

Chibber, V. (2022). *Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn*. Harvard University Press.

Review by Michael Beyea Reagan

In his new book, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn*, Marxist scholar and activist Vivek Chibber seeks to further explore the promise of Marx's materialism. Part defense of materialism, part modification to address the critiques of the 'cultural turn,' Chibber gives us a strong case for the power of materialist theory. However, in the final analysis Chibber's version of materialism is too closely hewn to unreconstructed Marxism, leaving many of the problems and questions present in materialist thought unaddressed. Since Marx we've had more than a hundred years of scholarship that sought to build from the materialist foundation in a meaningful way, taking its contributions and moving beyond its limitations. And even a quick look at history tells us that material class analysis is important, but ultimately constitutes only part of a compelling social theory.

At its strongest, the book demonstrates the continuing power of materialism. In five chapters Chibber shows how class structure relates to the process of class formation, a contingent and elusive phenomenon of workers coming to class consciousness and collective political action. Class formation, he tells us, doesn't necessarily lead to resistance. Instead, it is dependent on questions of consent and what he calls 'resignation,' a position by which the working class makes individual decisions to accommodate the system, rather than challenge it headlong. This process contributes to social stability and is a materialist explanation for why we haven't seen the types of collective revolutions predicted in Marx. Using game theory, Chibber says the economic structure produces resignation, a rational response to a constrained set of conditions. He then weaves together the relationship between structure and agency in a way that allows explanatory power for both, before concluding with an analysis of how his 'class matrix' framework can help us understand the current political economy.

Chibber's big contention is that class is special. 'The peculiarity of class,' he writes, 'resides in that fact that it is the only social relation that directly governs the material well-being of its participants'(p. 17). This fixed materiality places peoples' 'meaning orientation' as 'causally dependent' on their structural location in the class system. Culture, for all its independent variability, Chibber says, is ultimately rooted in one's class position, and class at its base is unique from other forms of social formation in that it is material. Important for him is that a 'causal arrow thus runs *from* the class structure *to* the meaning orientation of its actors'(p. 17). Infrequently this will lead to collective action of resistance, Chibber says, as workers seek individual solutions to class problems, try to overcome free-rider issues of collective action, and only rarely may seek to contribute to Marx's 'class for itself' conception of collective political struggle against all these obstacles. This is the foundation upon which the 'class matrix' operates. Class formation is far from a determined process, but a highly contingent and even difficult process. As workers 'resign'

themselves to the basic rules of class society, the system therefore produces its own stability ‘not because [workers] are duped by ideology but because it is rational to do so,’ he says (p. 20).

Where Chibber’s book struggles is in its treatment of cultural thinkers, which at times hardly engages with the specificity of their work. Take for example Stuart Hall’s concept of ‘articulation,’ one of his leading contributions to social theory, and absent in Chibber’s retelling. Hall argues that rather than any singular ‘determination’ of social causality, every era is given to particular forms of ‘articulation’ – that is the political, discursive, cultural, and material forces that compose and define each historical moment. Hall saw materialism as important but incomplete and sought ways to supplement our understanding of social change. Indeed, in Hall’s thinking culture itself emerges as a kind of social ‘structure,’ one with as much determinative power as the economic. This aspect of cultural studies is absent from Chibber’s engagement.

Perhaps the biggest struggle in the book is its conception of the material. Chibber’s argument about class as uniquely material is faulty. Yes, class has fundamental ways in which it is material, but in looking at class formation it is also profoundly a cultural phenomenon, defined by how people understand their identities and experiences. The entirety of EP Thompson’s work is founded on this idea; historical contingency, especially on questions of consciousness, is important. But the bigger problem here is in thinking about class as uniquely material against other aspects of social formation. In this telling race, gender, sexuality, citizenship lose their material composition, a grave mistake. As Cedric Robinson argues in *Black Marxism*, racial thinking profoundly shaped the material basis and expectations of early capitalism, giving race and white supremacy a material composition that lives on in the structure of labor market competition, housing market prices, and innumerable other material factors of race today. The lack of engagement on this work and others, like the new developments in social reproduction theory, is a weak point for *Class Matrix*.

Currently, a wide array of thinkers in black studies, feminism, anarchism, and others, both materialist and cultural, have developed a tradition moving toward a synthesis of social causality that takes materialism as an important contribution, but only part of a broader whole of social theory. At his best, Marx himself explored these ideas in his concept of social ‘totality,’ the ways in which material and cultural factors, consciousness and experience, all co-form particular moments of history. Rather than looking to readymade explanations of causality, we would do well to foster curiosity about the complexity of society, to take action to move to brighter futures, and then to see where we can go from there.

Reviewer Bio

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