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book review

Out of Time

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Sarah Sharma

In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics

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Sarah Sharma's excellent book *In the Meantime* is a call for critics to become more 'temporally attuned'. (12) Her core claim is that social theorists have been more attentive to spatial power than temporal power and that space continues to be more theoretically valorised than time. (10) This hierarchy persists, Sharma claims, despite the work of a group of 'time geographers' and the currency of what she calls speed theory—the widespread assertion that modern life is getting faster and faster. As Sharma points out, the critical discourse of 'speedup' has a corollary in the

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commonsense view of modern life as accelerating. Indeed, she considers this general consensus about speed to be 'one of the most powerful conceptual commitments in popular discourses today' (16) and in need of critical consideration. She notes, for example, that scholarly theories of speedup are likely to reflect the experience of speed theorists themselves rather than reflecting the general condition of human life, even in postmodernity.

The popular and scholarly 'attachment to the explanatory power of speedup', she argues, generates 'a completely inadequate and limited view' of temporality. (15-16) This oversimplification is deeply troubling since it fails to recognise that the experience of time is multiple and its politics 'uneven'. (7) Accounts of speedup reinscribe particular patterns of privilege by failing to recognise that the experience of white-collar workers is not representative of all people and, as a consequence, they play a part in the construction of new forms of common sense that have the potential to further consolidate privilege and its effects: 'Too often the belief that we are living in a dangerously sped-up culture makes the demand for the labor of others [in, for example, the form of house cleaners, drivers and personal assistants] justifiable as a systemic need "in these fast-paced times" rather than the structurally excessive privilege that it is.' (19) Thus Sharma's insistence on the multiplicity of time is bound to her sense of the 'differential relation of power'. (155) The 'sharing of space,' she argues, 'does not guarantee the sharing of time'. (22)

Sharma draws on Doreen Massey's conception of power-geometry, an early 1990s feminist attempt to counter rising theories of the 'placelessness' of (post)modern life by pointing out that experiences of space were bound up with social differences like class, gender, race and sexuality. (9) Sharma applies a similar critical logic to abstract accounts of a new global temporality to identify the 'specific experience[s] of time' associated with different groups of people. Her resulting 'power-chronography' focuses on time as a lived experience that is 'always political', always 'socially differentiated' and often measured in chronometers other than the clock. (14-15)

Sharma argues that numerous analyses of time still rely on subtly spatialised ideas of a political *sphere* that can be apprehended abstractly; attending to time in a non-spatial way requires immersion rather than distance. (15) For Sharma, attending to *lived* time is not the same thing as thinking about abstract 'temporality'

(which she sees as a descendant of Marxist theories of alienation). Time (the unit necessary for measuring speed) is not temporality and the uneven temporalities of lived time are entangled with 'labor arrangements, cultural practices and technological environments' in ways that the theorists of speed have yet to engage. (9) Thus, despite the force of its theoretical arguments and the exemplary clarity with which they are laid out, Sharma's book is not an abstract philosophical rumination but rather a series of case studies based on ethnographic research and participant observation.

Chapter 1 is a study of international business travellers. In Sharma's framework, these hardworking, tired, often jet-lagged servants of global capital are at once privileged and captured. This chapter elaborates a concept of 'temporal architecture'—that is, the facilities, infrastructure, services and labour of others that undergirds, smooths and makes possible, often invisibly, the fast-paced world of the traveller. The invisibility of this architecture is one reason the fast pace of business travel can be misunderstood (by speed theorists and business people alike) as *the* modern temporal order. The travellers Sharma interviewed believe in, espouse and live out the temporality of speedup, typically proclaiming it as an inevitable consequence of technological modernity. This view ignores the labour of many others—drivers, cleaners, masseurs, maids and hotel receptionists—all of whose lived temporalities are organised to serve the elite servants of global capital 24/7.

This chapter takes the international airport as its exemplary space. While in classic theories of postmodern time-space, the airport often features as a soulless hub enabling the flows of capital, Sharma's analysis emphasises the concrete temporalities of its workers: the immigration officials, retailers, cleaners, bartenders and other types of people who pass through its doors for purposes other than business of leisure travel. Sharma is not unsympathetic towards the tired and hardworking bodies of frequent flyers, but she is adamant that everyone's tiredness is not the same.

The lived time of the business-class traveller is very different from that of the immigrant trying to pass through customs. Nor does any cushioning temporal architecture exist to ameliorate the 'out-of-timeness' of those who labour to support the international travellers: 'While capital develops at the expense of bodies, it makes clear which bodies will be taken care of.' (51) Her portrait of institutions that

simultaneously 'drain life' and 'provide extra energy' ends by noting the devastating truth that the 'technologies of time maintenance' that support the frequent business traveller—such as the labour of the remote assistant, the office cleaners or the front desk staff—'reinforce the idea that subjects of value [such as the frequent business traveller] cannot be easily replaced, but the secondary labor they depend on can'. (51)

Chapter 2 provides a close-up look at temporal interdependence from the other side of the biopolitical fence. It considers the lived time of three Toronto taxi drivers. Like the corporate travellers they ferry to and from airports, the taxi drivers live 'out of time' and space and 'must create their own strategies of survival in order to stay in time'. (56) But, unlike the situation of the corporate traveller, no market forces converge to add value to their time: 'As the expendable bodies of a labor force that can easily be replenished, there is no need for the structures of capital to endow the taxi driver's time with importance.' (56)

Biopolitics, argues Sharma, offers a more complex understanding of this disparity than is provided by speed theory's categories of fast and slow classes. The taxi drivers' time is tied to that of busy white-collar workers but isn't experienced analogously. (57) Drivers have to take on board the speed-related stress of others—their anxieties around lateness, busyness, and so on—such that their bodies experience echoes of the stresses caused by the sped-up world of others: 'It is the driver whose heart rate accelerates and adrenalin increases due to the diminishing time the passenger has left to catch a flight.' (64) The drivers' lived temporality involves 'synchronizing to the time of others', (79) which encompasses not only knock-on effects of speed but also periods of slowness, especially waiting for others. While many of the taxi drivers' working conditions are similar to those of the frequent flyers insofar as they are often tired, away from home and disconnected from the temporalities of their neighbours and families, there is no corresponding care or temporal infrastructure in place to support them. Whatever points of similarity exist between corporate travellers and the taxi drivers they rely on, this chapter makes clear Sharma's overarching insistence on disrupting the tendency to generalise about the temporality of modern human life and its embodied effects: 'Part of capital's transformative effect is maintaining a fiction of generalized effects.' (70–1)

Chapter 3 moves away from those on the 'margins of temporal order' (the drivers) and those who occupy 'privileged architectures of time' (the business travellers) to focus on the 'millions and millions of industrious desk workers toiling at the workstations of contemporary capitalism's nine-to-five days'. (82) This clock-on, clock-off experience of time is widely understood as the 'most normal time, the most structured of temporalities' but, as Sharma points out, this temporal architecture is more properly a kind of time cluster since: 'Along with the nine-to-five, one expects to find weekends, retirement, TGIF, happy hour, the daily commute, and the two-week holiday.' (83)

Under scrutiny in this chapter are the office workers and three mobile yoga instructors who offer workplace yoga sessions to them. Again, Sharma positions her analysis as a break from recent Marxist-inspired analyses of new flexible labour practices, arguing that the critical focus on mobility, migration and telecommuting that underwrites these otherwise subtle studies is still spatially oriented and tends to ignore what is still 'one of the most normalizing temporalities within global capital': sedentariness. (94) The sedentary life of the worker, argues Sharma, 'is a form of stillness not chosen but actually required by global capita.' As such, it requires bodily training and ongoing bodily 'recalibration'.

Enter the workplace yoga instructor. Yoga in the office keeps bodies fit for the ever-more productive labour required by global capital, but that is only half the story. Corporate yoga, Sharma points out, mobilises the discourse of speed in two different directions: to employers, corporate yoga is sold as a technique for making workers more productive while to employees, yoga is framed as an escape from the rigours of the workplace. Sharma is clear whose side she is on: yoga in the office context 'doesn't oppose as much as it ameliorates'. (91)

Here, Sharma is at her most scathing. She is sceptical of some corporate yoga instructors' implicit claim to be outside corporate structures, noting that not only are they dependent on these structures for their own livelihood but, consciously or not, they enable others to persist within them. Any 'revulsion' at corporate life expressed by those instructors she interviews is not, she insists, the same thing as 'resistance' to it. (91) Indeed, she sees the corporate yoga instructor as 'a roving infrastructural technician of time maintenance' (84) whose efforts are part of the contemporary forms of 'time discipline' (96) now needed in a work-world in which

the efficiency impulses of classic office life, which compress and maximise time in the service of efficiency, appear to have reached their limit in squeezing ever-more productivity out of workers' time. Now, the sedentary desk-worker's productivity needs to be enhanced by regulated techniques of movement including walk-stations, standing desks, corporate exercise programs and office yoga. Even these (to Sharma) dubiously liberatory practices are an 'uneven privilege' available to white-collar workers but not to manual workers, including the labourers who 'clean, secure, and serve sedentary spaces'. (102)

It is hard to disagree with the basic tenets of this argument, but some academic listeners have obviously found it unpalatable, as Sharma indicates by describing objections raised to her by some (presumably yoga-approving) colleagues. For me, the argument that such bodily technologies are part of the apparatus that supports an alienating system by helping people to survive within it is neither wrong nor earth-shattering. It points usefully to the different meanings and effects of yoga (and other body techniques) in different institutional and ideological settings, but without giving us many clues about just what (if any) transformative work might nonetheless occur in those moments of break or rupture. If Sharma's ethnographic method had also extended to those who practise yoga at work rather than focusing on the teachers, we might have been able to gain more insight into just what potentially transformative thoughts, ideas, decisions or actions it might in some instances catalyse. Perhaps not everybody simply hurries back to their desk unchanged, week after week. But her interest is in systems of power rather than individual moments of rupture, so we are left with the rather bleaker picture.

The final chapter focuses on slow spaces as putative spatial solutions to cultural anxieties around time, (22) based as they are on the logic of getting away from it all. Her case study exemplars of slow space are two stores on Vancouver Island; the Caretta Shiodome, a slow living skyscraper in Tokyo; and the slow food movement. As she argued at the outset, Sharma sees the politics of slow as tied to space. This connection is literalised in the case of the slow food movement, which she characterises as a series of 'protected spaces' (123) for mostly middle-class people to withdraw into. As expected, Sharma notes how such spaces are available only to privileged people and made possible only by the invisible labour of those who keep such places running. Moreover, she argues, the slow food movement 'fetishises'

groups of others, such as farmworkers involved in food production, 'without a concern for how they actually negotiate their time'. (125) Rather than focusing on slow versus fast food, Sharma argues that we should concentrate our attention on 'exploitative labor arrangements required for both food experiences'. (126) The slow food movement privileges some forms of time politics over others as if the value of different temporalities was innate. (127) But, as Sharma points out, while 'the still citizen is a threatening figure for capital', (132) slowness and immobility are not simply the antithesis of a capitalist culture of speed. Slowness is not outside anything but can work to both pro-capital and anti-capital ends.

While there are elements of familiarity to the conclusions drawn in this book (the slow movement is middle-class and only ambiguously resistive; modern therapeutic body techniques operate, in part, to keep us docile), Sharma's insistence on the multiplicity of lived temporalities in the order of global capitalism is valuable, not least in its parallel insistence on the multiplicity of methodologies (including ethnography) needed to apprehend our different experiences of time. One of the book's many achievements is to paint detailed portraits of lived time while simultaneously effecting a systematic, clear articulation of theoretical arguments. For both reasons, this book is an impressive contribution to the cultural analysis of time.

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