

Book Review

Chibber, Vivek, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn*¹

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The difficult problem that any Marxist social theorist must contend with is how to theorize the fall of capitalism through its inherent contradictions. The persistence of capitalism seems to cast a shadow of doubt on the viability of theory. Hence, various philosophers have sought reasonable justifications for why the revolutionary rapture has yet to occur. The common approach was through the causal depiction of ideology impeding the working-class consciousness. In Adorno, we see this in the instrumentalization of ideology in the form of the culture industry. In Marcuse, we find this in the psychosocial conditioning of the subjects of the welfare state, where the pursuit of needs and wants occupies the consciousness of the citizen, leaving no room for dissent and critique.

If the revolutionary rapture has absconded, is it the fault of the masses for falling prey to the allure of false consciousness? Or is the prophecy of the theory defective? Vivek Chibber, in *The Class Matrix*, thinks the latter is true. The main thrust of his critique is against cultural Marxists' assumptions. He argues that there is a failure of the development of theory from Marx when the cultural Marxists became fixated with the role of ideology. Chibber attributes this to the domestication of the 'organised left' that occurred after the fall of the Soviet bloc,² where the intelligentsia tried filling in the theoretical gap created by the eschatological failure of Marxism. The failure of the working class to organise meant that something was interrupting the inevitable downfall of capitalism, which has been seen as a matter of 'false consciousness' of the worker driven by the powerful force of manufactured ideologies or cultures.³

Chibber's critique of cultural Marxism hinges on an elaborate rehearsal of Marx's materialism and historical development of capitalism. To

¹ London: Harvard University Press, 2022, 192pp.

² *Ibid.*, 3.

³ Chibber notes that this is an interchangeable concept in this work.

begin with, he argues that culture or ideology merely reflects class structure and does not significantly influence changing class structures. This is because class structures in capitalistic societies are sources of material stability. Class structures provide the heuristic approach of optimizing economic stability for both institutions and individuals, while culture is subordinated to material structures that constrain and limit subjects' motives. That is why popular genres are reproduced rapidly in the music industry compared to obscure genres like sea shanties played on a theremin. Class structures are supported by material resources; the more stable they are, the more they are preferred over other alternatives. The consequence of this preference for material stability means that culture follows the structure, not the other way around. In the context of capitalism, we are motivated to follow structural constraints because they provide the necessary material stability. Hence, there is a strong material force in incentivizing individual economic action over organized class action. Class action is difficult; it requires consolidating individual interests into an attractive and reasonable proposal towards the employers. As opposed to individual economic action, class action requires specific individual interests to be disregarded in the service of the class. Likewise, the scrutiny inherent in a contemporary surveillance society will discourage the organization of class action and will foster informal, individual economic activity.

The crux of this conundrum leads us to the problem of how capitalism persists despite its internal contradictions. The problem, as Chibber notes, is sourced from the belief that capitalism is self-annulling. My take on the matter is that, perhaps, there is also a widespread belief that capitalism is an ideology, as opposed to the fact that it is a material condition. Chibber seems convinced that the latter is true as opposed to the former. The condition of capitalism caters to our desire to be materially secure in a constantly insecure world, resulting in conformity to institutions. Ironically, it creates a condition where the desire for material security creates the conditions of furthering the goals of institutionalizing material insecurity.⁴ This desire to seek material stability is the constant scaffolding that supports the structures of capitalism—not merely because it incentivizes the concentration of profit among individuals, but also because it holds the very possibility of subsistence hostage for both individuals and institutions. But does this mean that individual agency is lost in pursuing material stability? Chibber thinks otherwise; in fact, he argues that this very condition makes capitalism diverse by necessity.

Diversity, in this sense, is not a limitless condition of various identities; it is subject to material structures that constrain possibilities. This

⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

is why unpopular genres of music exist, despite the general interest of the public towards K-pop. Genres like thrash metal can exist so long as there are willing listeners. Music producers, like employers, also seek stability; hence, they make calculated efforts to make their enterprise profitable. This relationship between laborers and employers is asymmetric. Employers always have the leverage in negotiations between profitability and labour, while workers are beholden to this condition because of their constant insecurity.

Prudence over valor is often the logical choice for workers—not because they lack agency or are simply drawn in by the ideologies of capitalism, but because of the material constraints of labour. The worker, for Chibber, is always in this disadvantaged position where the demands of employers constantly pressure them to conform to the demands of the employer. This structure is what allows capitalism to persist; it guarantees the stability of class structures through their continual reproduction. This material condition, however, does not mean that workers have no agency and that the outcomes are generally predictable in the relationship between these classes. The contrary is true for Chibber, despite the usual association of structuralism with deterministic outcomes. The idea that actors in capitalism have agency is reflected by their choices and the reproduction of capitalism. Workers have ways of navigating the labour market, which is why some achieve greater success than others, resulting in variations in their material compensation and career trajectories. This is also why a neurosurgeon earns a higher salary than a municipal solid waste and recyclable materials recovery specialist.⁵ The difference in the specialization of work here also reflects variations in strategies, which may prove either successful or ineffective. Chibber's proposal in this materialist and structuralist reading of Marxism is the reformulation of class action as a genuine, grounded, and feasible call for action by laborers. While he does not pitch utopian visions for revolutions, Chibber prioritizes the structural possibility of a sustainable and structurally stable form of transforming the material conditions of the working class.

The Class Matrix follows an intricate and interwoven set of chapters. Chapter 1 argues why culture or ideology plays a secondary role in the economic practices of actors in capitalism. Chibber argues that while social relations are subject to culture, they are not entirely subordinate to culture or ideology. He argues that culture “does not independently shape the outcomes so much as it is shaped by the antecedent cause.”⁶ Economic actors react to culture depending on their contexts and the viability of maintaining

⁵ Also known as a ‘garbage collector.’

⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

a stable homeostasis. Culture, therefore, is prevalent only when it is viable under certain economic conditions. This is why we do not see municipal solid waste and recyclable materials recovery specialists taking up golf as a hobby or sailing around the Pacific in a carbon-neutral yacht to avoid creating further emissions that would harm the environment. Those activities are usually beyond the means of this laborer, in the same manner that there are more nursing students than paleontology students in the Philippines. Culture is subordinate to economics: while it can influence economics to some degree, economics remains the structure that undergirds the reproduction of culture.

In Chapter 2, Chibber argues that the formation of classes under the structure of capitalism is merely a contingent possibility and not a necessity, as cultural Marxists claim it to be. He argues that the belief in the Marxist teleology that capitalism will meet its demise through internal contradictions is flawed. Since the relationship between the employer and the employee always remains asymmetric, class action remains constrained since it disrupts the stability of workers' material security. This creates a condition of incentivizing individual economic action as opposed to collective action, as the latter is hindered by constant surveillance of employers and the inherent asymmetry between employee and employer. Individual action is therefore preferred, since workers' vulnerability to material insecurity constrains their ability to pursue greater compensation and stability—outcomes that would, in turn, also benefit the employer. Moreover, the issue of consolidating every worker's interests is more complicated than negotiating with individual workers' interests. The diversity of skills, interests, and leverage makes it difficult for organized collective action to aggregate workers' interests and agreement. Collective action also fails to see success since it requires workers to subordinate their goals to the larger agenda. One can imagine a company demanding an increase in output from its employees. An individual can offer to do that for increased compensation using a highly specialized skill, knowledge, innovation, or connections. This translates to longer hours, extra work, and additional training, which compromises an employer's desired stable outcome. A third impediment that Chibber notes is the tendency of laborers to merely 'free-ride' towards the attempts of other laborers to seek collective action. The backlash from an employee actively disrupting the homeostasis of an employer's enterprise is a risk that includes jeopardizing an employee's material security. While a free-rider's interest might align with the advancement of their material interest, there is a greater interest in maintaining the stability of their economic security. This material tendency often leads to using informal networks to maneuver individually through economic interests. For Chibber, it takes a special kind of consideration from individuals to collectively organize by individually considering the effects of

their actions towards their peers.⁷ Hence, he advocates that collective action should begin as a matter of self-exhortation.⁸

Chapter 3 is Chibber's response to the eschatological belief towards the demise of capitalism's inevitable downfall. He argues that the ageing question of capitalism's demise is rooted in the belief that the failure of class action comes from the working class's false consciousness. Through the belief in a failed theory, the special pleading towards the assumptions of ideology influencing class action⁹ has impeded the proper understanding of why capitalism persists today. Capitalism survives because it strives to organize the economy and distribute wealth. In other words, capitalism is the structure that holds society together to the point that we freely consent because it promises material security. Otherwise, we are compelled to engage in capitalism's coercion because of our need for stability. This is not a matter of false consciousness, as Chibber argues in Chapter 1. It is a condition that applies to both employee and employer, as both pursue material stability. However, as Chibber indicates in Chapter 2, it is a lopsided arrangement due to the employer's leverage over employees.

In Chibber's view, ideology reflects the material stability of structures,¹⁰ a feature which can be observed in any context of capitalism. For example, the stability of people in academia earning a stable source of material security in their pursuit of criticizing the inherent contradictions of capitalism; they thrive because they are incentivized by structural stability. In this sense, workers consent to the conditions of labour, not as a matter of ideological inclination, but as a matter of knowing their structural entanglements better than anyone else. This direction in *The Class Matrix* articulates Chibber's dissatisfaction with how the intelligentsia and academia treat the so-called 'ignorant masses.' By merely looking at workers from the ideology perspective, we ignore the actual material conditions that have shaped their individual strategies and practices as economic actors.

Chapter 4 further explores the problem of consent within structural materialism. Returning to the argument that ideology merely reflects stable structures, Chibber revisits the role of agency through the lens of structuralism. He intends to demonstrate that structuralism maintains agency and contingency of consciousness, as opposed to the belief that culture or ideology shapes the class consciousness. Drawing on Sewell and Althusser, Chibber argues that structuralism does not deny agency; it merely constrains a worker's options for economic actions. This does not deny the fact that actors can still intervene in the world through reason. Structures and classes

⁷ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

likewise make certain courses of action attractive, as they tend to lead actors towards material stability.¹¹

Through the constant support of the actors incentivized by the system to engage in labour, the system gains homeostasis. Wages are paid, profits are met, and the cycle continues to sustain workers and employers despite their asymmetrical relationship. The class structure continues to reproduce itself, and it does this because the parties involved have agency over their economic actions. Chibber argues that if it were otherwise, the outcome would be catastrophic.¹² If stability were not the motive of these classes and economic actors—if they were purely automatons of ideology—the reproduction of a stable system would cease, and the possibility of overthrowing capitalism might become a reality. Consent and agency are the reasons why capitalism persists; it sustains material stability.

Chapter 5 of *Class Matrix* consolidates the concepts that Chibber advances to understand the restructured condition of class formation over the past century. The organization of collective actions and labour unions after the Second World War marked the progressive growth of the left and the organized labor movements. In the past, this was possible due to the shared solidarity of classes; people were huddled in communities where they shared similar classes, interests, and material needs. However, this growth began to decline as structural conditions changed. The rapid industrialization of labor increased the asymmetrical relations between employers and laborers. The pursuit of profitability meant that service-oriented tasks were outsourced to other locations. Automation also replaced workers, thus decreasing the leverage that a worker has in negotiating their compensation. This increasing asymmetry atomized the class structure of workers, who resorted to informal networks that enabled individual economic action. The other alternative for workers was to resign themselves to erosion of their security of labour and supplement their material stability with additional informal work by joining the 'gig-economy.' Wage continued to stagnate while wealth became more concentrated among the employers. What Chibber worries about is the further atomization of the working class. Labour unions and political parties have become increasingly scarce due to increased surveillance, worker competition, and greater material insecurity. Class structures have become harder to unify due to conflicting interests and a lack of solidarity. Chibber observes that this development is the shift from industrialization in the 1920s to deindustrialization in the 2020s,¹³ accompanied by the decrease in the growth of services that led to the decline in the profitability of employment.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹² *Ibid.*, 124.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 171.

At this point in *The Class Matrix*, it becomes clear that Chibber embodies the Marxist concern with workers' material insecurity. It also highlights his plea to the growing social atomism workers experience today. For Chibber, reviving class organization requires a better understanding of the conditions of labour and capitalism—an understanding he laments has been overtaken by upper- and middle-class intelligentsia that is ignorant and indifferent to the workers' experience.

One of the compelling reasons to read this work is that it holds the reader in suspense as to whether Chibber follows the agenda of Marxism or is inclined towards abandoning Marxism. The reason for this suspense is Chibber's fair assessment and treatment of capitalism and Marxism. A careful handling of both sides of the argument depicts him as a neutral party to the debate. The discourse of theoretical and empirical conditions of labour and capitalism creates an inviting atmosphere for readers to move forward in the quagmire of capitalism and labour. Chibber does not fall into the tragic tone of pessimism, nor does he come off as Pollyannish in pursuing solutions and remedies to the situation.

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Reference

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