BOOK REVIEWS

Vinay Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India.* Permanent Black: Ranikhet, 2008. xxv + 337 pp. Rs. 750 (hardback).

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Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India is an exposition of the various 'interruptions' that capital encounters in both the human and non-human worlds and in that sense, it is an argument about the specificity of the experience of capitalism in any given space-time. But to view the book only as yet another case study of a local manifestation of capitalism – albeit a brilliantly written one – would be doing it injustice. Empirically, the book uses a mix of archival, ethnographic and survey research to explain a seemingly straightforward phenomenon – the emergence of the Lewa Patels as a significant force in central Gujarat by the early part of the 20th century and their relative decline in recent times. But in doing so, Gidwani offers new theoretical insights about core Marxist concepts like value and labour, presents the continuities and discontinuities inherent in the dynamics of class and caste formation in colonial and post-colonial settings, and underlines, once again, capital's "para-sitic" existence viz., the fact that its force can be understood only by taking into account other kinds of energies and logics.

It would be difficult to do justice to the entire range of arguments in the book in the space of a short review, especially given that these arguments could be analyzed from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. Instead, I would like to focus in this review mainly on two chapters – the third chapter (*Machine*) and the fourth chapter (*Distinction*).

Chapter 3 is an insightful account of the complex working of development in post-independence Gujarat. The story of canal irrigation in Matar taluka in central Gujarat that Gidwani recounts, along with its various expected and unexpected effects, can be used to productively engage with and add to the developmental studies and agrarian studies literatures. Here I briefly juxtapose Gidwani's arguments with three other important works. Firstly, Gidwani's conceptualization of development as a machine is very different from James Ferguson's "anti-politics machine" put forward in his famous 1990 book *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho.* Ferguson's development machine seems to almost mechanically transform political questions into technical questions and mask the expansion of state bureaucratic power. Gidwani's development machine lacks any such singular essence; on the contrary, it brings into relation previously unconnected parts (living and nonliving) in dynamic ways, thereby transforming the parts themselves as well as having unanticipated effects. Ferguson's emphasis is on how every so-called failure in development forms the basis of further intervention by the state; for Gidwani, on the other hand, the unpredictable trajectories of the development machine mean that the "failure of the state to deliver is not the same as the failure of "development"... it is the failure of the Indian state to *contain* the power of development" (p. 136).

The emphasis in Gidwani on the non-human as well as on uncertainty remind us of Timothy Mitchell's argument in *The Rule of Experts* (2002); like Mitchell, Gidwani's argument also seems at least partly a response to the (relatively) crude notions of power that underpin some of the post-development critique. Further, both Gidwani and Mitchell see the state and capital as "concrete abstractions", whose areas of operation and effects are so widespread that they seem to extend everywhere, but who seem to lack presence outside of their effects even as they are real in their effects (p. 130). But where Mitchell and Gidwani differ is in the theoretical approach used to make their argument about the parasitic survival of capitalism and the nature of its effects. As Gillian Hart points out in her thought-provoking essay on development, power, and capitalism, Mitchell does this in part by eliding Marxism.[1] Gidwani, on the other hand, goes back to Marxism and the Marxist categories of value and labour; while these are not discussed explicitly or in great detail in Chapter 3, notions of value and waste, of forms of labour and how they constitute self-identities, form the subject of other chapters in the book and contribute to the argument about the working of development. Thus Gidwani's principal argument in Chapter 1 (*Waste*) is that development was the internal reference point against which all problems were posed in colonial India. For instance, to reconcile the challenge that colonialization posed to liberalism, the notion of value (and its converse, waste) was extended beyond its meaning in classical political economy to include norms of conduct (both economic conduct that would multiply the production of wealth as well as moral conduct). This, in turn, led to a particular discourse of land and waste in both colonial and post-colonial settings, and affected developmental interventions like the canal irrigation scheme discussed in Chapter 3.

A third comparison that it might be productive to indicate is between the idea of the "desiring machine" in Gidwani's exposition of the working of development and Akhil Gupta's description of the post-colonial condition in *Notes from Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (1998), where people's consciousness about their 'lack of development' and the consequent desire for development informs their sense of self (in combination with other identities of caste, class, region, and gender). In both, the desire for development is also a major factor feeding into the emergence of new kinds of resistances, although the political implications of these resistances are not straightforward. Gupta discusses how the economic and social ascendance of newer upper caste groups in the aftermath of the green revolution in Uttar Pradesh led to a form of agrarian populism which focused on the failure of the state to implement development, even as it glossed over differences *within* the peasantry. The development machine has had a somewhat different trajectory in central Gujarat. There, it was historically subordinated pastoralist groups such as the *Bharwads* and the *Rabaris* who began to slowly bring into question the domination by upper caste elites. This was in part due to their desire for development (which includes in it a proclivity for certain kinds of labour and not others – an argument that is developed further in Chapter 4), and in part due to the various surprises produced by different developmental interventions (for instance, the explosion of grass along irrigation minors and subminors and along perimeters of cultivated plots and field channels following the introduction of canal irrigation). More critically, as in the case of the agrarian populism in Uttar Pradesh, the politics of the subaltern is not necessarily congruous with a politics against capital. One example of this is the fact that the initial surpluses of the *Bharwads* and the *Rabris* from dairying were invested in moneylending and slowly control was acquired over land via mortgage transactions. Similarly, Gidwani also makes a connection (albeit one that is not fully developed) between the decline of upper caste elites in the region (for whom development has not worked in their favour, or at least not to the extent expected) and the socially regressive nature of their politics of communalism.

Chapter 4 starts with a very specific goal viz., to explain why piecework arrangements (in contrast to daily wage contracts and in-kind harvest shares) have become dominant in a variety of agricultural tasks in the study region, using what Gidwani calls a "cultural logic of practice". While the growing importance of piecework arrangements is part of a wider change in agrarian relations, Gidwani's focus is not the commonalities across such a shift in different contexts (such as the availability of surface irrigation and the use of modern crop varieties), but rather the conjunctural nature of such a shift (in this case, the long struggle between different castes to change their relative standing in society). In discussing this, Gidwani contrasts two major theoretical approaches – new institutional economics and Marxist political economy – and points out how these are inadequate to explain the shift to piecework because they grant greater causal primacy to seemingly hard material factors as compared to supposedly soft cultural accounts.

New institutional economics approaches explain the rise of piecework by emphasizing efficiency considerations, in particular the argument that piece-rate regimes increase worker productivity, ease temporal constraints on agriculture, and lower supervision costs on employers. Marxist political economy approaches highlight disciplinary considerations, that is, the opportunities for surplus extraction and social control of workers that piecework or task-related regimes offer to employers. Both discuss power, freedom, and exploitation within the labour process, albeit in different ways; but Gidwani points out that the two sets of explanations are limited. A very different kind of understanding of power and freedom emerges when Gidwani uses Bourdieu's insights to analyze how different caste groups seek to attain social distinction via the labour process. Thus the Lewa Patels' drive for refinement had led to their seeking to disengage from direct supervisory cultivation and therefore to a preference for hiring out work on a piece-work basis. In what is reminiscent of James Scott's "weapons of the weak", households that depend primarily on labour income also use variations of a logic of distinction e.g., being late for work, and selective shirking. Some of these households (particularly from the subordinate groups like the *Baraiyas/Kolis*) have managed to negotiate piece-rate contracts where they can work at their own tempo, and without constant interference and berating from the upper-caste Patel employers. Other households have found alternative avenues of income generation.

A number of points are noteworthy in this chapter. Firstly, the complex working of the development machine is very much evident in the changing nature of the labour process too, as the ability of labourers to challenge the terms and conditions of work are augmented by favorable factors such as increase in demand for labour because of changes in cropping practices, which in turn clearly results from particular developmental interventions. Secondly, the articulation of work practices as being embedded in a cultural universe is critical, because it brings in the idea of "self-regulation" *within* the labour process, thereby adding more analytical potency to the concept of the "government of work". Thirdly, such an analysis of work practices also enables one to go beyond a politics of labour that is essentially framed in terms of an antagonism between capital and labour, and instead focus on a politics of work that includes affirmative forms of being (a point that is discussed in the fifth chapter titled *Interruption*). Here Gidwani is drawing upon Diane Elson's reading of labour, where labour itself is seen as the object of Marx's theory of value, instead of just being a means of explaining prices.[2]

However, there are two concerns that must also be highlighted. Firstly, while the juxtaposition of the new institutional economic, Marxist political economy and "the cultural logic of practice" approaches is an interesting and productive exercise, the fundamental nature of the irreconcilability between them is under-estimated. This is also a point that applies more generally at other junctures in the book where different theoretical perspectives are evaluated. Secondly, while the explanation of the logic of distinction and how it feeds into a specific balance between work and leisure for the Lewa Patels helps to understand the formation of a particular kind of caste identity, the phenomenon of the withdrawal of family labour (particularly female labour) from the commoditized labour circuit could do with a more complete and detailed explanation. In its current form, it almost seems to subsume gender to caste and does not engage adequately with the vast literature on the question of female participation in the work force and how this is shaped by a caste-class-gender nexus. Such an exercise would also better complement the rich account of the establishment of the corporate identity of the Lewa Patels in the nineteenth and the early part of the twentieth century in Chapter 2 (*Birth*), wherein caste is treated as an identity overdetermined by factors ranging from particular systems of revenue administration to hypergamous marriage practices.

This brief discussion of some of the major arguments in the book should hopefully give enough of a flavour to stimulate further engagement with it. But in concluding this review essay, a final noteworthy feature of the book that deserves to be highlighted is the succinct but forthright discussion of the ethical dimensions of a research such as this as well as of the political economy of knowledge, particularly in the aptly titled *Afterword: Aporia*. This, in combination with the attention paid throughout the book to the political implications of the research findings, means that the book could potentially result in a lot of unsettling in the realms of both "theoretical practice" and "political practice".

NOTES

1. Gillian Hart (2004), "Geography and development: critical ethnographies" in *Progress in Human Geography* 28(1), pp. 91-100.
2. See Note 35, Chapter 5, pp. 315-316 for a brief discussion by Gidwani of this alternative interpretation.