FORUM:

PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE

2.

IN DEFENSE OF PROVINCIALIZING EUROPE:
A RESPONSE TO CAROLA DIETZE

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ABSTRACT

This response to Carola Dietze’s critique of Provincializing Europe takes up for examination three key expressions or ideas on which the original argument of the book was founded: hyperreal Europe, historicism, and political modernity. I appreciate the spirit of Dietze’s engagement with the book, but I show that her critique is based on a degree of misapprehension of these three central ideas. While clarifying the details and the degree of my disagreement with Dietze, I provide my own critique of Dietze’s proposal of “equal histories” by arguing that Dietze has not named or explained the unit with respect to which different histories could be considered equal. I also argue that Dietze’s proposals about judging societies only by their “own” standards, and basing human dignity on the idea of a “human nature” that could be seen as a “constant,” do not solve the problems she sees with my book and are themselves open to some serious historical and logical criticism.

I am honored by the attention Carola Dietze has given my book Provincializing Europe (hereafter PE) in her thoughtful essay, “Toward a History on Equal Terms.” As it happens, however, I mostly do not agree with her criticisms and will devote the bulk of this essay to explaining why. But there are a few prefatory remarks I need to make before getting into the nitty-gritty of our disagreements.

First, I am enormously appreciative of the fact that Dietze, a Europeanist, has, of her own accord, cared to comment on my book in such detail and with such a lively sense of engagement. The essay speaks of the generosity of Dietze’s intellectual spirit. But I hope that it is also in itself some kind of a proof that my complaint in PE that Europeanists do not read books on South Asia with as much curiosity as South Asianists have about matters European, now stands in need of serious revision.

Second, as the reader will see, most our disagreements arise from my perception that Dietze has misread my book in small but important ways. I take the blame for the misreading. For reasons mainly personal, I had to finish PE in a great hurry. As a result PE lacks a chapter that summarizes its fundamental argument. (I have sought to provide this in my new Preface to the second edition.) The argument is dispersed over different chapters without adequate signposts and is

sometimes made in far too cryptic a fashion. When readers have got the nuances of my argument—and, surprisingly, quite a few have—I have been lucky: they have done so in spite of the faults of exposition from which PE suffers. Dietze offers me another chance to explain what I was attempting to accomplish in PE. I am grateful to her for that opportunity.

I also would like to make it clear that the few critical responses I offer to Dietze’s idea and ideal of “equal histories” do not—and are not meant to—do justice to the complex project she proposes. My responses arise from the context of my answers to her criticism of PE. But I think the idea of “equal histories” deserves a serious and separate discussion. I leave that for another occasion.

And, finally, I have to note that in spite of our criticisms of each other’s positions, we both are engaged in a search for a more democratic and equitable foundation for the discipline of history. My criticisms do not take anything away from this ground we share.

I have organized my response to Dietze around three key words or ideas of PE on which Dietze’s critique also focuses: hyperreal Europe, historicism, and (political) modernity. Our disagreements turn mainly around how we understand these expressions.

I. HYPERREAL EUROPE

I see two broad problems with Dietze’s exposition of my use of the expression “hyperreal Europe.” She refers to it as a concept. It is important to explain why I have always thought of it as something less than a concept. The second problem is this. The expression referred to a construction of “Europe” in everyday life—in the media, in conversations, in textbooks, and so on—and its impact on historical thinking in third-world countries where most writing in history is still dominated by what I called the “transition narrative,” the idea of “catching up” with the West. That is why I argued that this hyperreal Europe was a product of both the imperialist imagination of “civilizing mission” and nationalist dreams of modernization. Dietze writes as though I were speaking of history everywhere, even in Europe. I present below the details of our disagreement.

Dietze writes:

According to Chakrabarty, this “asymmetric ignorance” [Europeanists not having to read specialists of non-Western histories—DC] among historians and social scientists highlights the fact that conceptual “Europe,” the metanarrative of political modernity, works as a “silent referent” for the writing of history and the analysis of societies all over the world: as modernization in Europe preceded similar processes everywhere else, there is always a structure of “first in Europe, then elsewhere,” and thus research everywhere needs to flesh out “a theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe.’” (Dietze, 71; emphasis added)

This sentence synthesizes material from the Introduction and chapter 1 of PE. I see three problems with this summary. First, in describing a certain Europe as “hyperreal,” I did not mean a “concept” of Europe. By using the adjective “hyperreal” (which Baudrillard defined as a copy without an original), I wanted to refer to something less determined than a concept, something like an imaginary entity that has some relation to the real but is also at the same time phantasmal
and that, as I said, is part of everyday representations in a place like India. Dietze acknowledges a part of this in saying that “Chakrabarty’s project . . . does not aim at any geographical or social entity called Europe” (Dietze, 70)—I actually said “‘Europe’ and ‘India’ are treated here as hyperreal terms . . . whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate” (PE, 27)—but misses out on what I said to indicate why this “Europe” could not be a concept. Hyperreal “India” and “Europe” are unstable entities. I wrote: “As figures of the imaginary they are, of course, subject to contestation [hence they are plural, I might add], but for the moment I will treat them as though they were given, reified categories, opposites paired in a structure of domination and subordination.” I admitted that such ideas of “homogenous, uncontested” Europe or India would not stand the scrutiny of research or “critical awareness.” Yet I remained interested in them because, as I said, I believed that “a certain version of ‘Europe,’ reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern, continues to dominate the discourse of history. Analysis does not make it go away” (PE, 27-28).

This hyperreal “Europe,” I argued, was a part of the global “discourse of history.” Why else would historians in/of India, say, scramble to keep up with the latest writing on European history while there was no parallel or equal scramble from the other side? In other words, the global condition for the production of history had this element of inequality about it. The picture of professional history-writing has admittedly changed somewhat since 1992 when I wrote the words quoted above—the rise of “world history” and discussions of a possible multicultural Europe have indeed made a difference to history professionals—but my point, I still think, holds albeit with some qualifications.

The important point is to note, however—and this is my second problem with Dietz’s summary—is that I did not argue that this global condition influenced research “all over the world” or “everywhere” in the same way or to the same degree. I actually said: “The dominance of ‘Europe’ as the subject of all histories is part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world [emphasis added]” (PE, 29). Now one might quibble about the meaning of the expression “third world” but it surely could not mean “all over the world” or “everywhere.”

Third, it was not my position that “everywhere research only needs to flesh out ‘a theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe.’” I was teasing out a “theoretical position”—my exact statement was that “the argument would appear to be”—from “the writings of philosophers who have read into European history an entelechy of universal reason.” This position was—not mine but theirs as I read them—that “only Europe was theoretically . . . knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially ‘Europe’” (PE, 29; I named Marx as one of my exemplars). The exercise of thus teasing this position out of their writing made sense, I further argued, if we regarded their statements about Europe as “the self-consciousness,” as it were, “of social science” (PE, 29).

My use of words and expressions like “skeleton” and “theoretically knowable” actually mimicked the language of Marx. Applying the Hegelian dictum that “the
intimations of higher development among the subordinate animal species . . . can be understood only after the higher development is already known,” Marx concluded, “The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient . . . ” (PE, 30). He had made the same point in another place in the Grundrisse: “Human anatomy contains the key to the anatomy of the ape” (PE, 30). I was simply extrapolating this logic to the case of my hyperreal Europe. In others words, if Europe represented “the higher development” of human society, then it supplied the “key” to the “skeleton” (a word meant to echo Marx’s “anatomy”) of the history of the less developed countries. The acceptance of this philosophical position, then—that the more developed supplies a key to the less developed or, as Marx said, industrialized nations mirrored the future of the non-industrial ones—is what led to the “dominance of Europe” that I described as a predicament for third-world historiography. My claim may be open to criticism but it should be clear by now that I was not being prescriptive about the function of research “everywhere” or even arguing that a hyperreal Europe was a problem for “the writing of history and the analysis of societies all over the world” (Dietze, 71). Dietze has stretched the case well beyond its original provenance.

II. ON HISTORICISM

This is a troublesome word. So many people have used it in so many different senses that confusion is very easily created. I recognized this problem and added a short note on my use of the word at the end of the Introduction to PE. I said at the very beginning of this note: “The term ‘historicism’ has a long and complex history. Applied to . . . scholars who are often as mutually opposed and as different from each other as Hegel and Ranke, it is not a term that lends itself to easy and precise definitions” (PE, 22). Indeed, all that I read on the subject before and while working on PE and all that I have read since have only confirmed this impression. To give just three examples at random, take Arnaldo Momigliano’s use of the word in his 1961 essay, “Historicism in Contemporary Thought”; Charles R. Bambach’s use of it in the 1990s in his book Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism; and the more recent (2003) use of the word in David N. Myers, Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontent in German-Jewish Thought. Momigliano seems to take the meaning of the word for granted, and yet clearly makes room for a variety of historicisms, speaking, for instance, of “the profound gulf . . . between Crocean historicism and the multifarious forms of German historicism.” Bambach, quite early on in his book, follows Herbert Schnädelbach in stating that while the term “historicism” can be dated back to “very early in the nineteenth century,” it came into more popular use “after the Great War.”


veying a large number of scholars who have worked on the history of the term, Bambach concludes that “there is really no universally agreed-upon movement that can be called ‘historicism.’”5 Myers also begins his discussion with a similar observation: “To be sure, not all have agreed on the virtue or, for that matter, the very definition of historicism. On the contrary, the term has spawned a remarkable range of definitional progeny.”6

Faced with this problem, I thought I would explain my use of the word so that readers would not read other possible meanings of the term into my book. But I seem not to have succeeded. Dietze’s summary of my use of the term “historicism” is fair in many ways, but she is wrong to say: “Chakrabarty equates ‘historicism’ with the discipline if history” (Dietze, 73). I wrote: “much written history still remains deeply historicist” (PE, 23, emphasis added). If I had seen the discipline of history and what I call “historicism” as identities, I would have said: “all written history is historicist.” In a footnote, Dietze adds: “this equation generally remains implicit. However, it can be well observed on pp. 41 and 237” (Dietze, 73, note 16). I turn to pages 41 and 237 in PE. What I have written there is about “the deep collusion,” not identity, between the discipline of history and “the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation state” (PE, 41). A “collusion” requires the existence of more than one party, at least two; the two parties in question in my discussion are the discipline of history and “historicism” (as I have explained it). They have a “deep” relationship, I claim. I do not claim that they are one and the same thing. PE is a critique both of history, the discipline, and of historicism, a particular way of thinking about history. What I say on PE, page 237 is, similarly, about historicism and history being “close allies” of a certain kind of rationalism in the history of Indian “modernity” (a word to be discussed later). But it does not establish the equation that Dietze attributes to PE.

Dietze’s misreading is this: she thinks my use of the term “historicism” is a union of two sets: German “Historismus . . . and [emphasis original] historical metanarratives” (Dietze, 73). To my mind, what I call “historicism” is more like the intersection of two sets: what Dietze calls “German historismus” and versions of the idea that third-world histories are primarily about the transition from a premodern condition to that of modernity of which my hyperreal Europe remains the original site (see the discussion in PE, 30-39). I thus said (PE, 23) that “historicism,” in my usage, referred to a mode of thinking that “tells us that in order to understand the nature of anything in this world we must see it as an historically developing entity, that is, first as an individual and unique whole—as some kind of unity in potential—and, second, as something that develops over time.” In writing a new preface for the second edition of PE, I have provided this additional gloss:

It was a mode of thinking about history in which one assumed that any object under investigation retained a degree of unity of conception throughout its existence and attained a full expression through a process of development in secular, historical time. Much of my thinking here was inspired by what Foucault had said . . . in his essay “Nietzsche, Geneal-

5. Bambach, Heidegger, 4, note 5.
ogy, History.” . . . I . . . tried to think with Foucault’s critique of any historical category that is “either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.”

Dietze finds “puzzling” what she mistakenly takes to be my fusing of historicism and the discipline of history in my account of “historicism,” noting that they are “two modes of thinking about history that have opposed and even excluded each other in the history of the discipline.” The two modes in question are represented by “idealist philosophies of history,” produced by Enlightenment philosophers such as Hegel, and the method of “source-based research” on which the likes of Leopold von Ranke founded the discipline of history. “Therefore,” Dietze adds, “it is important to clearly differentiate between these two modes of historical thinking,” almost echoing Ranke’s dictum: “One must distinguish clearly between these two sources of knowledge” (“abstract doctrines,” that is, philosophy of some kind or another, and history) (Dietze, 73). But distinguishing analytically between these two different sources of knowledge did not prevent Ranke from seeing that mutually opposed ideas and methods could often co-exist in the same text or the same cluster of thoughts. He says, for instance, “revelations comprehend both abstract doctrines and history.” If such co-existence in the same text of historismus and what Dietze calls “metanarratives of modernization” were not possible, how, one might ask, could there ever be respectable and superb historians (such as E. P. Thompson or Eric Hobsbawm) who combined the Rankean spirit and method of close and critical attention to sources with largely Hegelian-Marxist expectations of the long-term processes of world history (see, for example, my discussion of Thompson in chapter 2 of PE)? Indeed, as Momigliano observed in a 1954 essay entitled “A Hundred Years after Ranke,” the “German method of source criticism” had silently survived to become an elementary part of the practice of historians of all description. Perhaps the much-maligned old Hegel has the last laugh here: opposites have crossed over to each other to be part of a new whole that is made up of a combination of these opposites!

To repeat, then: I did not “equate” historismus with “modernization narratives.” What I called “historicism” intersects with the discipline of history, and PE is a critique of both: history, the discipline, and historicism. The object of my critique was a certain kind of imagination of the past where historicism and history colluded in sustaining the dominance of a hyperreal Europe (that is, a theory of modernity in which some people claim to have become modern before others and use this claim to justify their domination of those they consider less evolved). The critique had a political point to it. I explained this political point in the introduction to PE. I have recently had the opportunity to reiterate it in the preface to the second edition, and it may be worth repeating here:

9. Ibid.
10. “A Hundred Years after Ranke” in Momigliano, Historiography, 105-111.
Poststructuralist thought [I wrote, after acknowledging my debt to Foucault’s anti-historicism] was not the only ground on which I wanted to situate my critique. I could not but notice the fact that, long before Foucault, a radical aspect of anticolonial nationalist thought in India had in fact repudiated what I have called “historicism” by first demanding and, on independence, actually granting full citizenship to unlettered masses at a time when all classical and Western theories of democracy advised a two-step program: first educate and thus develop them, and then grant them their citizenly rights. This critical relationship to developmental or stadial history was thus, I claimed, a part of the anticolonial heritage.11

III. MODERNITY

I find this section of Dietze’s essay somewhat difficult to respond to, for she mixes her criticisms of my use of the term “modernity” with her discussion of “equal histories.” I will say a few words in criticism of the idea of “equal histories” insofar as it is proposed as a corrective to my approach. But here Dietze’s purpose is to posit a larger and general program of research and writing that should be discussed separately for its own merits and inadequacies. Let me respond, initially, to her complaints about my use of the word “modernity.”

Unfortunately, I have to begin by pointing to some unintended misreading of PE. Dietze attributes to me the view that “modernity is not very livable. One has to find niches like adda to make oneself feel at home somewhere in the modern world.” Therefore, she reads into my citation of a passage from Sudipta Kaviraj, who writes about modernity “unfolding” as a “plural” phenomenon, an argument in favor of the idea of “multiple modernities.” This is not how I understood my own position; let me use this occasion to explain where I was coming from and what I was trying to say.

I actually begin my book Habitations of Modernity (which Dietze cites in her section on “Modernity,” 77) by saying “modernity is easy to inhabit but difficult to define.”12 Then how does Dietze arrive at the conclusion that I do not find modernity “very livable?” Her reading of the chapter on adda (a particular form of Bengali sociability emphasizing the importance of informal and unfocused conversation) gives me a clue, and lets me see how she may have missed some critical elements of the overall framework I was trying to set up in PE. In my chapter on adda in PE, I opened with a question that was raised by Marshall Berman in his classic All That is Solid Melts into Air. How did “modern men and women,” asked Berman, get a grip “on the modern world and make themselves at home in it?” (PE, 180) That is to say, if the capitalist order, in its never-ending quest for the new, made (in the language of the Communist Manifesto) all that was solid melt into air, how did people come to belong to—or even have a sense of ownership about—the particular (but by definition precarious) patch of capitalist modernity that they inhabited? Such belonging, in view of the nihilistic tendency of capital, would no doubt have to be a “struggle.” It would be like having to run all the time in order to stay in the same place. But this did not mean that one had

to find some arcane “niche” in which to survive. The struggle is a struggle to be at home in the rule of capital, make it one’s own, not just a struggle for survival.

The point goes back to what I had elaborated theoretically as the distinction between History 1 and History 2 in my chapter on “The Two Histories of Capital” in *PE*. By History 1, I referred to the universal historical logic around which Marx built his philosophico-historical category of “capital”—a history posited by capital itself. History 2 referred to numerous other tendencies in history that did not necessarily look forward to the telos of capital but could nevertheless be intimately intertwined with History 1 in such a way as to arrest the thrust of capital’s universal history and help it find a local ground, as it were. Our capacity to take pleasure in the rule of capital (the “universal history” being one of unrelieved abstraction and domination), I suggested, resulted from a successful—though always provisional, partial, and tension-ridden—co-existence of History 1 and History 2s (necessarily plural and under-determined). It is this idea of the co-existence of History 1 and History 2s that allowed me to say in *PE* that the question of the transition to capitalism anywhere was a question of translation as well, both literally and metaphorically (*PE*, 17).

Theoretically speaking, this business of History 1 and History 2 goes to the heart of what I was attempting to do in *PE*. It is unfortunate that Dietze does not pay much attention to this exercise. *PE* is about the tension between History 1—the universal historical logic that is intrinsic to Marx’s category—and what I called, not very elegantly, History 2s. But *PE* is not about rejecting either—which is why I did not recommend that we “multiply modernity into different—but equally valuable—modernities, implying multiple traditions and teleologies. . .” (Dietze, 72). Such relativism is not what *PE* preaches. *PE* was about holding in perpetual tension conceptions of (political) modernity—which are universal—and historical differences on the ground. It was not about tipping over to any one side. I read Kaviraj’s paragraph that Dietze cites in this spirit (that is, not looking for multiple modernities), and I repeated the point—I hope with sufficient clarity—in my introduction to *Habitations of Modernity*. Craving the reader’s indulgence, let me quote myself:

So how would one write of forms of modernity that have deviated from all canonical understandings of the term? . . . Most [responses] revolve around contesting the idea that modernity has any necessary, ideal-typical form. . . . [But] the concept modernity loses value if everything in the world is by definition modern (alternatively or not). . . .

The fundamental problem of how one might characterize Indian modernity has remained at the center of scholarly disputation in the subcontinent. The labeling exercise on the part of the Left and the liberal intelligentsia has, on the whole, been an attempt to qualify categories characteristic of European metahistories by attaching to them negative particles or prefixes. *Not bourgeois, not capitalist, not liberal* . . .

The problem . . . lies in the very categories of social science and political philosophy with which we think. . . . While such categories are eminently translatable across societies and should, indeed, be so translated in the interest of social justice, they are also dogged by problems that arise from such acts of translation. . . . Our use of negative labels may be read as an index of the problems of [such] translation. . . .

13. Ibid., xx, xxii–xxiii.
While we are on the subject of translation, let me also point out that PE does not propose that historians avoid the abstractions of the social sciences and translate into the prose of history subaltern lives, learning from “the way Hindu and Muslim gods were ‘translated’ in thirteenth-century India” (Dietze, 72). Again, my point was about holding in tension two forms of translation—one involving a mediating abstraction and the other using barter as a model. I wrote: “empirical historians . . . write history . . . only after the social existence form of their own labor has entered the process of being made abstract [in Marx’s sense] in the world market for ideational commodities” (PE, 94). How could I then suggest that they avoid social-science abstractions altogether? My point was that what enables historians to write, say, Marxist histories of all kinds of societies is that, in life, capitalist or analytical abstract categories are “translated” into “local” categories—and vice versa—without all of these translations going through a process in which a third, supposedly higher category mediates between the two terms being translated. I make this point in at least two chapters in PE: “Translating Life-Worlds into Labor and History” and “The Two Histories of Capital.”

IV. POLITICAL MODERNITY, RADICAL HISTORICISM, AND EQUAL HISTORIES

Dietze takes me (and Peter Wagner and unspecified others) task for leaving the word “modernity” ill-defined, but nevertheless believes it possible to raise some further polemical questions about the term. Words that become powerful in everyday life often do so at the expense of their conceptual precision. Actual histories of modernization in the world are energized by such powerfully charged words. It is often more fruitful to see what people have done with these words rather than to try to legislate their use. “Modernity” is not the only word that suffers this fate. A similar argument would apply to the word “democracy” as well.

However, a few of Dietze’s charges seem unfair to me and I need to dispose of them quickly. For instance, she says that “Chakrabarty . . . takes Foucault’s description of the subject self in the nuclear family and Locke’s outlook on society as a factual description of historical reality in Europe . . .” (Dietze, 77). Not guilty, I plead. I wrote about “the Lockean schema,” “Lockean thought,” “Lockean story,” “Lockean understanding,” “the autonomous, sovereign, and propertied individual that Locke posited,” “the theological propositions of Locke” (PE, 218, 219, 230, 231, 236, emphasis added). (The case for Foucault would be the same.) Does that sound like I equate thought with reality? There remains, of course, the more complex question of the relationship between “historical reality” and “schematic thought” that thinkers produce out of certain histories. Koselleck writes, for instance: “It has been a consistent finding from Aristotle to the Enlightenment that the concepts of political language have primarily served to collect experiences and develop them theoretically.”

Similarly, in what seems to be a reference to the second part of *PE*, Dietze writes, a little accusingly, that I “practically exclude the subaltern from society and history.” But I had clearly said the following in my introduction to *PE*:

To critics who may ask why a project that arises initially from the histories of the subaltern classes in British India should turn to certain histories of the educated middle classes to make its points, I say this. This book elaborates some of the theoretical concerns that have arisen out of my involvement in *Subaltern Studies*, but it is not an attempt to represent the life practices of subaltern classes. My purpose is to explore the capacities and limitations of certain European social and political categories in conceptualizing political modernity in the context of non-European life-worlds. In demonstrating this, I turn to historical details of particular life-worlds I have known with some degree of intimacy. (*PE*, 19–20)

These are, however, minor points. The thrust of Dietze’s criticism of the term “modernity” leads to her proposal regarding “equal histories.” I appreciate the spirit in which she proposes this and I also appreciate the fact that this is a preliminary exploration and statement of the idea. I hope Dietze will have more opportunities in the future to explain and elaborate on this idea. But let me, for now, spell out what I see as some of the main problems with the idea as she adumbrates it. This will help me to address the stakes involved in my use of the word “modernity” and of the expression “political modernity.” With that, I will bring this response to a close.

As I read it, the argument for “equal histories” has three strands. With each one of them, I have disagreements of varying degrees. The first strand may be found in the following statement by Dietze: “I maintain that a ‘History on Equal Terms’ has to be essentially history in the sense of radical *Historismus*...: the notion that *periods and peoples can only be justly appreciated according to their own standards* rather than the norms of a universal narrative of progress” (Dietze, 79; emphasis added). Here is how we disagree. *PE* accepted what is good about “radical *Historismus*” (and here I am largely in agreement with Dietze) but only as a tendency that works alongside the opposite tendency toward a universal position so that the two keep calling each other constantly into question. For me, one does not negate the other. I do not agree that judgments of societies must be based on standards considered internal to them. Otherwise one would have no place for the role of reason and rational judgment in history and would have to condemn, for instance, generations of social reformers in India who felt inspired by ideas and ideologies that came from outside, be it Islam or the European Enlightenment. Thus I wrote:

Modern social critiques of caste, oppression of women, the lack of rights for laboring and subaltern classes in India... are unthinkable except as a legacy, partially, of how European Enlightenment was appropriated in the subcontinent. The Indian constitution tellingly begins by repeating certain universal Enlightenment themes celebrated, say, in the American constitution. And it is salutary to remember that the writings of the most trenchant critic of... “untouchability”... refer us back to some originally European ideas about liberty and human equality. (*PE*, 4-5)

The English critic Ben Highmore has made this observation about my work that seems to me to be just: “Chakrabarty’s historiography is directed at the entanglements of ‘Europe’ and ‘India,’ not so as to un-entangle them, but so as to figure
The second strand of Dietze’s analytical strategy is to suggest, programmatically, that historians “characterize certain social formations, relations, and interpretations as modern—for example, social relations based on money as opposed to the inherited rights or personal bonds; authority based on achievement as opposed to ancestry . . . but without its normative traits” (Dietze, 81). (She does not explain why she would still want to retain the nomenclature “modern.”) So any society could have some elements that look “modern” by this definition alongside elements that are decidedly “non-modern”—and the two sets could be in relations of “diachrony, synchrony, or entanglement” (Dietze, 82). But what if the seemingly non-modern is a product of the seemingly modern, say sweatshops in Mexico resulting from global movements of U. S. capital and finance? Here the relation is not only that of entanglement but it is also temporal—and a perverse temporality in that the “non-modern” follows from or is caused by the “modern.” Dietze’s framework of “diachrony, synchrony, entanglement”—because of the very absence of any sense of historical dynamics connecting and animating its constituent parts—would leave us no language with which to speak of global capital or world-systems, and thus we would miss out on the productive aspects of these approaches. This particular strategy of avoiding Eurocentrism appears to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

The third element of her strategy seems under-specified and in any case questionable. “A ‘History on Equal Terms,’” she says, “needs a clear concept of human dignity, which gives historians a position from which to judge ideologies and political systems. . .” (Dietze, 83). She finds this “position” in the idea of human nature as put forward in a proposition by Georg Iggers: “He [Iggers] claimed that a constant element in human nature needed to be found that might serve as a basis for norms such as human dignity on which political claims and judgments could be founded” (Dietze, 83). Human beings have shared capabilities and capacities (one of which is the capacity to reason). This we can reasonably claim. But what is a “constant” human nature? Who will find this “constant”? Clearly, historians can’t, being in the business of studying change. How do we know that it is a constant? What will such a nature be based in?—genes? But then we share most of these with chimps!

“Dignity” is a relational entity. I do not deny its importance, but it is something that concerns how an individual or a group is treated or related to. It is not the same as equality for it can exist alongside inequality—we speak, for instance, of the dignity of the poor. Equality implies the postulation of some measure. “Equal histories?” Equal with respect to what? Surely we need at least the idea of a measure here. It seems to me that what Dietze gestures toward by her expres-

sion “human nature” is the need for a universal. I do the same in insisting that my critique of the “universal” hyperreal Europe is not a rejection, as such, of the universal ideas or even of the universal that is built into the fantasy of “Europe.” PE, ultimately, was an attempt to grapple with this necessary and yet problematic need for universals in writing histories of political modernity: the rule of the modern state, bureaucracy, the disciplinary apparatuses that come with these, and the narratives of human freedom that underlie and justify these institutions. To provincialize Europe was precisely to find out how and in what sense European ideas that were indeed universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity. I have recently had occasion to reiterate the problem thus:

I have argued not against the idea of universals as such but emphasized that the universal was a highly unstable figure, a necessary placeholder in our attempt to think through questions of modernity. We glimpsed its outlines only and when a particular usurped its place. Yet nothing concrete and particular could ever be the universal itself, for intertwined with the sound-value of a word like “right” or “democracy” were concept-images that, while (roughly) translatable from one place to another, also contained elements that defied translation. Such defiance of translation was, of course, part of the everyday process of translation. Once put into prose, a universal concept carries within it traces of what Gadamer would call “prejudice”—not a conscious bias but a sign that we think out of particular accretions of histories that are not always transparent to us. To provincialize Europe was then to know how universalistic thought was always and already modified by particular histories, whether or not we could excavate such pasts fully.17

With this I come to the end of this response. Let me, in conclusion, thank Dietze once again for the intellectual vigor with which she read and criticized my book. I remain grateful for her criticisms even if I do not always agree with them.

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