

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Jamie Cross, *Dream Zones: Anticipating Capitalism and Development in India*, London: Pluto Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780745333724 (paper); ISBN: 9780745333731 (cloth)

This book humanizes an emblem of capitalism's inhumanity in the critical imagination—Special Economic Zones, those islands within state territory where tax regulations, labour rights, and laws are minimized if not extinguished to maximize exploitation and profit. In a significant contribution, Jamie Cross's book *Dream Zones* disabuses the reader of any notion of zones functioning as friction-free islands unto themselves seamlessly generating profit. Rather, he vividly captures the dreams and desires, the friction and folly that fuels work, failure, profit, and loss in the zones and makes these viscerally meaningful and “generative social and cultural spaces” for a variety of people (p.188). Cross usefully shows that these zones cannot be adequately understood as owing their entire existence to the cold calculation and “external” logics of the uneven development of capital. Instead, he demonstrates that zones also materialize because diverse local dreams and desires invest in their existence. Sentiments and sinews, feelings and failures tie social life within the zone to social lives, hierarchies, and histories well beyond its walls. Since people anticipate the future in diverse ways, attending to aspirations and sentiments produced at the intersections of caste, gender, and class relations in rural and provincial Andhra Pradesh in India, Cross invites us into a healthy scepticism about the bracing terms of anti-SEZ activism.

Cross's book allows us to consider who attaches their desires to spaces of apparent cold calculation and profit-making and why, and to imagine what it feels like to invest one's dreams in them. We explore diverse anticipatory modes that collude and collide with one another to animate these spaces of capital as spaces of hope. For example, we meet the regional politicians who project wildly unsubstantiated statistics of employment and profit potential of a proposed

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SEZ in the hope of attracting capital investment. Situating new zonal cultures that aim to protect capital from state regulations within a longer history of India's first-generation SEZs that protected state-owned industry from the market, Cross shows that aspirations for regional autonomy also buttress the will to champion zonal potential. Further into the book, we glimpse the dreams that attach to land acquisition declarations when we meet high-caste, rich landowners and middle-caste, relatively well-heeled men who sell their land to make the most of the politics of compensation and real estate speculation, while forcing smaller landowners to follow suit at relatively inopportune moments. In the prominent World Diamond factory within the zone, we meet the factory manager George, who forges fool-proof paper plans for exceeding production targets. Even though the plans to exceed production targets fail to come to fruition, George's hard work and creativity still pays off for the company, as his paper dreams are sold in the form of consultancy services to other factories within the corporation's network.

Significantly, the promise of employment, education, and empowerment is a crucial and false promise circulated among those from whom land needs to be acquired to build the zone. Dreams of living and working away from caste-segregated villages animate the hopes that displaced lower-caste villagers attach to the coming SEZ. We meet precarious male factory workers who embrace the possibility of escaping futures of debt and suicide—the small-holder agrarian futures made unviable in Andhra Pradesh today. In the SEZ, men flirt with female workers who occupy their deepest fantasies and fears. Young men imagine what accoutrements their dispensable income might buy to communicate their marriage eligibility, despite acute anxieties about the inadequacy of their income to support a household. Through SEZ employment, young men pursue parental aspirations and familial responsibilities even if they are not in the ideal permanent, salaried government job. Yet, we also encounter Raju's recognition

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that his two unschooled brothers earn more from fishing than he does with an education working a precarious job at a factory in a SEZ, where “you are dreaming without hope” (p.145).

Finally, we encounter the kinds of metropolitan activists who dream of greater justice in their focus on anti-SEZ legislation in contrast to the regional SEZ politics focused on getting the compensation and land price right. Showing us the kinds of frictions, appropriations, and simplifications that attend the encounter between metropolitan and regional activists, Cross reminds us that anti-SEZ politics is not homogenous, that we learn a great deal more about SEZs if we wean ourselves away from questions centred on their success and failure, and complicate a vision of them as spaces of outright domination or unmitigated resistance. Cross wants us to appreciate that attending to the minutiae of everyday hopes and “diverse genealogies” (p.136) that inform the ways in which people navigate the present and look to the future has the potential to enrich our understanding of what counts as politics.

This attention to the diverse dreams that inform people’s self-fashioned consent to exploitative work makes for a compelling argument that refuses too simple representations of freedom, resistance, and domination. As apparent from Cross’s invocation of Arjun Appadurai, at heart this is an argument about researchers recognizing and nurturing the “diverse genealogies” that inform human capacity to aspire in utterly constrained circumstances (p.91). In fact, as Cross notes, drawing on Pun Ngai’s research on China, “the question is not whether workers can realize their hopes or aspirations through waged labour but rather how capitalism incites people to dream and desire in ways that engender their continued commitment to the relationships of reproduction” (p.135). Interestingly, the workers in the SEZ factories that Cross follows might not necessarily agree with this either/or formulation of things given their experience of the SEZ as a site of dreams, but one where they are “dreaming without hope”.

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Thus, at times, it seems that Cross is far more eager to portray the dreams realized and dreams revitalized in the face of failures than he is in making sense of the dead-ends of failed dreams.

For example, he argues that “people consent to low-waged, exploitative work in order to pursue material desires and self-fashioning” (p.151). And, self-fashioning has significantly to do with escaping the caste-segregated village and a politics of consumption in his argument. But can we really argue, as Cross does, that caste histories are transformed even when precarious jobs fail to actually secure dreams of economic stability just because Dalit young men welcome a life beyond caste segregation (p.135)? After all, Cross also notes the profound resentment of upper-castes for being placed adjacent and across from lower-caste families in the resettlement colony (p.80). How generative are spaces allied with the SEZ if the resettlement colony reorganized caste space but can do little to mitigate caste prejudice? Indeed, in other parts of India such mixed-caste neighbourhoods which place the class mobility of caste subordinates on display have featured in narratives mobilizing caste and genocidal violence. Surely we might consider such a possibility whilst acknowledging the felt liberation experienced by young Dalit men celebrating recent experiences of inter-caste commensality.

While Cross makes a necessary intervention by studying sentiment as an animating force of exploitation within spaces of industrial capitalism, he might have deepened the analysis of a political economy of anticipation, dreams, and sentiments, instead of the overwhelming focus on the diversity of dreams. Ultimately, I view this as a single-minded will to recognize capitalism as endlessly capable of regenerating desires and dreams. This drives a theoretical and political commitment most clearly stated on the very last page when he says, “the challenge for critical social science is not that people cease to believe in the ideas and promises” of modernity but rather that “people continue to believe in or have faith in these dreams, even when their fulfilment is perpetually deferred, and when their power, claims, and effects are no longer

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entirely convincing” (p.192). Importantly, we are not in each case taken towards such a conclusion.

For example, he offers this conclusion even though Raju and Madhu, two out of three of the precarious workers most closely profiled by Cross, do in fact exit the SEZ and fail to reinvest their hopes in it. What about those who refuse to belong to the time of perpetual deferment? What do we make of not just friction and reignited hope, but dead-end futures? Further, Madhu’s resistance to factory management rhetoric is apparent in his statement that the factory “just makes people work, work, work, and gets profits from them. This company was never like a mother to workers, it was just interested in business” (p.156). An exit from investing dreams in the SEZ with such words demands an analysis of what men like him make of metropolitan and regional anti-SEZ activism. Beyond seeing the SEZ as a site of diverse dreams of Dalit young men, metropolitan and regional activists, perhaps it is also a matter of asking what Dalits and precarious young men make of anti-SEZ politics? The reader is left wondering whether reignited faith in dreams in SEZs is as secure as Cross seems to guarantee considering there is some evidence to the contrary in the book. In addition to the valuable work of explaining the revivification of failed dreams, might the task of critical social science be to take equally seriously those who refuse perpetual deferment, and construct modes of individual and collective action that constitute a fugitive politics? This consideration aside, this book is a vivid read with profound insights that will be of tremendous interest to students of critical development studies, political anthropology, and cultural geography who are looking for an innovative and grounded application of recent theoretical attention to affect, aspirations, and sentiment.

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