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On Minor Peregrination: The Aesthetics of Dissensus and Movement

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Abstract. This paper is an attempt to examine critical ways of displacing the meaning of journey – as minor rhythms and motions of everyday life. The everyday and its cyclical nature embedded in a productive life within the capitalist social regime is seen as an unexotic site of quotidian struggle. It warrants our attention only when the body asserts its presence at the site of rebellion or resistance. This is frequently reported as an exception to the given norm. The concrete reality of our given material conditions is always fermenting and churning towards the “not yet”. Patterns of the everyday are seen as an extraordinary event or rupture only when the body rebels. My contention is that this journey of the body-politic is not embedded in a certain moment of its arrival or departure, from point A to B, but marked by dynamic, shifting vectors that are capable of a “leap”. In, against and beyond the spectre of capital, this paper will try to outline and discuss these minor perforations in time through the Shaheen Bagh protests and the migrant exodus during the pandemic in India.

Keywords: Migration, Exilic aesthetics, Protest, Body politic, Spatio-temporality.

The first commandment for every good explorer is that an expedition has two points: the point of departure and the point of arrival. If your intention is to make the second theoretical point coincide with the actual point of arrival, don't think about the means – because the journey is a virtual space that finishes when it finishes, and there are as many means as there are different ways of “finishing.” That is to say, the means are endless. (Che Guevera [2003]: 49)

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1986) discussion on the works of Kafka, makes an entry through a concept called minor literature. For them, the interpreter is typically an agent of the dominant social code and thus the interpretation reproduces the material it considers as instances of the code. Thus, in order to allow for experimentations

in interpretation, they call for a deterritorialization of a major language – stammering, stuttering or becoming a stranger in one’s own tongue, and hating all the languages of the masters, thus undermining the structures of power at the centre. This paper takes this Deleuzian concept of the ‘minor’ as a task of reinterpretation of the notion of journey. More so now than ever, this ‘task’ becomes necessary as the global pandemic has thrown into sharp relief the contours of economic and political crises, and the ways in which its problem solving postures only remained acts of deferment. Up until, the world with all its productive rhythms came to a screeching halt, albeit momentarily. As the global capitalist regime fumbled towards more and more barbaric forms of accumulation, it was the stammerings and stutterings of resistance and revolt by the masses everywhere, that once again showed some hope in these bleak times. This paper will attempt to decentre/destabilize the commonly held assumptions of the concept of journey in two parts. The first part will shed a light on the displacement and disarticulation of everyday rhythms and movements of women and children during the protracted resistance at the site of Shaheen Bagh. A brief critical analysis will be attempted of the politics of the protest in its visual register. In the second part, I will try and unpack the ‘exilic’ or ‘migrant’ aesthetics, its limits and possibilities, and the crisis of representation that accompanies its unfolding. With a brief interlude in this direction, the purpose of this section will be to explore migration as a generalised condition and how the pandemic has forced us to rethink the valence of rhythm and movement. Which is to say, map the vectors which do not necessarily have a start or finish point but are journeys all the same. The figure of the migrant is unpacked as a key witness to the material conditions of this epoch and the bearer of its refusal.

1. SHAHEEN BAGH: MINOR FIGURES OF THE POLITY

The anti-CAA/NRC (Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens) protests took

over the subcontinent in 2019, changing the imagination of resistance in the subcontinent.¹ The Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB) sought to provide an amendment in the Indian citizenship act wherein illegal migrants (Hindu, Sikh, Christian, Jain and Parsis) who entered India before 2014 and suffered religious persecution in the neighbouring countries, would be accepted as Indian citizens. The main point of contention in these protests was the exclusion of Muslims and other religious/ethnic communities. The dissent of the bill/act was largely articulated as a discriminatory measure by the state which could leave these communities ‘stateless’ or devoid of their rights as citizens. On the surface, the protests took the shape of resisting against the further persecution of a minority community (exclusion of Muslims, exiled Tibetans, Rohingya refugees) through the language of the state, vested in the narrow juridical vision of acts and amendments that keeps defining and dissolving the parameters of the constitution of its subjects for governance.

One of the protest sites in New Delhi, Shaheen Bagh (hereafter SB), became a global symbol of dissent, being led by women of the area, who staged an indefinite sit-in against the act. Images of *burqa*-clad women, old and young, sitting defiantly against the latest diktat of the state, gained immense popularity. (Fig. 1) However, what I want to focus on is not so much the outward appearance and bravura of the protestors, but the subtle and minor displacements, hiccups and stammers that affected the body politic, in terms of everyday rhythms. A crucial element of these protests was also its location (a major highway that served as a connection between peripheral industrial sites in the city and its extended circuits

¹ See <https://citynotesinquiry.wordpress.com/2020/01/06/caa-nrc-rebellion-against-and-beyond-the-duality-of-citizen-and-infiltrator/>. The observations and critique of the Shaheen Bagh protests in particular and the Anti-CAA/NRC struggle, in general, are documented in more detail here. City Notes Inquiry is a documentation of the political inquiries in which I am a co-researcher. The writings here reflect the open-ended interviews, discussions, writing pamphlets collectively at the site of the protests.

which served as a passage into the capital's centre of distribution and exchange). By blocking this highway, the protest site concurrently turned an enclosure – vested with the privatized interest of the state – into a 'common' site for its very dissent and disarticulation. Women, whose labour usually remains unpaid and invisible in the reproductive sphere of 'home and hearth', moved out to assert their double resistance – against their time which is bound by care-work at 'home' and another that seeks its representation/measure in the (public) social sphere. The number of hours that the women spent sitting at the protest site was an uncommon phenomenon from the regulated hours of child-rearing, jobs and house-hold chores. Usually these hours are self-regulated as care-work on which other members of the family depend. Many young women were accompanied by infants and toddlers on the site. This also drew heavy criticism from certain factions and the Supreme court took *suo motu* cognisance on the matter to stop involvement of children and infants in demonstrations. However, the women spoke out against this injunction knowing fully well the stakes that were in operation – not just a collective resistance against CAA/NRC but an emancipatory force that lay in the maturing of time on their own terms.

Another spatio-temporal site of disambiguation during the protests were those occupied by children. As future workers, whose time is controlled by the ideological state apparatuses of school, family and play-time; they turned the protest site into an active sphere of engagement. (Fig. 2). As Adorno pointed out:

In his purposeless activity the child, by a subterfuge, sides with use-value against exchange value. Just because he deprives the things with which he plays of their mediated usefulness, he seeks to rescue in them what is benign towards men and not what subserves the exchange relation that equally deforms men and things. (Adorno [2005]: 147)

Barricades and rubble from the highway at the protest side, in the daytime, were converted in resourceful ways to play hide and seek, or turned into a makeshift seesaw or other ways which

change the pre-existing meaning of the original material. (Fig. 3) The children were quick to mimic slogans and sing along songs of resistance – words far removed from their daily lives – but a sense of curiosity for their meanings deepened their interaction with the body as the site for politics. Time and space – and within it – rhythm and movement, are not just disruptions from the normal way of life; but point towards the incommensurability of qualitative rhythms. Life, as organised under the capitalist regime, would see this as a hindrance to the smooth functioning of clock-time or homogenous empty time as Walter Benjamin (1986) called it. It is homogenous because each moment, past, present or future is indistinguishable in its own right, it is only a tool in which our activities occur, or our labour-power is expended as productive subjects. Walter Benjamin's (1986) critique of the linear progress of history is situated against the paradigm of a such positivist understanding. The concept of the history of the human race is based on a certain idea of homogenous and empty time, where time is merely seen as a crucible in which human activities take place. Which is to say, a time in which labour-power is expended under capital's command. Against a dominant and unconscious view of this time, he proposes the concept of the "here-and-now" (*Jetztzeit*), which is charged with our past and where the objective of history is fulfilled. The time of resistance and rebellion thus takes place in the here-and-now. Here, what matters is not gaining time, but losing it in such a way that the maturity or intensification of the same allows for an active remembrance and a leap in the imagination towards possible futures, different from the present one. During protracted periods of protests or resistance, it is this 'time' as organised under the universal principle of exchange that is in crisis. It does not add up to surplus-value. It is a suspension that must be restored by all means. However, I contend, that it is precisely this time under 'suspension' that is at its most intense. Against such a quantitative suspension that must be restored to fulfil one's journey as a productive subject, it is the qualitative intensification of

time (in and against capitalist clock-time) that is imbued with creating conditions for the possibility of collectivization and commoning.

If one were to examine the kind of visual and textual imagery that were produced during these protests mostly in the form of graffiti and installations, one could begin to analyse both its limitation and potential. Towards the initial phase of the SB sit-in protest, numerous texts came up on the walls of the corrugated metal sheets that covered an area at length along the highway for some construction purpose. They were devoid of any so-called artistic 'style' or 'signature', mostly done in black or white spray paint, bearing only the anonymity and the will to signify the absent collective of a 'we' rather than an 'I'. Some of them were even able to discern the impersonal state power and how it further segregates the coming together of a collective subject. (Fig. 4 & 5) Solidarity statements that came up on the wall with those suffering in Kashmir, Gaza or Palestine hinted towards the recognition of a relative surplus population that is exploited and reproduced by the capitalist regime. Those at the protest site, were initially quick to respond against the diktats of the state as productive subjects, whose labour and labour-power is under capital's command, itself a coercive social relation. (Fig. 6) However, this active tendency to organize themselves as something much larger only remained at an incipient level. Graffiti and installations that came up during the later stage of the protest (installations of India Gate and physical map of India) were mostly seen as addressing constitutionally minded 'citizens' or 'people', and as described earlier, remained caught up within the force field of identity and representation. (Fig. 7) In this sense, when the initial potential of figuring out its position in the capitalist relations of production waned, it found its fix in the sphere of distribution (in terms of equal rights or fair wages) which also meant this 'fix' laid more stress on reform than revolution.

Despite the limits of the protest (due to its internal contradictions), the counter-power which asserted itself pointed toward the constant/dynamic act of becoming a 'we' and of paving the way

forward.

2. THE FIGURE OF THE MIGRANT: ACCELERATION AGAINST ABSTRACTION

The concept of journey, historically (migration under socio-political conditions) and mythically (spiritual journey of life) has given rise to certain figures/subjects that have been contemplated in theological, philosophical, and sociological studies, as two separate realms. This section is concerned with the figure of the migrant, as historically determined, and the possibility of its emergence as counter-power. The migrant, the refugee, the nomad, the vagabond – emerge as figures where their spatio-temporal location, previously fixed and a marker of several identities, is upended. Which is to say, that the quest remains for all that has been lost and displaced, i.e. various markers of identities, to be given back through a political process. In juridical terms, through the conventions of human rights, the state once again, in its language of the law, confers (with varied conditions) the title of the citizen to the displaced subject. The entire journey of the migrant/the refugee, which begins with the productive subject (the worker-citizen) having lost its place in the social regime of capitalism, often by force and violence, is seen as means to an end, the end being slightly better conditions of survival under the same social regime. What gets displaced in the process is nothing more than the identity markers (refugee/immigrant to a citizen-subject) that keep her bound under capitalist relations. However, this journey needs to be seen as more than something that would ensure their chances of survival than what was previously possible (as right to life). Which is to say, but as a movement that brings into sharp relief the given social relations that are constituted by and are constitutive of the identity that a subject bears under the juridical social contract. This unfortunate but necessary chance of transforming the meaning of journey – or in its Latin origin as *peregrinor* which means to 'wander', 'sojourn' or 'migrate' – was provided by the ongoing pandemic. Under heightened

surveillance, not just by the state but in our individual interactions, this term shifted and displaced the meaning of wandering without a purpose, travelling for work or leisure or sojourning for rest. What remained unchanged was the movement of migration. A migrant is a figure who lacks both a static place and some or the other form of social membership and is constantly on the move to acquire both. It highlighted the fact that migration is not an exception to our lives but a generalised condition under capitalism. Figures 8 & 9 show two eerily similar photographs of migration. Figure 8 is from the permanent displacement of Palestinian Arabs in 1948, historically remembered as *Nakba* (catastrophe, disaster, cataclysm), through a violent and forceful annexation of their land by Israel. Figure 9 shows the exodus that happened in India during the pandemic, when thousands of migrant workers fled from their urban centres of work back to their domicile states. The former is seen as a direct form of state repression while the latter as an inevitable condition of unforeseeable circumstances. Conversely, both these scenes of migration (and many others in everyday life that are invisible) are a result of extended primitive accumulation. Marx describes the original/primitive accumulation in capital's long history thus:

In the history of primitive accumulation, all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capital class in course of formation; but, above all, those moments when great masses of men are suddenly and forcibly torn from their means of subsistence, and hurled as free and "unattached" proletarians on the labour-market. The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process. The history of this expropriation, in different countries, assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different periods. (Marx [1867]: 876)

There is no longer a need to extract profit through the old ways of forced labour but precisely based on this illusory freedom it offers the wage worker through the modern and effective method of commodification, that primitive accu-

mulation proceeds in a dynamic fashion. In a classical example of primitive accumulation that Marx (1867) situates in 15th century England, through forceful expulsion – turning common land into enclosures and then onward through slavery, colonialism and war – this capitalist growth continues. In the late stages of advanced capitalism or neoliberal capitalism, enclosures or privatisation of land continues under various pretexts. Urban centres are run precisely by this relative surplus population who, more often than not, works for a minimum wage. The mass exodus of migrants from these centres exposed them for what they are – landscapes of dead labour. Media portrayal of this exodus was shown as an exception to the norm. Well-oiled machines of capitalist accumulation – the cities – experienced the first signs of visible crisis. Serpentine lines of daily wage workers made their way hundreds of kilometres on foot towards their 'home' states. The portrayals varied from empathy, pity to rage; all directed against the state which had failed in its duty towards its hard-working citizen subjects. They were seen as victims of the state's apathy, as heroic workers who wanted to be with their families and even ready to embrace death at this chance. At the same time, millions of others, engaged in knowledge production, gig economy, Information Technology, were faced with job loss, decreased wages or increased workload. These workers too, migrated in large numbers, pushing the political economy of rent into crisis. But this representation of migration was unsuitable in gaining TRPs (Television Rating Points) or political mileage, as opposed to the helpless figure of a worker on minimum wage cycling or walking barefoot with all his meagre belongings. The media spectacle created through the overload of images of workers exiting on foot highlighted only what was an everyday occurrence and the condition of daily wage labourers (labour *chowks* in towns and cities). This was now visible due to their colossal outpouring on the city-roads during a strict regulation against any movement. The assertion of their presence, considered a defiant move under state enforced lockdown, further valorised the figure of the hard-working migrant.

Against this valorisation – which further reproduces the figure of the migrant worker – there is a need to see this exodus as the refusal of labour-power to be labour-power. It is the rejection of the proletarian context of living as it exists.

Thomas Nail (2015) ascribes a new movement to this figure of the migrant – a “pedetic force” as opposed to a centrifugal force. His use of the term comes from the 19th century botanist Robert Brown’s experimentation on particle fluctuation. Termed the Brownian motion or Brownian movement in which the particles are prone to random motion when suspended in a particular state of matter (gas or liquid). For Nail, the social forces, that of expansion and expulsion that result in migration also create counterforces of “oscillation, waves and pressure”. He terms social pedesis as the “irregular movement of a collective body: a social turbulence”. This is the counter-power or migrant’s power that is capable of qualitative changes in the social environment that they enter (collectivization of land, unionization are some of the examples he gives). (Nail [2015]: 125). This random, chance-like movement or leap in a migrant’s life is tied to ever new places of work where they are forced to go. To unhinge themselves again and again and increasing the number of encounters they will have. Although these motions are tied up in the given social relations as they are, the “pedetic force” they will exert in their new circumstances has the power to create frictions, resistance and rebellion that many times over.

It is then, precisely the counter-power of the body politic that needs further analysis.

CONCLUSION

I am, precisely because I am able to disregard the fact that I am an isolated individual.

(Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt [2016]: 9)

The biblical figure of the wandering Jew was presented as a legend in which a mythical, immortal man is cursed to walk the Earth as a form of punishment. Here, wandering aimlessly, without

a purpose, this unproductive activity is mythologised as a terrifying spectre. The accursed man cannot end this horrifying journey since even death escapes him. Many religious texts and faiths see the idea of pilgrimage, taking long journeys on foot, as a way to wash away their mortal sins in the worldly realm so that the soul undergoes a purification for the heavenly abode. Many faiths emphasise that they are pilgrims in a profane realm that is not the final object of their longing, but if they keep their faith in God, the heavenly destination awaits. Just as Adorno emphasised that theological concepts must undergo a migration into the profane, similarly we have to search anew for possibilities in the here and now.

This paper was an attempt to imbue the concept of journey with new, possible meanings, but also reconfigure and resist the structures of abstraction of minor figures – the woman, the child, the migrant. A post-pandemic world has only reiterated the limit and crisis of their representation. This limit is confronted by us when the exilic imagination reproduces the figure of the migrant as a ‘victim’ or a ‘hero’; the women as only ‘fearless’ and ‘brave’. Instead of dislodging the universal tendencies of these figures, they are pulled back with a certain ‘moralising’ force to a position of fixity; either within the constitutional framework of the nation-state or the juridical one of emancipation and justice. In both cases, maintaining and thus deepening the logic of capitalist relations. Nonetheless, it is resistance in all its becoming, that keeps active the tensions, the intensified rhythms, motions and vectors of the body-politic; refusing at each moment, its previously given condition.

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