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Special issue review of C. Jeffrey's *Timepass: youth, class the politics of waiting in India*.

Hang about: young peoples' frustrations at the state of progress

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Most of my research is conducted in Mexico, a country burdened with the *mañana* stereotype. But compared to the country I first knew as a young researcher, it is claimed that contemporary Mexico runs according to 'NAFTA time'. Like Mexico, the image that India likes to project of itself is a country with 'new' industries and middle classes, and a sense of productivity, mobility and speed. An advertisement I saw in Mumbai for the Development Credit Bank proclaimed "I want to increase the capacity of my BPO, I want an international holiday, I want it now". The DCB website entices loan applicants with promises that credit will help to "fulfil your dreams", get a "new computer" and light up the face of your daughter as she leaves to study in London. 'Dreams', the word is used three times in six lines, do not need to be put "on hold for ages" but can "come true today". As Aravind Adiga explores in *The White Tiger*, however, access to this Anglophonic consumerist world is not openly available. The eponymous White Tiger is a Dalit and seeks out his personal social change through an array of 'fast practices' and darker means.

There has been considerable attention afforded in the last decade to those apparently left out of the neoliberal 'dream', for whom ascension to the status of 'new middle class' is not possible or intended, who inhabit worlds of 'slums', informality and slow time. Craig Jeffrey's *Timepass* tackles the disjuncture between the image of the new economy and its reality from a slightly different perspective, focussing on the plight of an older middle class. The young people at the centre of *Timepass* are the children of medium-sized farmers of the Jat caste - a kind of Junkers peasantry - themselves under threat from a political economy of agriculture that no longer works to their favour. The parents' 'game plan' is to 'invest' in their children to enhance their 'capital' in Pierre Bourdieu's use of the term and in order to acquire a secure job. Viewed from the outside, this seems to be the wrong game, played at the wrong time and possibly in the wrong place. Yet, the game continues to be played, with more and more young people striving to get to university, being taught by faculty who approach classes as an 'occupational hazard', and chasing few jobs. As Craig outlines in an excellent chapter on the political economy of Uttar Pradesh and the rise of a rural middle class from the 1950s, the 'social fields' in which their parents excelled are not as predisposed to the children. Moreover, the present generation is unlikely to join India's 'new middle class': they are not studying to become IT professionals or grab MBAs, their grasp of English seems insufficient and their eye to future employment is trained on an unreliable access to the state, either in Meerut, Lucknow or Delhi. Indeed, reading *Timepass* one senses a class on the wane. The challenge is whether these young peoples' tactics are capable of reproducing their status as an old middle class.

Timepass offers a careful ethnography to examine the tensions inherent in the reproduction of class position; how amidst seeming material failure the strategy still makes sense to so many people. We do not discover why these young people or their parents have not switched to a more private sector oriented approach, why they have not sought out education in establishments better suited for the changing economy or simply moved elsewhere in India. They continue to have faith in education, spending years 'completing' numerous degrees from BA to PhD level, sometimes gaining qualifications in a range of disciplines. Yet, *Timepass* shows lives during and since education that consist of 'waiting' for these efforts to be converted in to achievement, for

the investment to pay-off.

'Timepass' is a plastic term to describe both unproductively passing the time as well as peoples' efforts to build social ties, gather skills and seek out opportunities while not working. In broad terms, timepass might be considered a fairly universal phenomenon and characteristic of being a student. Although my students seem a long step from those of Meerut, and boast of being 'busy', they seem to find ample time to fill the cafes on campus, probably had a 'gap year' before arrival and strategise to land unpaid internships during and after completion of studies in order to boost their CVs. To what extent therefore is timepass better disguised in certain contexts than others? Craig suggests at one point that timepass possesses a class and caste dimension, implying some familiarity with English for example (p97), although I am told it is used in a variety of situations across India. Is timepass a singular phenomenon or one that crosses space and class, and should we take care before attributing it to conditions of crisis or failure? Does the quality of timepass differ between neoliberalism's victims, the young people of Meerut, and its winners, the young people in my university? Timepass in Meerut of course is linked to the shape of education-labour relations internationally and perhaps also to how different notions of timepass exist in other contexts.

In thinking through the many ideas presented in *Timepass* as specific and generic I want to raise three points. The first, and the closest to my own research, is what people stigmatised as 'wasting time' actually do (see Herrera 2009). Timepass in Meerut is spent at a range of meeting spots from tea stalls (*addas*) to street corners. Craig represents these spaces as convivial, spaces where men "smoked, drank tea, fooled about, enacted mock fights, got into real fights and lounged around with their arms draped around each other's shoulders" (p94). We also learn that timepass at the *addas* took little heed of class or caste, and involved a degree of social imagination through, for example, honing of humour and use of "reverse speak" word play. It was a pity that these insights unfold over just a few albeit fascinating pages and are often described in direct relation to an observation of a person's career prospects. I wanted to know a little more about these everyday encounters, more on the topics that feature lightly if at all in the text, the conversations on cricket, on alcohol or drugs, on parents, religion, fashion, music, sex and girls.

Exposing the social encounters of timepass a little more might have allowed closer sight on the important role of gender to class reproduction. *Timepass* is a masculine text, in the sense that the informants are men but also through the treatment of how we appreciate the observation that gender norms are entrenched in timepass cultures (p35). If the social space of the *addas* hold some potential for cross class and caste relations, these seem nevertheless to be male spaces and to support particular forms of masculine identities. We do not learn how emotional or sexual relationships relate to timepass or whether young men's sense of frustration at their education and work prospects may deepen entrenched misogynistic attitudes. I was also struck by how the informants appeared to be hetero-normative. I can't imagine a similar study in Durban or Rio not dealing with gay identities or LGBTQ politics at some level. Timepass in Meerut therefore seems unlikely to challenge gender norms, thus leaving unaffected a 'structuring structure' as Bourdieu defined gender, one that is vital to the dispositions that reproduce class.

My second point is to reflect on how handling time is characteristic of social class and possibilities for agency, especially among the young. As *The Great Gatsby* reveals, time is a character of class; the 'slow time' of leisure is portrayed as uninterrupted by even the mildest intrusion of having to control the means of production. In this context, being bored becomes a virtue and not as sociologists would have it a sign of 'social malaise'. This might be a claim

levelled at 'street youth' in Mexico for whom boredom is often interleaved with conversations about sadness. Unless in drug induced torpor – a very different notion of timepass – young people on the streets will feign high levels of activity – places to go, people to see – in order to stave off boredom. It is unclear if *Timepass* informants are bored, or what this would mean to them. The equivalents might be the 'killing time' undertaken by young men in Senegal through the slow repetitious making of tea which serves as a means to construct reputations for trustworthiness and a social space to discuss disenchantment through rap lyrics. Similarly, Brad Weiss's wonderful study of barbershops in Tanzania reveals a milieu through which young men tackle the stillness of un(der)employment through cultural performances involving haircut styles and rap music. Tackling time in these different contexts, as with the accounts collected in *Timepass*, seems to involve enormous imagination and ingenuity but rarely is this effort transformative of class position.

The third point concerns how timepass relates to young people as political subjects. For Senegal, Ralph believes that "except occasionally for students, youth are not recognized as a group to which the government must be accountable. They are, instead, imagined as the origin of social unrest" (2008: 11). But what form might social unrest take in situations of timepass? Judging by its current Development Report the World Bank seems convinced that disenfranchised unemployed urban youth threaten security and development, though it is characteristically mute on the matter of class. Craig devotes two chapters to exploring how politics is "serious" and distinct from timepass, and detailing the motives and methods of charismatic "political animators" as well as their relationships with class and caste. Many seem to be genuinely concerned by the plight of fellow students, others come across as more self-interested. I found it odd to read that student leaders had weak links with political parties and collective protest was conducted "with a certain measure of irreverence and in a reasonably civilized, legal and restrained manner" (p129). As a Mexicanist, I was expecting the pages to yield details of burning cars, riot police and the equivalent of thugs known as *porras* meting violence against students. The *porras* are the other face of student politics, not 'animators' or 'social reformers', but groups of often middle class men embedded in public universities allied to a political party and increasingly involved in criminal activity. I wondered if the absence of 'violence entrepreneurs' on the Meerut campuses was a sign that student politics was deemed "unserious" by those with political power, its potential more likely therefore to affirm class position for participants than transform them.

Craig's optic is to consider the means rather more than the ends of Meerut student politics, and especially to critique the work of Patha Chatterjee and Arjun Appadurai. This literature has tended to represent subaltern politics, its actors and their actions, in very particular ways and provide rigid distinctions between for example civil and political society or the attributes of 'deep democracy'. *Timepass* suggests that subaltern politics is not easily bounded by illegality, violence and operation outside the sphere of political institutions, and the politics undertaken by middle classes is not immune from class factions and underhand practices. We can stretch these findings a little further, although not in particularly optimistic ways, by thinking how timepass and its interface with politics might have wider resonance with new forms of political organising and discourse. The shift covers the intergenerational period from middle peasant parent to timepass son.

Had today's Meerut students' parents gone to university they might have formed the "middle peasantry" identified by Eric Wolf in 1969 who were supposed to lead the revolt inspired by an urban intelligentsia. A half century later and Jat student sons might consider themselves to be that intelligentsia but they seem disinterested in revolt and devoid of ideology. As some studies

suggest this may be typical of contemporary ‘contentious politics’ that is more closely related to matters of consumption and identity than labour and ideology. Khosravi examines the ways in which ‘new middle’ and elite Tehrani youth, for example, engage in what the state calls “cultural crime” to resist their parents’ Revolution and the theocracy’s expectations of young peoples’ humility. Khosravi reveals how youth have built identities around the idea of *khariji* (Western) via the space of the mall, a rather narcissistic if nonetheless political identity that opposes being *bidard* (sell-outs, anti Islam) and *javad* (poor, local). Although many geographers are dismissive of consumption as what Bourdieu might consider a ‘field’, Iran may demonstrate how new middle classes with ‘surplus time’ are reproducing their class position in ways that may have some wider transformative potential. By contrast, *Timepass* affords us few clues that young peoples’ timepass is geared to take on the state through consumption – their resources do not allow – and nor are the looser class/caste distinctions at the addas equivalent to a radical identity politics and likely to be carried forward to later life. The point to middle class urban politics in Meerut is not to be a game-changer.

Mexico’s transformation to ‘NAFTA time’ is captured by Alejandro González Iñárritu’s film *Amores Perros*. Mexico is depicted as urban, frenetic, callous, violent, and for the young. Yet, by the end of *Amores*, most characters are either in the same position as at the film’s start, in a worse position or dead. As the character of Susana points out, “If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans”. That seems a useful coda to middle class strategic determinism under neoliberalism in India and beyond.

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