Uses and Abuses of Marx

The works of Marx, and aspects of Marxist theory, were important at the inception of Subaltern Studies. Although less so now, Marx remains an important reference point for Chakrabarty and Guha – if only as a foil for postcolonialism – in addressing a range of historical, historiographical and political concerns arising out of the experience of colonialism, decolonisation, political independence and the ongoing struggles within India and now in a global world that perforce has to deal with the powerful legacies of colonial and ‘Western’ archives of theory and knowledge production. In Provincializing Europe, this takes the form of evaluating the potentialities and limitations of the Marxist use of abstractions, powerfully illustrated in Marx’s discussion of abstract labour in a number of his major texts from Capital to the Grundrisse to The Theories of Surplus-Value, as a sign of the way in which abstractions can strategically be used for political ends and the risks that such uses carry for a history of different ways of being-in-the-world and stories of affective belonging. A critique of abstraction, then, would be vital for a history that avoids triumphalism and inevitability in favour of one that stresses the role of the vital force of life itself in resisting abstractions. In Guha, Marxist theory supplies – via the more politically direct notions of expropriation and hegemony – theoretical instruments for a critique of historiography. This constitutes an interesting attempt at the deployment of a concept in Marx that organises his understanding of the inescapable originary moment of the capital social form, what Marx himself was to call ‘original’ or ‘primitive’ accumulation – that is, the transfer of (landed/productive) property from the generally usufructuary domain within which the peasantry held it, in freehold or tenancy relations, to a form of property used to generate profits via the reorganisation of production. In Guha’s usage of the term, the capture of an autonomous ‘Indian’ domain by the British is followed by their writing of Indian history as simply an interesting chapter of British history. Guha’s subsequent discussion of the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’ reveals the extent to which Indian modernity under colonial conditions is distinct from its metropolitan counterpart(s), and generates in turn an Indian historiography of India, whose task is to remedy the shortcomings of the colonial construction of the Indian past. In both cases, history and historiography are subject to critical scrutiny for traces of historical evolutionism that contains its own political agendas, including, for example, the ‘civilising
mission’ of colonialism. The language of the mainstream social sciences is particularly implicated in this type of practice.

The pages that follow will be concerned to debate the range and adequacy of Chakrabarty’s and Guha’s engagement with Marx and Marxist theory via three topics of historical and political interest. These relate to abstract labour and its corollaries productive/unproductive, not to mention socially necessary labour; hegemony, including the related issues of coercive dominance, persuasion and leadership, as well as the question of the determinants of hegemony in colonial and non-colonial social formations; and finally the question of the place of historicism in Marxist theory, and more generally in a historiography of colonial modernity. The following pages will also discuss issues of relevance to what one might call the ‘politics of knowledge’ that a critical engagement with postcolonial thought raises.

5.1 Abstract Labour, Difference, History I and II

Chakrabarty argues the centrality of the concept of abstract labour in Marx’s thought and the need to rescue this concept from its reductionist uses that would limit history to History I, the ‘self-expanding process of capital itself’, whereas in fact much of the history of people, he contends, is outside capital’s ‘life process’. Chakrabarty wishes to use the latter history (History II) to show how Marx’s thought may be made to resist the idea that the logic of capital ‘sublates difference to itself’. Abstract labour, Chakrabarty holds, is the key to understanding ‘how capital can encounter difference and still extract surplus value from labour’, while abstracting it from ‘all the social tissues in which it is embedded and which make any particular labour, even the labour of abstracting, concrete’. In a hypothetical ‘barbarian’ society, labourers might evince a practical ‘indifference to specific labour’, but this would not be visible to an analyst; in capitalist society, by contrast, the particular work of abstracting (from the specific qualitative aspects of each labour process and its output) would itself ‘become an element of most or all other kinds of concrete labour and would thus become visible to an observer’. Abstract labour, Chakrabarty maintains, is to be understood as a practical, performative category, rather than the result of a ‘large-scale mental operation’. He quotes Marx to the effect that ‘men do not bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values because they see these objects merely as material integuments

1 Chakrabarty 2000, pp. 49–50.
2 Chakrabarty 2000, pp. 53–5.