

REASSERTING CLASS IN THE AGE OF CULTURE: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF VIVEK CHIBBER'S THE CLASS MATRIX

REAFIRMANDO LA CLASE EN LA ERA DE LA CULTURA: UNA REVISIÓN CRÍTICA DE
THE CLASS MATRIX DE VIVEK CHIBBER

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**Critical Journal of Social Sciences
(CJSS)**

ISSN: 3101-0415



Volume 1, No. 2 | 2025
pp. 261 – 268



Received: July 8, 2025 · Accepted: November 19, 2025

Abstract

This review critically engages with Vivek Chibber's *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* (2022), a provocative defence of structural class analysis against culturalist and poststructuralist approaches. The author argues that despite culture's ubiquity in social life, class structure retains causal primacy in capitalist societies. He proposes that workers' continued participation in capitalism is not grounded in ideological consent but in resignation arising from material constraints. This review systematically unpacks Chibber's arguments, situates them within historical and theoretical debates, and evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of his intervention. While the book powerfully reinstates materialist critique into contemporary discourse, it also underplays cultural autonomy and intersectionality. The review suggests that Chibber's framework, though compelling, requires further integration of cultural and identity-based dynamics to capture the complexities of resistance and domination in global capitalism.

Keywords

Class structure, Cultural turn, Materialism, Collective action, Resignation

1. INTRODUCTION

Vivek Chibber's *The Class Matrix: Social Theory after the Cultural Turn* arrives at a critical juncture in social theory and political praxis. In the last four decades, the "cultural turn" has dramatically reshaped social scientific inquiry, pivoting away from grand structural narratives—particularly those grounded in class analysis—toward an emphasis on meaning, identity, and local contingency. As cultural studies gained prominence, Marxist frameworks were often relegated to the margins, criticized for determinism and economic reductionism. This book intervenes forcefully in this context, arguing that class analysis remains not only relevant but indispensable for understanding capitalism's resilience and contradictions. By revisiting Marxian categories and reinterpreting them through contemporary empirical and theoretical lenses, Chibber aims to offer a revitalized materialist approach that addresses—and, in his view, overcomes—the critiques posed by cultural theorists.

This review offers an in-depth examination of Chibber's arguments, assessing their theoretical coherence, empirical relevance, and political implications. It also puts Chibber's intervention within broader debates in sociology, political economy, and critical theory.

2. SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

2.1. *The Structure and Central Claims*

The book is organized into five core chapters, bracketed by an introductory framework and a concluding synthesis that delineate Chibber's critical dialogue with cultural theory while advancing his robust defense of structural class analysis. Chapter 1 is about Class Structure which lays out the core features of capitalist class relations and argues for the causal autonomy of structure vis-à-vis culture. Chapter 2 talks about Class Formation where he explores the conditions under which class interests are transformed into collective action, emphasizing the difficulties of overcoming individualism. In Chapter 3 which is on Consent, Coercion, and Resignation, the author critiques the focus on ideological consent, proposing "resignation" as the primary mechanism of stability. Chapter 4 is on Agency, Contingency, and All That thorough which he defends his structural approach against charges of determinism and examines the role of agency and contingency. And Chapter 5, How Capitalism Endures analyzes the historical endurance of capitalism and the changing dynamics of class power.

The book's central notion is clear and states that while culture is an essential part of social life, it does not undermine the primacy of material class structures in shaping social outcomes. In Chibber's formulation, capitalism compels individuals to adapt culturally in ways that align with structural imperatives, not the other way around.

2.2. Reassessing the Cultural Turn

Chibber situates the cultural turn as a response to perceived limitations in classical Marxist theory, particularly its failure to account for the subjective mediation of material interests. Inspired by figures like E.P. Thompson (2016), Sewell Jr and Sewell (2005), and Joyce (2018), cultural theorists emphasized that class identity is not a mechanical outcome of structural location but is constructed through lived experiences and symbolic practices. While the book acknowledges the value in this critique, he argues that cultural theorists went too far in detaching class identity and action from material interests, maintaining that culture mediates but does not fundamentally determine structural relations.

For the author, the crucial mistake of cultural theorists lies in conflating the universality of culture—as a medium of social life—with the autonomy of culture as an independent causal force. He insists that capitalist structures shape the range of viable cultural practices rather than being shaped by them. This is illustrated through the example of wage labor: regardless of cultural background, workers are structurally compelled to participate in labor markets to survive. The cultural adjustments they make are, therefore, responses to structural pressures rather than purely voluntary or autonomous creations.

Much of Marxist and neo-Marxist theory, especially following Gramsci (2000), emphasizes the role of ideology and hegemony in securing workers' consent to capitalist rule. The cultural turn further radicalized this thesis by proposing that capitalism persists because subaltern groups internalize dominant meanings and values. Chibber challenges this by introducing the concept of *resignation*. He argues that workers do not necessarily consent to exploitation because they are ideologically duped but because they perceive collective resistance as impractical or impossible. This is not a moral or intellectual endorsement of capitalism but a pragmatic adaptation to structural constraints.

This distinction has significant implications for political strategy. If capitalism's endurance rests on resignation rather than ideological domination, then counter-hegemonic cultural projects alone are insufficient. Instead, there must be practical efforts to reduce the risks and costs of collective action, thereby creating viable alternatives to resignation. The analysis reframes how left movements might think about consciousness-raising, emphasizing material capacities and organizational infrastructures over purely discursive interventions.

2.3. Class formation and the Collective Action Problem

In Chapter 2, the book explores why class conflict does not automatically translate into collective resistance. He argues that while structural antagonism generates grievances, it also incentivizes individual accommodation. Collective resistance is costly, uncertain, and requires a level of solidarity that is not spontaneously produced. Drawing on the logic of

collective action outlined by Olson (1971, 2012), Chibber explains how individual rationality often undermines collective mobilization, as structural compulsion rather than shared ideological frameworks tends to shape the preference for individual strategies.

While culture plays a role in fostering solidarity, he maintains that it remains secondary to structural incentives. Collective identities are essential for overcoming the individualism induced by capitalism, yet they are neither naturally occurring nor guaranteed. Instead, they must be consciously constructed through sustained labor organizing and political work.

2.4. Agency, Contingency, and Variation in Capitalism

In Chapter 4, Chibber addresses critiques that structural analysis undermines human agency. He counters that his model inherently presupposes agency, since actors must interpret, navigate, and respond to their material conditions. However, their choices remain constrained by the structural imperative of survival. The author critiques culturalist approaches for sometimes attributing false consciousness or irrationality to actors who do not resist, thereby paradoxically denying their agency. In his view, choosing resignation over resistance is a rational response to adverse conditions rather than evidence of ideological manipulation.

Extending this logic, he demonstrates that his framework can also account for variations in capitalist development across different contexts—such as the emergence of social democracy in Scandinavia versus neoliberalism in the United States. While structural logics shape the general patterns of capitalism, local political struggles, historical contingencies, and institutional configurations determine its specific trajectories and outcomes.

2.5. Capitalism's Global Endurance: Historical Analysis

The final chapter situates Chibber's theoretical claims within global capitalist developments from the 20th century onwards. He details how neoliberal globalization dismantled many of the protective institutions that once bolstered labor, resulting in a historic shift in the balance of power toward capital. By emphasizing resignation and the decline of collective capacity, he connects theoretical analysis to empirical trends such as declining union density, precarious labor, and rising inequality.

The author further critiques culturalist readings of past labor movements that attribute their decline to cultural fragmentation or ideological failures. Instead, he argues that material defeats—deindustrialization, automation, and capital flight—undermined the organizational bases of collective resistance. This focus on structural conditions offers a sobering yet more precise explanation of labor's retreat, reinforcing his broader claim that capitalism's endurance is rooted less in cultural hegemony than in the material erosion of collective power.

2.6. Strengths of The Class Matrix

Perhaps Chibber's most significant contribution is the reaffirmation of materialist analysis at a time when social theory often privileges cultural and discursive factors. His insistence on the causal primacy of class structure serves as a powerful corrective to the sometimes-excessive voluntarism of cultural approaches. His writing is remarkably clear, even when dealing with dense theoretical debates. His arguments are systematically developed, avoiding jargon and opaque formulations that plague much of contemporary critical theory. By emphasizing structural factors and collective action problems, Chibber's framework suggests practical directions for left politics: building organizational capacities, reducing the costs of resistance, and re-establishing solidarities.

3. LIMITATIONS AND CRITIQUES

A major limitation of Chibber's framework lies in his insufficient engagement with intersectionality. While he acknowledges the existence of other social cleavages, he largely treats them as secondary to class. This reductionist framing risks flattening the complexity of lived experience, especially for those whose oppression is simultaneously shaped by race, gender, caste, sexuality, and nationality. In reality, material exploitation and cultural subordination are rarely separable; they intertwine in ways that amplify vulnerability and resistance alike. Movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) or anti-caste mobilizations in India illustrate that struggles against capitalism are also struggles against racial and social hierarchies. By neglecting these intersections, Chibber's analysis, though structurally elegant, risks reproducing the very exclusions that cultural and intersectional theories originally sought to contest.

Similarly, while Chibber rightly warns against overstating the power of cultural discourse, his treatment of cultural resistance tends to underplay its transformative and mobilizing potential. Culture does not merely reflect material conditions—it can actively reimagine them. Feminist, environmental, and indigenous movements demonstrate that songs, symbols, rituals, and collective narratives are not peripheral to material struggle but constitute its emotional and moral infrastructure. To view them only as secondary risks ignoring how meaning-making sustains long-term commitment and redefines what counts as "rational" resistance. A more dialectical reading would recognize that culture and structure continually reshape one another in the lived practice of resistance.

At the same time, despite his explicit acknowledgment of human agency, Chibber's argument occasionally leans toward economic determinism. His emphasis on material survival can narrow the range of human motivation, overlooking affective, ethical, and symbolic dimensions that often drive collective action even when material outcomes appear uncertain.

Finally, although Chibber addresses capitalism's global endurance, his empirical focus remains predominantly Western. A deeper engagement with the Global South—where labor, informality, and community often intersect differently—could have expanded the scope of his analysis. Examples from informal workers' unions in India, peasant cooperatives in Latin America, or mutual aid networks in Africa might have illuminated how structural and cultural forces interact under diverse conditions of capitalism.

2.7. Contributions to Theory and Future Directions

The Class Matrix revitalizes class analysis by integrating collective action theory and decentering ideological explanations of consent. Author's contribution challenges theorists to reconsider the relationship between structure and agency without dismissing either, emphasizing that human behavior is both materially constrained and purposively enacted. His framework thus reorients Marxist analysis toward understanding how structural pressures shape, but do not entirely determine, social action.

While he maintains the primacy of structure, his recognition of cultural mediation provides a valuable bridge between materialist and culturalist perspectives. This opens possibilities for future scholarship to develop more dialectical models in which culture and structure are seen as mutually constitutive—shaping and reshaping each other through ongoing social practice and historical contingency.

For activists and organizers, Chibber's focus on resignation rather than false consciousness carries profound strategic implications. It suggests that the central challenge is not simply to ideologically "educate" workers but to transform the material conditions under which collective action becomes both viable and rational. In doing so, his analysis redirects attention toward building organizational capacity, reducing structural vulnerabilities, and creating the tangible conditions necessary for meaningful resistance.

2.8. Comparisons with Contemporary Thinkers

Thomas Piketty's (2014, 2020) *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* and *Capital and Ideology* emphasize the role of ideology in justifying inequality. In contrast, Chibber downplays ideological justification and emphasizes resignation and structural constraint. This contrast highlights differing strategic prescriptions: Piketty suggests ideological reform, whereas Chibber insists on changing structural incentives and capacities. Further, Nancy Fraser's (2016, 2020) work on the capitalism's Crisis of care and dependence on unwaged social reproduction suggests a broader field of structural domination than Chibber's primarily wage-labor focus. Integrating reproductive labor and social reproduction theory could complement Chibber's framework. Scholars like Tithi Bhattacharya and Cinzia Arruzza advocate for an expanded Marxism attentive to race, gender, and care work. Chibber's book

offers an opportunity to debate whether a “pure” class analytic can still serve as an adequate foundation or whether a more intersectional materialism is needed.

2.9. Theoretical and Practical Implications

Chibber’s analysis underscores the importance of unions and other collective organizations, emphasizing that their erosion is both a cause and consequence of widespread resignation among workers. Reviving these institutions, therefore, becomes central to rebuilding collective capacity and countering the isolating tendencies of capitalist structures.

If workers’ resignation stems from rational calculations rather than false beliefs, then strategies for change must focus on altering these risk assessments and fostering new forms of solidarity. This shift has direct implications for how left movements allocate resources and craft their messaging. While Chibber critiques the primacy of cultural politics, his framework also implies that cultural work remains essential—not as a substitute for material organization, but as a supportive force. Cultural narratives, in this sense, should complement rather than replace the power of collective institutions.

4. CONCLUSION

The Class Matrix is an ambitious and rigorous intervention into contemporary social theory. Vivek Chibber challenges the hegemony of cultural explanations and reasserts class structure as the foundation for understanding capitalism. His distinction between consent and resignation offers a novel perspective on why capitalism persists despite widespread inequality and discontent.

However, Chibber’s argument is not without weaknesses. His underestimation of cultural autonomy, insufficient engagement with intersectionality, and potential economic determinism suggest areas for further development. Nonetheless, his work is an invaluable resource for those seeking to reconstruct a materialist analysis in an age dominated by identity and discourse.

For scholars, the book provides a sharp theoretical lens through which to reconsider foundational questions about structure, agency, and resistance. For activists, it offers a sobering but clarifying assessment of the challenges facing collective action. Above all, *The Class Matrix* invites renewed debate on the paths toward a more egalitarian and democratic future.

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