Book Review/Compte rendu

Vinay Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, 368 pp. $US 25.00 paper (978-0-8166-4959-4), $US 75.00 hardcover (978-0-8166-4958-7)

Despite its subtitle, *Capital, Interrupted* is not a book about India. Neither is it necessarily about Matar Taluka, a collection of villages in central Gujarat, nor the Lewa Patels and other caste groups the author came to know intimately over two years of fieldwork that commenced in 1994. Rather it is about the crisis of left theoretical practice, which according to the author can only conceive of capitalism as preordained and linear, thus leaving no room to think about resistance or the alternative ways of life and society that may follow. Gidwani draws on the people and environment of Matar Taluka to achieve two aims: first, to advance a theory of capitalism that reflects the way "multiple elements combine to produce a complex whole" (p. xix); and second, to reveal gaps or openings in the system that may sustain "noncapitalist forms of value production" (p. 220). While he has great success at making the first point, he exhibits much less success in the second.

The introduction frames the debate on the crisis of left theory with a discussion of the agrarian question, namely how agriculture is transformed by capitalism. That very question, for Gidwani, foreshadows hegemony, which stands as explanation for why revolution has not arisen in spite of the excesses of capitalism through the twentieth century. To address the failure of "delinquent reality" (p. xvii) to conform to existing theory, Gidwani develops a "critical genealogy" of the Lewa Patels. Survey data, archival materials, and ethnography are his principal tools of inquiry. In what follows, through five chapters, plus an afterword that reflects on knowledge as commodity, the Patels share the stage with several Western European thinkers, notably Althusser, whose concept of "overdetermination" is the lens through which Gidwani interprets events and actions.

As Gidwani explains, the Patels are an "overdetermined entity" (p. 38), the result of social, political, and even environmental factors that made them a dominant caste group two hundred years ago and a global diaspora today. Gidwani narrates the "birth" of this group in the second

chapter, sandwiched between chapters which read like primers on colonization and development before and after Independence. Originally rent collectors under village Desais and Amins who, in turn, reported to an imperial appointee, in the early 19th century, Patels assumed a vital role in a system of direct revenue initiated by the British to consolidate power over independent villages and municipalities. Through advantageous colonial policy and hypergamous marriage, Patels expanded lender networks and accumulated land and wealth that in the end reduced other elites to leaseholder status. Today other factors like canal irrigation and changes to the landscape threaten to unseat them as new groups compete and rise in prominence.

The uncertainty of group dominance and potential displacement and redistribution in the social order is a main theme that runs through the book. The interpersonal qualities of distinction and social mobility are the subject of Chapters 4 and 5, which on the whole appear more concrete, if still highly theoretical and dense in places, than the first three. At the outset of Chapter 4, a puzzle: Why do young Patel men with land to cultivate and labour to supervise, along with their counterparts, mainly lower caste men from households that live off manual labour, regularly sit idle all day in the village, seemingly against both of their self-interests? Sensitive to dynamics of place, culture, and history, Gidwani sees these actions as efforts to establish social distinction, based not on money but on a relationship to manual labour. The men in the village that earn a living by manual labour only do it when necessary. Called to work they show up late or shirk on the job whenever they get the chance. Patels, who started to disengage from manual forms of labour in the late 19th century, display their "supervisory acumen" (p. 174), often from afar. For both groups of men, status and prestige accrue to those least beholden to profit or wage motives.

Gidwani views the idle behaviour of the men as an "interruption" to the flow of capital, rather than some premodern disposition that lies outside of capital or one that is opposed to it from within. To develop this insight, Gidwani seeks, first, to disentangle "work" from "labour" in order "to reclaim for that term its heterogeneous and irreducible sense of meaningful fabrication—*labor as potentiality: potentiality as activity*" (p. 212). Work, he adds, in contrast to labour, "refuses to be defined as 'not-capital,'" and in that way escapes the binary formulation that is endemic to "negative dialectics" (p. 213) and pervasive across the social science literature. He conceives of this work as a "noncapitalist form of value production" (p. 220), which leads Gidwani back to Althusser and the logic of overdetermination. Though a structural formation, capitalism is nonetheless without a centre. Instead, it is an "aleatory [ran-

dom] outcome" (p. 229), an unpredictable process that mixes human and nonhuman forces. This process, he says, reveals spaces or openings into which "work," as he defines it, as well as a politics of work, can thrive and function.

The argument for such a politics is compelling in places, even inspiring, but overall it lacks the necessary depth that only a critical examination of everyday life can provide. Gidwani comes close in Chapter 5 with Ajibhai, a lower caste Thakur, married with three children, who embodies the politics Gidwani advocates, along with the Patels and other idle men described in Chapter 4. The elites of the village see him as lazy, a man that prefers drinking to work. In response, Ajibhai tells Gidwani, "I am not anybody's servant. I work when I want to and rest when I want to" (p. 208). Gidwani, in turn, remarks that Ajibhai "arranges to use his labor and his activities of consumption in time and space at *his* pleasure." However, we never really get a sense of what Ajibhai does, the rhythms of his life, how he interacts with others, notably his wife and children, or the rudimentary tasks they undertake. It seems a stretch to argue that Ajibhai "is producing a crisis in one molecular point through which capital as value must pass," or that his actions represent a "counterforce" or form of "resistance" (p. 209).

Overall, this is an important book, the product of serious fieldwork and research. In the end, Gidwani is most effective when he focuses on the constant change that is endemic to capitalism and the ways in which large groups like the Patels retain and expand power and control amidst shifting social, political, and economic tides. How individuals like Ajibhai or others much poorer than him effectively resist these tides or benefit from them is less clear. If Gidwani is vague about how and where already disadvantaged individuals and groups transcend the limits imposed by capitalism from above through actions below, he nevertheless provides a necessary theoretical foundation upon which to pursue that very question. In this regard, present and future generations of scholars are indebted to him.

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