

# The Red Pill

## Breaking out of The Class Matrix

William Clare Roberts

Rare is the book that provokes in me both frequent agreement and teeth-clenching, head-shaking, wincing frustration. But such is Vivek Chibber's *The Class Matrix*.<sup>\*</sup> Chibber is his generation's foremost advocate of analytical Marxism, a program of articulating and defending socialist politics using the tools of contemporary social science. The journal he helms, *Catalyst*, has quickly become a premier outlet for socialist research, something of an Old Left Review. He has supervised a raft of young researchers from his position in the NYU Department of Sociology. His previous book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, elicited both rave reviews and real anger for its sustained attack on Subaltern Studies, the school of postcolonial research that emerged from the work of Ranajit Guha and his students.

In *The Class Matrix*, Chibber argues for a stripped-down Marxist theory of capitalism, structured by the class relation between wage-workers and capitalist employers. His goal is to vindicate both the explanatory priority of the class structure and the political priority of class interests. Both have been eclipsed, according to Chibber, by the turn to culture and ideology initiated by mid-century Marxist academics, but is now fundamentally antithetical to both Marxist research and socialist politics.

Chibber never fully explains what he means by the titular 'class matrix'. Is it supposed to refer to 'the deep structural facts about capitalism', or to the more mutable form in which this structure is reflected in modes of reproduction and struggle? Is it supposed to be the two-by-two matrix (Figure 3.1, on page 109) schematising possible outcomes of economic growth and working class

political organisation? Or, in keeping with the red and blue cover, is it a nod to the Wachowskis' movie and its contemporary afterlife in online political discourse? Perhaps, *The Class Matrix* is also meant to name the false, superficial world of academic culturalism from which Chibber offers you a 'red pill' exit into real class struggle?

I argue that *The Class Matrix* is itself what must be escaped. It is superficially rigorous but built upon critical ambiguities, equivocations and contradictions. Like much online and podcast commentary, it hovers indefinitely between angst and trolling. Like a bad legacy sequel, it can match neither the scope nor the insight of the original work of Erik Olin Wright or Adam Przeworski, to which it hearkens nostalgically. If this is what analytical Marxism is today, it is time to cancel the franchise.

### But first the good news ...

In Chibber's story, classical Marxism as a theory and practice of class politics had two basic premises. First, it presupposed that the capitalist economy established the parameters for politics by imposing real constraints on what people could reasonably be expected to do. This economic base defined the class positions of individuals, established their fundamental interests and limited their avenues for action. Second, classical Marxism assumed that the capitalist organisation of production was simultaneously the organisation of the proletariat as a revolutionary force. The common interests and common experiences of wage-workers would forge them into a self-conscious political agent, capable of and willing to transform the economic structure itself. Thus, capitalism,

<sup>\*</sup> Vivek Chibber, *The Class Matrix: Social Theory After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022). 224pp., £28.95 hb., 978 0 67424 5 136

above all, produces its own gravediggers.

Chibber wants to rescue the first premise by revising the second. He wants to analyse the economic base of capitalist society, and its fundamental division into classes, while jettisoning the sense of historical destiny that marked the period of classical Marxism. There is no guarantee that the workers will win. In fact, the economic structure of capitalism militates against the workers of the world uniting. The class structure incentivises 'go it alone' strategies. Individual workers are constantly tempted to pursue their own narrowly-conceived interests by working harder, applying for promotions, kissing up to the boss, saving money for their kids' educations, and so forth, rather than to undertake the hard and risky work of collective action.

But in order to focus on the real problem of building institutions of horizontal solidarity, and a solidaristic culture to support those institutions, Chibber also thinks we must upend the received way of thinking about culture on the Left. Cultural Studies and the New Left more broadly have bequeathed to the contemporary Left the notion that cultural hegemony or the culture industry has fully incorporated the working class into capitalism. The workers consent to be ruled in exchange for Marvel movies, the wages of whiteness and other vehicles of vicarious pleasure and ersatz emancipation.

There is quite a lot to agree with, and be grateful for, in Chibber's intervention. The model of the capitalist economic structure he advances is parsimonious – cartoonishly so, even – but it gets the job done, pedagogically speaking. In contrast to the buzzing blooming confusion and niche specialisations of much academic scholarship, there is something refreshing about Chibber's anti-nuance. This is not to say that his model – there are two classes, one owns the means of production and the other owns only their labour-power, the relationship between the two is exhausted by the wage contract and the exploitation of wage labour at the point of production – explains everything about class in the modern world. It doesn't. But it does effectively accomplish two tasks.

First, it is a proof of concept for the idea that economic structures are real and effective, and that we can specify them as stable background conditions that give rise to predictable strategies and interactions among those who participate in them. 'Structure' is a word frequently invoked but rarely elucidated in academic and

para-academic writing, so it's welcome to encounter such a straightforward and explicit articulation of a social structure, even if the simplicity of the model masks some deep ambiguities (I'll come to this in a bit).

Additionally, Chibber demonstrates that the sixty-year-old 'structure/agency debate' has been a colossal waste of time. The economic structure of capitalist society does not override conscious human agency, but relies upon it. As Chibber points out, 'there is nothing automatic or passive about seeking out and finding a job, or holding onto one in competitive conditions, or marketing a product and winning out in the warlike domain of the product market'. These are also the very activities that predictably reproduce the class structure of society year in and year out.

Finally, Chibber is persuasive with regard to two of his central theses. Class formation is hard, uncertain work, and it is backwards to think that what needs to be explained is the *absence* of a successful revolutionary movement among the global proletariat, or even among the working classes of the most developed capitalist nations. The surprising and explanation-worthy phenomenon is that there has *ever* been large-scale collective action carried out by people operating 'in a condition of generalised insecurity'. Why don't people get together and rebel against the social order that oppresses them and renders them systematically vulnerable? This is a question that answers itself.

Consequently, Chibber's thesis that resignation rather than consent is the basis of capitalist stability is well-founded and valuable. Workers – in Ohio or Kinshasa – submit to the economic structure of capitalist employment, with its exploitation and subjection, not because they think it legitimate or the freest and fairest system, but because they don't know what else to do or how to change the world for the better. It reasonably seems that there is no feasible alternative.

These are important lessons for any socialist project today. I am glad that someone is arguing them forcefully. It is unfortunate, however, that they come as part of a package-deal with the rest of Chibber's book: a collection of threadbare assertions that evince more conviction than thought. As in his previous book, Chibber is often more concerned to hit the right people than to accurately reconstruct intellectual and political history, and more concerned to draw stark lines between himself and his

opponents than to figure out exactly what it is he is defending. Indeed, it seems crucial to the argument of the book that Chibber avoid reflecting on and clarifying his own position. If he did, he would face the discomfiting realisation that many things he criticises are, in fact, at work in or implied by his own argument.



Chibber accuses the New Left, for example, of forsaking materialist explanation. However, his model of the economic structure replaces the material analysis of social power with a generic rational choice framework applied arbitrarily to only a subset of market relations. The result is an explanatory framework that applies to only one structure in all of human history and a declaration that everything else is sheer contingency. Similarly, Chibber accuses ‘culturalists’ and ‘social constructionists’ of obscuring the reality of material interests. However, he never defines material interests, and his constant and equivocal invocations of the term militate against nailing it down. Chibber’s house is not built upon rock, but upon sand.

In the greatest irony of all, a book that loudly and repeatedly proclaims its opposition to all notions of cultural hegemony and ideological false consciousness ends

up concluding that only the formation of *just the right kind* of working class cultural identity can make class conscious collective action by workers possible.

In what follows, I will substantiate each of these judgments. If you believe Chibber’s words, the story is simple: people act on their interests as given by their position in the class structure. But if you follow the implications of his argument, you find that the rabbit hole of culture goes deep.

## Structure (well, ... a structure)

Things quickly go awry. Chapter One is dedicated to Chibber’s effort to differentiate the capitalist class structure from all of those culturally contingent norms, institutions and power relations that social constructionists and interpretivists are interested in. However, defending his overly-tidy model just embroils Chibber in more difficulties. Every time he expels a form of cultural contingency he implicitly admits another, which must be expelled in turn, allowing yet another to slip in. In the end, keeping the structure free of culturally contingent mediations looks like a fool’s errand.

The social constructionist challenge to structuralist materialism was that, in the words of William Sewell, ‘social and economic structures ... were themselves the products of the interpretive work of human actors’. Chibber’s strategy in the first chapter is to give the constructionists every social structure but one: materialists get to keep the class structure. Yes, Chibber admits, the structure of a church is ‘undoubtedly’ constituted and activated by the construction of meaning. The sign that this is so is that this construction is highly contingent. People can fail to understand the norms and roles that constitute the church, or they can consciously reject them. Individuals or groups can fall away from the church, or the congregation as a whole can collapse. As Chibber puts it, ‘culture’s importance as the decisive link in the chain is elevated if it happens that the needed socialisation might not materialise’.

This emphasis upon contingency is the knife that allows Chibber to pare away the one structure that constructionism cannot comprehend: the class structure. Wage workers and capitalists have to internalise certain norms in order to participate in and successfully reproduce the class structure, but we can be *assured* that they

will internalise those norms. Why? Because their livelihood depends on it. A worker who doesn't 'internalise the appropriate codes' – timeliness, appropriate dress, acceptance of managers' and employers' authority, etc. – will lose their access to wages, and hence to food and shelter. A capitalist who doesn't make the cultural adjustment necessary to profitably employ wage labour will cease to be a capitalist and will have to adjust, instead, to the norms and meanings required of a wage worker. In other words, 'economic compulsion' makes failure or refusal to play a role into 'extremely rare deviations'. Therefore, culture and interpretive work just don't have the same explanatory prominence with regard to class roles and structures that they do with regard to more contingent social roles and structures.

Economic compulsion is not the only sort of compulsion, however, and performing class roles is not the only action that economic compulsion compels. Chibber notices the first difficulty, and he tries to turn it to his advantage by aligning the class structure with compulsion by 'economic vulnerability' and aligning contingent, socio-culturally constructed structures with compulsion by 'agent-imposed sanctions'. If you reject your church, your community 'might impose sanctions', such as ostracism or even 'physical intimidation'. But, Chibber insists, economic compulsion is not like this: 'no one has to monitor' or 'use social pressure' on recalcitrant workers, who don't need 'a socially imposed punishment' in order to be driven back to work.

This won't work, though. First of all, unemployed proletarians are subject to all manner of coercion and social pressure to get them to return to work. If you walk off your steady job today, what are you going to do? Access to land is conditional on having the money to pay for it. You can try moving in with relatives or friends, but you might find that ostracism, the denial of certain social privileges, and other agent-imposed sanctions coming to you. If you turn to panhandling or crime, you'll discover that this is recognised as a transgression, a breaking of convention. Monitoring and coercion imposed by other parties – even by specially uniformed and armed parties specifically employed for this purpose – will likely follow.

Yes, the mute compulsion of economic relations is a real thing, but everyone – including, presumably, Chibber – knows that the state is back there somewhere, maybe out of sight for now, but ready to step in with 'agent-

imposed sanctions' if people get too far out of line. In the biggest working class rebellions that the US has seen in decades – the Ferguson and George Floyd uprisings of 2014-15 and 2020 – the state was not out of sight at all. In Joshua Clover's phrase, the state was near and the economy far.

Moreover, Chibber's whole discussion turns on an equivocation regarding the predictability or reliability of certain behaviours. In the first step of Chibber's argument, social structures were contingent cultural constructs to the extent that the agent's socialisation into and participation in them were themselves contingent. To the extent that people face 'a powerful incentive' to 'achieve competency' in norms and meanings, we can assume they will do so. Therefore, Chibber insists, 'the peculiarity of class resides in the fact that it is the only social relation that directly governs the material well-being of its participants. Because it has a direct bearing on their welfare, it motivates them to learn and internalise the meanings required to participate in their structural location'.

The discussion of interpersonal coercion has silently shifted the locus of predictability, however. Non-class structures are contingent not because they do not have a direct bearing on people's welfare, but because the sanctions enforcing participation and compliance, whatever the incentive they provide, are the actions of *other people* – contingent, 'wilful interventions by other members of the community'. But this is confusing, since market forces are themselves the aggregate effects of wilful buying and selling by other members of the community. The market is just people, after all.

Chibber, therefore, is caught in a trilemma. If what matters for sorting social institutions into 'culturally contingent' and 'materially structural' is the *predictability* of an agent's participation given existing material incentives, then lots of institutions besides the wage-labour/capital relation have to be admitted into a materialist analysis. If what matters for sorting is whether the incentives for participation emerge from *non-agential sanctions* or agent-imposed ones, then markets for labour-power and other commodities – and hence capitalist labour relations – are going to be appropriate for a culturalist reading. If what matters is the difference between direct coercion and *economic incentives*, then the fact that economic incentives compel all sorts of behaviour



besides the performance of class roles becomes unavoidable.

Regardless of which path Chibber takes, he would have to admit that his simple model, in which materialist analysis, class analysis and economic analysis all line up very neatly – and happen to portray a perfect and homogeneous model of capitalist production as the only class-based, interest-driven social system to have ever existed – is too tidy to do any real analytical work. He might have to admit, as well, that the turn to culture, and the turn to other relations besides the wage-worker/capitalist relation, cannot be pinned on the heretical New Left, but were always already part of the Marxist analysis of modern society.

Marx strove to understand what it meant for a society to be dominated by this mode of production. Two consequences he highlighted are the production of a relative surplus population of wage-dependent but productively redundant people and the rise of a powerful centralised state wielding heretofore unprecedented levels of coercive force. The poverty of Chibber's theory is revealed by the fact that it cannot incorporate these two phenomena – a mass of wageless workers and workless wage-dependents and a coercive and interested state – into its conception of the economic structure of society. Chibber's simplified model is easy to grasp, and to wield as a weapon against those who would flatten society into intertextuality and meaning-making practices, but it is also incapable of articulating different levels and types of social power. This is a fatal drawback for what is supposed to be a materialist theory.

## Interests (well, ... *some* interests)

The connection between the class structure and action is supposed to be interests. 'The entire premise of class analysis', Chibber tells us, 'was that it was possible to predict actors' economic strategies on the basis of their location in the structure'. Interests, determined by one's class position and motivating one's economic strategies, lend causal force to the structure by translating one's structural location into a reason for acting this way or that.

Remarkably, though, Chibber never defines 'interests', and never discusses the scope and specificity of interests. How are interests related to desires or pref-

erences? How are they identified? How are trade-offs among interests articulated and decided? What is the temporal horizon of interests? How are individual interests integrated into collective action? Chibber does not raise any of these questions. In the absence of an explicit theory of interests, he uses the word opportunistically, treating contradictory phenomena as if they were equally interest-driven, as suits his present purpose.

As best as I can discern, Chibber uses 'economic interests', 'material interests' and 'class interests' interchangeably as terms denoting well-being or basic welfare. He claims that the strategies pursued by workers – whether individual or collective, conciliatory or militant – are constrained by their material interests in the sense that they are motivated and limited by a regard for their own well-being. This explains too little by explaining too much.

The crucial point to understand about any discussion of interests was well put by Göran Therborn. 'Interests by themselves do not *explain* anything', Therborn rightly noted. This is because "'interest" is a normative concept indicating the most rational course of action in a pre-defined game, that is, a situation in which gain and loss have already been defined'. In other words, to say that x is in your interest is to say that you have a good reason to want x, or that x is what you *should rationally* want, given your aims. Thus, you can't say what people's interests are unless and until you figure out what they are trying or otherwise aiming to do or be. Generally speaking, Chibber assumes that workers are trying to keep on living. This assumption is what gives economic interests their trump value when it comes to predicting worker behaviour. This is a fair assumption. There are certainly exceptions, but, given a choice between living and dying, most of us, most of the time, will choose life. Thus, anything that helps us to accomplish this modest goal is in our interest.

However, the vast majority of wage workers worldwide are not motivated to get out of bed and go to work each day by their desire for 'physical survival'. If survival were the *only* reason we had to do anything, our economic interests would be meagre indeed. Moreover, capitalism might well be the best possible system for satisfying *those* interests. Yes, it's exploitative, but if all we care about is 'maintain[ing] body and soul', then capitalist production would do the trick. (Our grandchildren

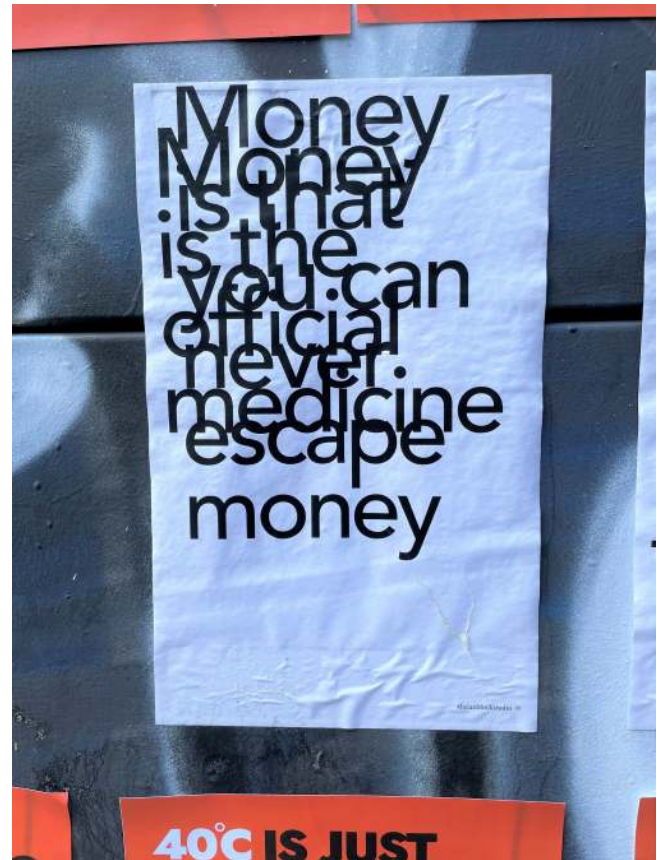
might want a word, of course, but they aren't able to act on their interests yet.)

One of the things capitalist production does, though, is it produces new needs and allows us to play new games, giving rise to new interests: social and spatial mobility, social and political standing, investments in children, etc. Trade-offs among these interests are not straightforward. Is it in your interest to accept a decrease in spatial mobility for the sake of higher political status? Is it in your interest to accept a decrease in your own material well-being in order to invest in the security of your children's future welfare? 'It depends' is the only general answer to such questions, and any instance in which such questions arise is going to provoke reasonable disagreement among equally rational and well-informed people.

Chibber's appeal to interests, therefore, is equivocal. He uses it to indicate that workers are rational actors – sensitive to the likely costs and benefits of different courses of action – but also to imply that workers all want more or less the same things, by which he means mostly the really basic things, as if there were only one set of costs and benefits that workers had to weigh. There are only two paragraphs in the whole book that raise issues related to the heterogeneity of interests *among* workers, and even these focus on directly work-related interests, the sorts of issues that are subject to collective bargaining with an employer: 'the intensity of work, the length of the workday, the level of the wage, health benefits, pensions, and so on'. This leaves out of view both the political interests of workers and the struggles of and among workers to define a broader workers' movement, not to mention the intrapersonal conflicts we all experience among our multiple interests.

Anyone tempted to embrace Chibber's mantra that socialist and working class politics is the politics of interests should read Gabriel Winant's *The Next Shift*, which beautifully traces the intertwined collapse of the steel industry and rise of the healthcare industry in America. Winant doesn't doubt that needs and interests are real and vitally important, or that workers are rational agents in pursuit of their own welfare. But what emerges from his account – and is invisible in Chibber's – is the reality of conflicting priorities, partial and competing communities of interest, institutional constraints and path dependencies, the outsized role of the state in shaping the context of choice, and the uneven and sometimes

openly exclusive webs of community support and solidarity that insulate some workers from harm by exposing others to those same harms. If you want a class politics based in material interests, then study Winant's book.



### Culture (well, ... just one culture)

We have seen that Chibber's construal of the capitalist class structure disintegrates under pressure because it relies upon predictable behaviour and market incentives coalescing in opposition to agent-imposed sanctions when, in fact, the relations among the three are much more variable and messy. We have also seen that Chibber's invocations of interests won't stand up to scrutiny, since wage workers confront conflicts among multiple interests, and the most basic and widely-shared interest – in life itself – is not the motivating interest in most situations.

But all of this was scaffolding. The real thrust of the argument is supposed to be that, because the class structure places the burden of collective action entirely on the working class while simultaneously incentivising workers to pursue opportunistic strategies of individual-

ised striving, class formation is not automatic, but must be driven by a conscious strategy of fostering a culture and institutions of solidarity among workers. Therefore, theories of ideological incorporation and false consciousness have got the wrong end of the stick. Workers are not kept in chains by culture but by the structure of capitalist power; their emancipation depends upon overcoming that structure by creating the right culture. Perhaps Chibber's structural model needs a lot of work, and perhaps interests are not as straightforward as Chibber claims, but those reservations need not impeach the conclusion that ideology and culture are not the lock but the key.

This gets to the real matrix of *The Class Matrix*, the contradiction that gives motion to its limbs. Chibber insists, repeatedly, that culture does not explain the absence of revolutionary working class collective action. Nonetheless, his argument clearly implies the contrary, that culture – 'ideology, discourse, normative codes, and so on' – *entirely explains* the absence of revolutionary working class collective action. Chibber tells us this while denying that this is what he is saying.

If the robust presence of the right kind of solidaristic culture and ideology is the decisive factor in bringing about class formation, despite the class structure – this is Chibber's thesis – then it must also be true that the absence or weakness of that culture explains the lack of class formation. The class structure is a constant. It militates against class formation among workers, and, in the absence of a strong working class culture and identity, it is sufficient to prevent class formation. The absence of one particular culture, however, is not the absence of culture *tout court*. If class formation is not happening, there are still cultures and ideologies abroad in the world, and the working class participates in those cultures and ideologies. They are simply *the wrong sorts of culture or ideology* to foster class formation. But this is the ideology theory Chibber denies.

Cultures are socially constructed and contingent. This is why Chibber argues that we must separate out the class structure. The codes and norms of cultures are invented, and our compliance with them is promoted by 'wilful interventions by other members of the community'. Therefore, if we don't have the right kind of culture to promote class formation, that is because we are creating and enforcing other cultures, the wrong kinds of cultures.

This reasoning is actually at work in Chibber's book, despite the fact that it contradicts Chibber's thesis. It shows up as a glitch in *The Class Matrix*, a point where Chibber suddenly and briefly claims that workers are prevented from engaging in solidaristic collective action as workers because they pursue their interests in the wrong way by creating and enforcing the wrong kinds of cultures.

The class structure is supposed to channel class conflict into individualised strategies by workers. That is Chibber's explicit claim. However, when he focuses in on these strategies, he briefly reveals that 'individualised' strategies need not be individualised at all. Rather than building unions, Chibber tells us, it is often easier for workers to rely on 'networks of kin, caste, ethnicity, race, and so on', into which they were born. Such 'ready-made' connections are 'a natural source of support'. Chibber also refers to these 'extramarket ties' as 'a means of exerting control over the labour market ... to hoard job opportunities'. Such a tactic, he concludes, 'only intensifies a class orientation in which one's welfare is secured by forms of association unrelated to class'. Using 'such ties' to organise the labour market 'runs directly against the principle of class organisation'. Then it is as if this interlude never happened. Chibber returns to the simple opposition between collective and individualised forms of resistance, writing that 'class formation occurs when workers seek out collective strategies to defend their well-being, as opposed to individualised ones'. He never mentions 'forms of association unrelated to class' again.

Culture plays a critical role in class formation, therefore – except when it plays a critical role in creating forms of association unrelated to class. Culture fosters a common identity among workers – except when it fosters a common identity among Black people, or kin networks, or trans women, or some other non-class – and hence cross-class – identity. Culture instils a sense of common goals and commitments, and helps to overcome the tendency to free ride – but it does this sometimes in the service of class consciousness and sometimes in the service of Indigenous communities, racial groups or age cohorts.

Chibber's argument, therefore, can be condensed as follows. The absence of proletarian revolution is not explained by the workers being integrated into ideology or fooled by culture, but by the capitalists' power and the difficulties of collective action. Collective action is



possible only when there is *the right sort* of culture, a culture of solidarity among workers *qua* workers, and a workers' identity formed by that culture. Workers participate in many cultures, however, and many of them can help to secure workers' welfare. But any culture that helps workers secure their well-being *not as workers, but on the basis of 'extramarket ties'*, 'runs directly contrary to the principle of class organisation'.

Chibber might deny that this is a theory of *false* consciousness. The workers who go in for MAGA or BLM or LGBTQI+ are rational actors pursuing their material interests as best they can in the circumstances. They are not the passive receptacles of culture made by others or the dupes of ideology. They construct, interpret and enforce the terms of their identities. Nonetheless, Chibber's argument implies that all of these other identifications, ties and ideologies are, *for workers*, mistaken identities and obstacles to *class* consciousness.

*The Class Matrix* aspires, therefore, to be *What Is to Be Done?* with rational choice characteristics. Chibber tries to show that the spontaneous movement of the workers cannot even produce trade-union consciousness, much less socialist consciousness. Only purposive ideological struggle – appealing to workers *as workers*, telling them that their true interests lie in banding together *as workers* – can hope to break through the reliance on 'ready-

made' cultures of kin, caste and colour. The foes to be overcome in this struggle are the stereotypical purple-haired, academic Leftists who talk about white supremacy, mysogyny, rape culture and so forth, and who think the workers are idiots and dupes, and who have to be told that the earth is round (that is, that interests, derived from class position, rule all).

In fact, *The Class Matrix* is not so much an updated version of Lenin's pamphlet as it is Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* stripped of the Hegel. Lukács claimed that only the modern proletariat was capable of pursuing a consistently rational strategy, due to their position as the makers of both every use-value and every social relation in the modern world. Only the standpoint of the proletariat is able to grasp the social totality. In Lukács, this reduced to moralism: the *real* proletarians, as soon as they are *really* conscious of being proletarian, will act in a *really* proletarian manner to consciously and methodically create the totality of society as a unity – and thereby also to cancel their existence as proletarians by eliminating classes altogether. In Chibber's book, this moralism is reproduced, but without the Hegelian eschatology and mediations. Rather than an expressive totality, we get an expressive monotony.

That the working class is capable of conscious and unified solidarity shorn of all particularism is a matter





to be taken on faith. Any failure to inhabit this interest-based universalism is a failure to comprehend true class consciousness. To ask how this class consciousness is produced from the manifold particularities of workers' local and contradictory situations is to admit that one does not possess this true class consciousness.

## Closing the book

Two results follow. First, Chibber's book should put an end to his notion that obsessive attention to culture, ideology and false consciousness only came on the scene when postwar Leftists tried to explain why the revolution didn't happen in the West. The turn to culture is the natural concomitant to positing class interests, rational strategy and class consciousness. 'False consciousness' is the difference between your interests as you currently perceive them and the interests of the class to which you belong, the distance between what you want and what would be rational for the collective action of those in your social position. That is all it has ever been. It wasn't devised by the New Left to explain the failure of Western revolutions. It is inherent in interest-based class politics. That is why Chibber recreates it as quickly as he dismisses it.

Second, attention to culture, ideology and false consciousness need not be a problem. It can be perfectly reasonable to tell people that they should not want what they want because it's bad for them. We can decry 'paternalism' all day long but it doesn't change the fact that we sometimes need to be convinced that we are acting contrary to our own best interests. 'Keep your eye on the prize' is indispensable advice in any political movement. But what is the prize?

Classical Marxists tell their readers forthrightly and repeatedly what the greater good is. They say why it requires struggle, compromise and sacrifice in the present to attain it, and why struggle, compromise and sacrifice

is worth it. Because Chibber does not give us a theory of interests, he is also coy about why workers should prefer a strategy of forging a class identity to the strategy of relying on 'networks of kin, caste, ethnicity, race, and so on'. He realises that organising must 'call for some workers *subordinating* their immediate welfare to the larger agenda', but won't say what this larger agenda is or why this subordination of immediate welfare is worthwhile. He only assures us that, 'of course, in the long run, these workers would also benefit in many ways from the security and leverage conferred by membership in the association'. Without a convincing story of interests beyond well-being, welfare and maintaining body and soul, this assurance is empty.

The absence of anything like an emancipatory interest is the void at the heart of *The Class Matrix*. When Chibber introduces the distinction between individualised strategies and solidaristic organisation, he establishes the contrast by saying that workers 'will typically find an individualised course of class reproduction more feasible than one reliant on collective organisation'. Perhaps this is a slip of the pen, but it is also the logical endpoint of his argument. The only alternative Chibber offers to the status quo is 'a course of class reproduction ... reliant on collective organisation'. The political lesson of his book is that workers should organise collectively *for the sake of being workers*.

This is the significance of *The Class Matrix*. For Chibber, the title names a reality from which emancipation is neither possible nor desirable. The only thing left to fight for is an identity politics for workers, a renovation of working class institutions geared toward class reproduction on an expanding scale.

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