothing exists that is beyond the reach of scientific historiography.

Some reflection is required at this stage on the level at which Chakrabarty locates the essence of this cultural difference which is "partly opaque" (17), and signals the failure of the universalist pretense of reason. He calls for a democratic tolerance which will allow history to accommodate on their own terms "different kinds of 'social' which could include gods and spirits" (92), and he repeatedly seems to imply that this religious view of the world is that which singularizes Indian culture, a way to enshrine difference that, it must be noted, comes paradoxically and disturbingly close to the reifying orientalist view of the "religious East". What he claims for the historian, in short, is a right to reenchant a world that has been disenchanting by the nihilism of modernity. A more comprehensive notion of difference emerges, however, from the "studies of belonging" which constitute the second half of the book. Chakrabarty offers us a glimpse of its unspeakable mystery in the experience of the socially relegated Bengali child widow who survives her intense experience of deprivation because "she implicitly knew that being human meant one could address the gods without having first to prove their reality" (145). He also sees it in the ineffable imagination of the country as godly Mother (Bharat Mata), so central to Indian nationalism, which he relates to the popular practice of *darshan* (the beneficial beholding of an auspicious person or thing, and especially of a divine image), and at the level of elite culture, to the enjoyment of *rasa* (aesthetic mood) as defined by ancient Indian aesthetic theory, both experiences which, he says, "resist the realism of historicization" and illustrate an "irreducible heterogeneity in the constitution of the political" (177-9). It is also visible in the practice of *adda*, the habit of men gathering together for long informal conversations which was an old custom of rural Bengal, and became an urban social practice among the literate middle class of Calcutta during the first half of the twentieth century (181-3). Or again in the Bengali figure of the model housewife (*grihalakshmi*) which was associated with the beauty of the goddess Lakshmi and the patriarchal idea of the male lineage (*kula*) (222-8).

Reading these essays of the second part of the book, however, at first leaves the reader somewhat flabbergasted, after all the vehement argumentation that Chakrabarty has piled up in the first part to demonstrate the inadequacy of the classical historical discourse to represent the experience of the non-modern (or of the non-Western modern) subject, for what we have here is nothing but "good", classical, rational history of mentalities pure and simple in the manner of Johan Huizinga, Lucien Febvre or Carlo Ginzburg. But the reader then begins to understand that in the author's mind, those levels of "difference" that belong to the domain of mores or institutions, and are susceptible of immediate description, are only symptoms (in a psycho-analytic sense) of a deeper layer of images and symbols, of a core of spontaneous values and ways of being which constitute the base level of a people's culture, and which are untranslatable. They can be analyzed, that is to say objectified ("anthropologized") and transposed into the abstract language of scientific rationality. But their true being is absent from the inanimate objects created by this act of domination of an overarching Reason. It is only accessible through the lateral approach of hermeneutics, but the degree of comprehension thus achieved through empathy, emotion or imagination will leave it with its essential part of "incommensurable" unicity.³ The hermeneutic tradition, Chakrabarty says, "produces a loving grasp of detail in search of an understanding of the diversity of human life-worlds", it "finds thought intimately tied to places and to particular forms of life", and "tends to reinstitute within thought itself this relationship between thought and dwelling". But it imposes no "third term of equivalence" supposed to "successfully mediate between differences", as analytical reason does (17-18, 71, 255). To cast an a priori suspicion on all forms of mediating representations is of course a difficult position to sustain, because the question then arises whether it leaves open the possibility of any other type of relationship between cultures than love or hate, whether there remains a possibility of comprehension where all translation fails. But Chakrabarty's apology of difference does not preclude all form of communication or exchange. Only the model of exchange which he has in mind is more of the type of barter than of generalized market exchange, as the latter needs transparency and the elimination of "imperfections", and implies submission to the universal rule of a homogenizing middle term of reference (money). Cross-cultural exchange, on the contrary, must remain of the order of translation, whose inevitable partial failure means that it does not

³ See Paul Ricoeur, "Civilisation universelle et cultures nationales", in *Histoire et Vérité*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955), 274-288.

neutralize differences or relegate them to the margins (71, 86). Such a model of the encounter of cultures has something in common with H.G. Gadamer's theory of the 'hermeneutic experience',⁴ which is based on the conviction that there exists an experience of truth outside the realm of science, and which defines comprehension not as a form of domination or objectification, but as receptiveness to the challenge of otherness: in this perspective, the self-conscious recognition of differences becomes a precondition for dialogic understanding of any kind. (insofar at least as this humanistic hermeneutics of difference does not turn out to be the last ruse of Eurocentricism).

The principle of Chakrabarty's critical stance, to be sure, is hardly very new. The romantic reaction against Enlightenment universalism, as inaugurated by Herder's celebrated pamphlet of 1774 on the philosophy of history, in which he defended the originality of German cultural identity against what he perceived as the uniformizing threat of the abstract humanism of modern reason, fundamentally expressed the same kind of refusal. But what deserves a lot more attention is Chakrabarty's assertion that, in spite of his determination to think in terms of singularities, he is not a cultural relativist (83), which would seem to mean that he admits of the possibility of a universal system of norms. In this he differs from a thinker such as Rorty for instance, who is a relativist, and who, although he presents himself as a sincere democrat and opposed to all forms of tyranny, simultaneously refutes as unconvincing, and denounces as dangerous, any attempt to subject the validity of such beliefs to any a priori system of thought. Chakrabarty explicitly refuses the authoritarian liberalism of the Western conception of democracy, whose worldwide expansion is inherently associated with the history of European imperialism, but he apparently does so in the name of a superior form of democracy grounded in a purer form of modernity. This reminds one of an important reflection made by Louis Dumont when he analyzed Herder's above mentioned text in his *Essays on Individualism*.⁵ He showed that the German philosopher, in his defence of the irreducible unicity of the *Volksgeist*, was far from exhibiting the spontaneous sociocentrism characteristic of non-modern cultures, but on the contrary fully admitted the fact of

⁴ H.G. GADAMER, *TRUTH AND METHOD* (NEW YORK: CONTINUUM, 1993), PART II, CHAPTER 2.

⁵ Louis Dumont, *Essays on Individualism: Modern Ideology in Anthropological Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), chapter 3. Also by Dumont, "Collective Identities and Universalist Ideology: The Actual Interplay", *Theory, Culture and Society* 3:3 (1986), 25-33.

the plurality cultures, all of which, he believed, were endowed with an equal right to existence. He thus betrayed an adherence to the modern ideology of individual rights, which he transferred onto the realm of cultures considered as collective individuals. The same kind of tension between two deep-rooted fidelities is equally obvious in Chakrabarty, and this is what constitutes both the difficulty and the appeal of his endeavour.

III

In a sense, given his repudiation of relativism, one is tempted to say that Chakrabarty's criticism is less postmodern than neo-modern (or possibly neo-universalist). His aim is "to bring Marx and Heidegger into some kind of conversation with each other in the context of making sense of South Asian political modernity" (18). Subaltern history, as he also says, can only situate itself theoretically "at the juncture where we give up neither Marx nor difference" (95). An undogmatic commitment to Marx as inspirator and guide in the fight for social justice, and to Heidegger as the ultimate critic of the abstract universal of modern humanism: such is the, at first sight uncomfortable, and nevertheless nowadays not uncommon intellectual posture which Chakrabarty adopts, from the specific standpoint of postcoloniality, which brings into the picture both specific justifications and specific difficulties. What Heidegger and the hermeneutic tradition provide him with is a philosophical ground for the repudiation of the homogeneous, secular historical time which the modern teleologies of progress usually take for granted, and for the refusal of the assumption that the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits can be satisfactorily analyzed and categorized as "social facts", in short of the "implicit sociologies of our narratives of capitalism" which "ultimately evacuate the place of the local, and tend to sever the relationship between thought and modes of human belonging" (16, 88, 255). Thus this Western critique of the violence of modernity, which in its principle is almost as old as modernity itself, comes in handy for a third-world intellectual justifiably revulsed by the revolting sequels of colonialism and the cultural threats generated by the last avatar of modern capitalism, globalization. The problem of course is that, while the critique of the abuses and periodic catastrophic consequences of a now exhausted modern ideology of progress is increasingly widespread in the realm of theory the world over, the popular demand for the economic, social and political benefits of modernity is all but universal, as shown by the permanence of classic mass struggles for social justice in the countries of the South, and by the relentless stream of

emigrants from these countries seeking entry into those of the North. As the present world scene amply demonstrates, the propaganda poured out by cultural integristism upon destitute populations to ward off the acceptance of a universalist modernity shown as necessarily destructive is more often than not a strategy of political domination, and is a distinctive feature of many contemporary despotisms. This is of course not to insinuate that Chakrabarty has the slightest sympathy for the latter, but to expose the dilemma which he himself fully recognizes when he says that his critical stance is not "a programme for a simple rejection of modernity, which would be, in many situations, politically suicidal" (45), because it could never earn a mass support unless at the cost of fundamental liberties.

These liberties Chakrabarty is not prepared to sell off in the name of the critique of modernity. He repeatedly describes Marx as a classic representative of the tradition of analytic social science which evacuates the local by assimilating it to an abstract human universal, and thus eludes the question of belonging and diversity. But he simultaneously declares that he shares with all moderns desirous of social justice in capitalist societies a commitment to the Enlightenment universals (both liberal and Marxist), if only for reasons of political opportunity. He does not uncompromisingly condemn all pretensions to universalism as camouflaged imperialism. He admits that the historian or social scientist cannot produce critical readings of social injustices without recourse to these universals and to the secular times and narratives of history and sociology. They cannot demonstrate without them how the promises of justice and democracy embedded in the very structures of the modern nation-state have been and are being constantly denied to those for whom these structures have been built in the trail of historicist ideologies of progress. And the subaltern classes need this knowledge to fight their battles for social emancipation. In support of his continued strategic adherence to a modern philosophy of social progress, Chakrabarty even goes a step further, and says that the project of provincializing Europe cannot mean a simplistic rejection of European thought, modernity and liberal values, and that it does not originate from the stance that Enlightenment rationalism and universals are simply culture-specific and only belong to European cultures. "European thought, social science thought, are both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various life practices that constitute the political and the historical in India" (6). "The need is to critique historicism and to find strategies for thinking historical difference without abandoning one's commitment to theory" (46).

For all its attractiveness, this meritorious effort to integrate postcolonial critical theory and postcolonial politics remains problematic, and one sometimes finds it difficult to figure out where Chakrabarty really stands, because his repeated and forceful statements in vindication of contradictory requirements are not always matched by a correspondingly thorough examination of their theoretical implications. Given the contents and limits of his critique of modernity, and his deep commitment to the values of subjectivity, a logical way out of this contradiction could have been to look toward the possibility of a non-historicist modernity, as various thinkers of the past century from Popper to Habermas have done (although Chakrabarty's premises and framework of priorities are obviously different), and of a modernity that keeps open the necessarily endless dialogue between its two opposed but complementary components, rationalisation and subjectivation (a central theme in Alain Touraine's latest writings, which focus on the form which the return to subjectivity is to take after the demise of historicism).⁶ In the latter perspective, the main target of the critique is not modernity as such but the positivistic, conquering, intolerant modernism that gradually overlaid and replaced it during the course of the nineteenth century, and that identified it until our time with the authoritarian reign of secular instrumental rationality, and this does not involve the renunciation to reason or to the liberal core of Enlightenment thought. But one is forced to admit (without necessarily falling in with current trends of facile anti-postcolonial criticism) that Chakrabarty chooses to follow a less convincing course. In diametrical contrast to the populist intellectuals of 19th century Russia who made it a point to "go to the people", he simply transposes his social and political criticism onto the order of discourse. This type of intellectual trajectory, in the case of postmodernists, or at least of the more skeptical among them, may have the merit of coherence with the conception of reality as a mere linguistic convention. But in Chakrabarty's case, given his own explicit commitment to the welfare of the masses and their ongoing struggles for social justice, it merely seems, pending further clarification, to bypass the difficulty instead of solving it. Thus the task becomes the subversion of historiography, the aesthetic celebration of the singularity of indigenous modes of being as retrieved (necessarily) from the writings of the literate elite, the subaltern classes'

⁶ ALAIN TOURAINE, *CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY* (OXFORD: BLACKWELL, 1995) AND *CAN WE LIVE TOGETHER? EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE* (STANFORD, CA.: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2000).

concrete battles for their immediate priorities being left to the domain of modern ideologies of progress to which the postmodern critic can no longer unreservedly subscribe (although he acknowledges the "political" need to think in terms of totalities).

What does the postcolonial project become once restricted to this question of the modes of historiographical representation? It consists, Chakrabarty says, in holding in a state of permanent tension a dialogue between two contradictory points of view: the indispensable although secularist and historicist anti-imperialist narrative of capital, which is marred by the universal, abstract (and for this reason inadequate) categories which it vehicles, but which is the irrecusable heritage on which popular struggles for social emancipation still necessarily feed, and the infinite incommensurabilities, the temporal heterogeneity, the fragmentariness in our experiences of historicity (108-9) that invariably disrupt the totalizing ambitions of the former. He urges the historian to take the discourse of history to its limit, to renew it "from and for the margins", to keep it "open to (its) own finitude" (16-17, 88-90, 237-9). There is nothing here like a postmodernist pronouncement announcing the death of history and its assignment to the realm of fiction. It is an "appeal" with which no historian today can refuse to sympathize, an invitation to explore the ways of a more democratic form of history writing, which is not the well-intentioned but assimilationist approach of "minority histories" or marginality studies, but one that assumes the intrinsic incapacity of the academic discourse of history to convey the irreducible plurality of the ways of being human. The only question is whether this statement regarding the limits of the historical discourse leads us or not to another insoluble dilemma between objectivity and authenticity. The historical explorations of certain aspects of the culture of literate upper-caste Hindu Bengalis which Chakrabarty presents in his "Histories of belonging" in the second part of the book are in any case good analytic essays in cultural history that do not "question the very idea of fact or evidence", and which conform to the rational protocols of the discipline. Only he does bring out that there is, in the ways of being of the social group which he studies (and to which he personally belongs), an ethico-mythic and affective level which must remain at least partly enigmatic, and which he refuses to neutralize in the reifying language of social science as

"religion" or "belief" or more generally "social fact".⁷ Thus we in fact return to the classical problem of the epistemological status of representation in the social sciences and of the pretensions to realism which often ensue, a problem which, in its postcolonial formulation, takes on the additional dimension of representation as a form of domination.

All in all, Chakrabarty avoids closing himself up in the definition of cultural identity as a counter-culture of subjectivity, which is a dead end and can only lead to mutual ignorance, aggressiveness or violence. His conception of difference is not of the kind that projects a fantasm of homogeneity upon cultural communities whose internal inequalities are underplayed or ignored, nor does it lead him to an integral and uncritical valorization of the indigenous ethos. He does criticize as patriarchal the Bengali upper-caste ideology of the *kula*, and raises at least once the following question: "How does one comport oneself toward those 'unjust' social practices that are often justified in the name of tradition, custom or indeed the past itself? Caste, sati, untouchability, religious conflicts -- examples abound. There is no single answer to this question" (244). In short, his apology of difference is less a form of cultural integrism, a claim of absolute and insurmountable specificity, than a critique of modern reason's pretension to the exclusive monopoly of universality. To the expired modernist dream of a triumphant abstract reason reigning over the ruins of world religions, he seems to oppose a belief in the possibility to think difference as a universal, a concrete universal respectful of cultural identities and released from Western ethnocentrism, not unreason but a plural reason.⁸ Another conclusion, which he does not explicitly formulate but which at least implicitly emerges from his book, is that just as subalternness is not in itself a substance but a status whose very existence derives from a

⁷ Incidentally, Chakravarty invokes the absence of "any sociology of religion" in his analysis (16), but he cannot avoid occasionally lapsing into it in his "studies of belonging" when he talks about *darshan*, the peasant understanding of Bharat Mata, the conception of religion of the upper-caste Bengali widow or that of the early nineteenth-century Calcutta Brahmin Bhabanicharan, and so on.

⁸ Sophie Bessis, born a Tunisian and raised in French culture, takes the same stand in *L'Occident et les Autres: Histoire d'une Suprématie* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001). See also Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Roudinesco, *De Quoi Demain...* (Paris: Fayard/Galilée, 2001), chapter 2.

situation of subjection, difference is in fact not a fixed property of any social group, but a process, an awareness of itself which it develops in its relation to others. All societies are necessarily partly opaque to themselves, just as individuals are, and the most reliable self-knowledge they can gain is that which arises from the experience of otherness. This is what an admirable sentence of the book precisely says, a quotation from the Indian philosopher J.L. Mehta's work on Heidegger which figures in the last footnote of Chakrabarty's epilogue, and which bears repetition here: "there is no other way open, to us in the East, but to go along with this Europeanization and to go *through* it. Only through this voyage into the foreign and the strange can we win back our own self-hood; here as elsewhere, the way to what is closest to us is the longest way back".⁹

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⁹ J.L. Mehta, *Martin Heidegger: The Way and the Vision* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1976), 466.