

Theory of the workaround

Amit S. Rai, *Jugaad Time: Ecologies of Everyday Hacking in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019). 208pp., £79.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 1 47800 110 2 hb., 978 1 47800 146 1 pb.

In Amit S. Rai's *Jugaad Time*, the Delhi-based freelance music manager Renu tells her interviewer proudly that jugaad is 'our [i.e. India's] brainchild'. To demonstrate this 'particular skill set to achieve the unachievable, mend the otherwise damaged or do more with less', Renu opens her smartphone browser to a listicle on the Indian media website *ScoopWhoop*. The page, titled *51 Photos That Prove Indians Are the Ultimate Kings of Jugaad*, provides a surfeit of hacks and workarounds for the reader's entertainment: a pair of trousers attached to an AC unit, so that its legs can direct cool air into two different rooms; a clothes iron turned upright and used to keep a pot of milky chai warm; a plastic bottle fixed to a water pipe, its bottom pierced to function as a makeshift showerhead; a scarf tied around a train seat to allow a man to sleep without his head drooping; and so on. It is clear that, for most of these examples, their conditions of possibility are precarity, resource shortage or what Rai calls, following Jasbir Puar, debilitisation. Jugaad stages the canny and at times extra-legal repurposing of materials, infrastructures and technologies. And yet in contemporary India, this marginal practice is often framed as a source of admiration and in this listicle even national pride: 'Innovation is a hallmark of excellence and we certainly excel in this field', the *ScoopWhoop* editor opines.

The *jugaadu*, the one who performs jugaad, is a pirate, a hacker, but also a virtuosic entrepreneur, a 'frugal innovator', the neoliberal 'confidence man'. This figure's ability to overcome stasis and evade blockages has attracted the attention of management gurus and business strategists in twenty-first-century India, who greedily appropriate an apparently vernacular spirit to propel new forms of capitalist value-creation. But as Rai insists, processes of jugaad are 'not reducible to, and indeed continually exceed, capitalist relations of production.' One aim of *Jugaad Time* is to grapple with this excess, to identify in the momentary exits and inversions facilitated by jugaad those 'lines of flight from contemporary capital [that]

increase collective capacities for a non-capitalist landing'. Rai is cautious in his conclusions: the creativity of India's pirate kingdoms may be expansive, but they can often be complicit in neoliberal logics and are always 'susceptible to control'. Nonetheless, the resulting portrait of contemporary India – which stretches from multinational corporate boardrooms to the intimate space of the home, from the tech CEO to the *kabad* (junk) scavenger – emerges as a dense and intoxicating affirmation of the plasticity of this country's present and an incitement to imagine possible futures otherwise.

Jugaad, a Hindi/Punjabi colloquialism, is itself an unstable category. The first page of Rai's *Preface* includes four different definitions: jugaad is a 'joyous passion', a 'practice of post-colonial practical reason', a 'hack', a 'pirated workaround'. It is a practice, a process, an event and an ethos, and is 'relatively old, but newly mediatised'. This latter is important, since Rai's particular focus is on mobile phones and digital cultures; indeed, he privileges this realm at the expense of those media shifts that precede the digital, for instance the televisual, and their own jugaad constellations. The book emerges from nearly a decade of research into the politics of neoliberal technology in India, specifically how they manifest at the level of a body's habits. India is home to more than one billion mobile handsets. Its national market is the most competitive mobile service market in the world, replete with cheap smartphones and a wide range of mobile value-added services. *Jugaadu* experiments demonstrate dramatically the emergent capacities of these new 'digital-human assemblages'. In Rai's words, jugaad 'gradually became for me a way of posing better questions regarding media, neoliberalism, and politics in India by tracing relations external to their term'. Though the book focuses on the contemporary, it also frames jugaad more generally as 'an attentive and canny bodily orientation toward historically specific *dispotifs* of power, exploitation, discourse, materiality, value and intensity, and [as] a relational practice of experiencing, negotiating, and, at

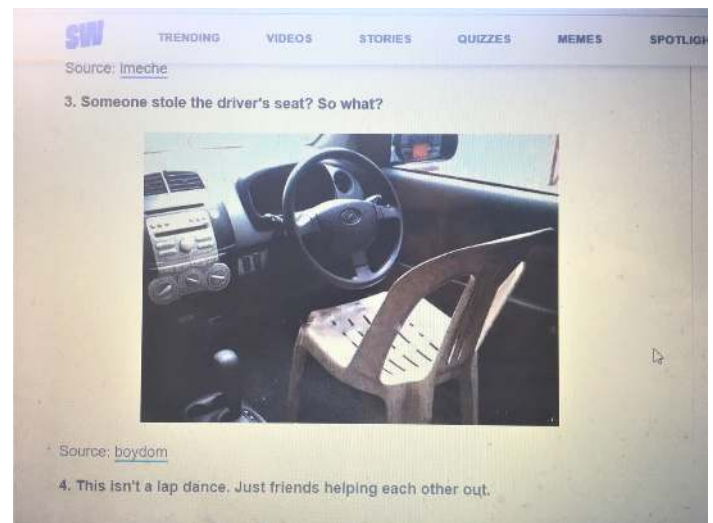
times, changing human and nonhuman ecologies.’

Rai is concerned primarily with jugaad’s ‘affective passage’ – its opening of different domains of action and power – to experimentation. He approaches affect in the Deleuzian sense as a ‘durational passage from one state to another in an encounter between two or more bodies (human or nonhuman, organic or inorganic), which either increases or decreases a body’s capacity for action.’ The emphasis on mobile phone *ecologies* means that the chapters grapple with complex and unstable assemblages, rather than tracing enclosed, self-oriented entities. Elizabeth Povinelli’s critique of ‘essence’ in her *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (2016) is an important reference here. To put it another way, Rai is interested not in the ‘product-event’ of jugaad, but in its ‘potential process-infrastructure’ – the web of social and material relations that enable hacking or workarounds and the vectors which jugaads themselves produce.

This foregrounding of jugaad’s distributed and ecological processes is not simply a challenge to its appropriation as a reproducible business model. It also departs from a certain postcolonial media studies focus on the agency of the subaltern or marginal subject. Rather than intent and outcome, Rai is interested in movement, contingency and ‘emergent sensations’. His ‘diagrammatic method’ attempts to create ‘practical genealogies’ of jugaad, capturing its processual nature and seeking to avoid the fetish of the hack demonstrated, for instance, in the *ScoopWhoop* listicle. For Rai, the hack is the labour of the *jugaadu*, certainly, but also of ‘software engineers, cable TV installers, electronic component supply-chain workers, miners, processing-plant workers, etc.’ All are part of the same assemblage. The question should not be, *How did they do that?*, but rather, *Where, when and how can the pirated be made common?*

Rai raises these questions against the backdrop of Narendra Modi’s India, where the Hindu nationalist Prime Minister’s promise of *acche din* (‘good days’) has been interpreted variously to affirm the flourishing of business, individual initiative and consumer choice, but also the fortification of the national body against ‘enemies’ and ‘traitors’ – commonly construed as the Indian Muslim, but also the Maoist Naxalite, and increasingly Dalit and lower-caste activists and organisers. Rai’s investigations traverse the polished contours and flickering screens of the Indian ‘smart city’ – ‘one of many instru-

ments of corporate neoliberalisation and the elite globalisation of Indian society’, and at the same time sites for new techniques of surveillance, security and segregation. Jugaad in this context can work to undermine regimes of copyright and facilitate informal labour practices, but Rai also warns that hacking what are essentially capitalist technologies – from mobile phones to databases – can still work to ‘habituate its practitioners and prosumers to neoliberal logics of Big Data and risk management.’



If jugaad is today a ‘quasi-capitalist art’, how far can the ‘quasi-’ be pushed to serve programs and practices of revolutionary becoming in contemporary India? Is this merely another chapter in the history of the intensification of work in postcolonial South Asia? In the book’s introduction, Rai suggests that, ‘indeed, in some sense the revolution will be anti-jugaad.’ Disappointingly this provocation is never unpacked, but it becomes clear throughout the book that the value of jugaad is not in providing *hope* but in affirming *recalcitrance*. Jugaad is ‘a fractally styled answer to the “no” of both state (law) and capital (private property).’ What is needed is a politics that will take this break from habit – jugaad’s sabotage of what is ‘fixed, moral, propertied, *suvarna* (upper caste), appropriate and right’ – and radicalise it, make it revolutionary, resist its smooth integration into neoliberal logics. *Jugaad Time* is a diagnosis of a situation and only the start of the story. But for Rai, the direction of travel is resolutely toward the commons and the collective.

Jugaad occurs in the junkyard workshop, the video parlour, the hackers’ den but also in the home, in the domestic sphere. Rai’s welcome concern for questions of gender is threaded through the book. Rai is keen to chal-

lenge the vision of the hacker as a heroic and masculinist visionary. He devotes attention to the ways in which media ecologies can undermine the gendered binary of *ghar/bahir*, home/outside, where the feminised domestic is contrasted with the masculinised public world. The sharing of mobile handsets by women in extended families becomes a demonstration of commoning and the horizontal distribution of ethical know-how. The mobile phone is a 'flux-machine', threatening structures of caste and gender control. Rai's interviews and fieldnotes are wielded as interventions into feminist and postcolonial literatures on capitalist social reproduction, but though persuasive, his observations can stray towards the speculative rather than substantive. This quality is perhaps consistent with the book's concern for vectors of potentiality. A more serious concern is the ways in which the concept of jugaad is stretched, referring at one point even to recipe shortcuts. The section on social reproduction may have benefitted from a sharper delineation of jugaad, against a more general notion of 'everyday resistance'.

Jugaad, as I have noted, allows Rai to ask specific questions about urban India after liberalisation, particularly since 2009 when research for the book began (and when 3G and 4G networks were taking off in India). Though this is a single-authored text, Rai's research was collaborative, involving sustained interaction with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai and the labours of three research assistants: Anisha Saigal, Shiva Thorat and Rachna Kumar. Fieldwork took place in Bhopal, Mumbai, Delhi and Bangalore. Rai's wide-ranging citations – appearing as a bracketed deluge at the end of key sentences – reveal the complex architecture on which the argument is built. Jugaad may be a window into contemporary India, but Rai also argues that it is not restricted to the twenty-first century, nor is it specifically Indian. This is a productive observation, but its implications are underdeveloped. The only non-Indian example given in the book is the repurposing, in rural China, of washing machines to help clean vegetables. While the diagrammatic method serves a certain purpose, some comparisons across time and space might help refine a conceptual history of jugaad. I offer two brief examples here.

First, in terms of comparisons across time, we might consider the late nineteenth- / early twentieth-century category of *swadeshi*, a descriptor for goods and products

'of one's own country'. Like jugaad, this was a quasi-capitalist concept that sought to disrupt the circulation and consumption of British goods in colonial India, drawing on ideas of traditional craft and slow artisanal labour, even as it also created new types of value and profit. Rai talks about subaltern jugaad as tied to the 'persistent effects of (post)colonial struggles against hierarchy, authority and deployed power', but the only anti-colonial tactic he discusses is that of subaltern networks of rumour, in which he sees a precedent for the unpredictable circulation of disruptive knowledge. Might the afterlives of *swadeshi* – invested, like jugaad, with a sense of pride and independence as well as experiences of debilitation, but translated over time into a hegemonic nationalist register, including the recent exhortation to 'Make in India' – suggest a possible future for jugaad?

As regards anti-colonial strategies, I wonder, too, if the inspiring mobilisations of the 'Why Loiter?' group in Mumbai and elsewhere – an attempt to make women visible in public space and to challenge perceptions of risk and fear – are best thought of as an urban 'hack', as Rai suggests, or simply as part of a longer history of *satyagraha*, of courageously making visible the injustices of the present, even under the threat of violence? Does the use of digital technologies radically redefine this older spatial strategy and its forms of publicity?

Second, a comparison across space, and again to China. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han's recent book on the idea of the 'fake' in China, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in China* (2017), can be read productively alongside *Jugaad Time*. The association of 'fake' with 'inferior' is challenged in Han's exploration, since his interest is in the way Chinese philosophy and culture departs from western ideas of the 'original' and 'authentic'. The *shanzhai* product is more like a jugaad, a pragmatic attempt to make something work better for the individual user – whether this is an upgraded mobile or a fan novel bringing Harry Potter to China – a responsiveness that large companies cannot realistically emulate. As Han notes, due to a high degree of flexibility and adaptability in design, the 'fake' is frequently superior to the original. In this it is differentiated from jugaad – both aesthetically (as a polished product rather than refurbished *kabad*, waste) and in its more explicit project of value-creation. But Chan also sees in *shanzhai* pragmatics a possible line of flight, the potential for a reworking and repurposing

that channels ‘anti-authoritarian, subversive energies’, especially against the security apparatus of the Chinese state. Are there similar tensions to unpick here? And if we can see *jugaad* in rural Chinese washing machines, what might *shanzhai* look like in India?

Jugaad Time’s provocations are not limited to its philosophical reflections and fieldwork notes, but are found also in the speculative interludes that pepper the book. Rai’s *Fables of the Reinvention*, a gripping vision of ‘mutating technoperceptual assemblages’ and ‘data reinventing life’ reads like a new frontier for Indian science fiction. But dystopias are not distant from the present moment. I finished reading *Jugaad Time* on a flight, where I’d also picked up an international edition of the *New York Times*. In this 19 December 2019 edition, the third page featured a story entitled ‘India’s habit of shutting down the internet’. India, it reads, ‘tops the world – by far – in the number of Internet shutdowns imposed by local, state and national governments.’ Over the

previous calendar year there were 134 cuts to internet service, justified largely as a method to secure order against ‘misinformation’, but also deployed for more mundane reasons, such as to prevent students from cheating on exams. Pakistan, India’s closest competitor, had cut service 12 times; Syria and Turkey just once. This story, alongside the sustained internet and communications blackout imposed in Kashmir since August 2019, underlines Rai’s concern about the increasingly authoritarian character of the Indian state’s engagement with smart technologies. If the futures promised by *jugaad* are multiple and contradictory, then its affirmation of the plasticity of the present must be seized upon with strategy and intent, affirming with Rai ‘the potential of strategic bottlenecks, sabotage and repurposing ... to effect change in contemporary arrangements and practices of solidarity’, not least at this time of toxicity, entanglement and reinvention.

Chris Moffat

Human rights in a wrong world

Ratna Kapur, *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl* (Cheltenham and Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018). 307pp., £90.00 hb., £19.95 pb., 978 1 78811 252 9 hb., 978 1 83910 447 3 pb.

Over the past few decades, various critical scholars have emphasised the limitations of human rights. Such scholars have, for the most part, proposed a return to human rights as the solution to its failures, hoping to revise the project through a renewed faith in liberal democratic values, as, for example, in scholarship by Wendy Brown, Costas Douzinas or David Kennedy. In *Gender, Alterity and Human Rights: Freedom in a Fishbowl*, Ratna Kapur also notes the uses, promises and limitations of the human rights project. However, rather than returning to the latter for answers to these limitations, Kapur goes further, seeking to think freedom through alternative registers beyond the bounds of the liberal legal fishbowl. The book is consequently essential reading for international lawyers, human rights lawyers and activists, and for critical thinkers across the disciplines, drawing on postcolonial, intersectional, feminist and queer theory, epistemologies of the global south and relationships between theory, activism and spirituality to provide a unique and in-depth

analysis of the search for freedom beyond dominant systems of knowledge.

Much contemporary human rights scholarship can be seen as resting somewhere between a more doctrinal approach, seeking to use human rights law for social justice gains, and a more critical approach, which aims to understand what social justice outcomes are *not* seen by current human rights framings. Thus, while critical scholars note the ways in which human rights have become a powerful tool for governance with not always positive outcomes, people working more on the doctrinal side often hear this as a dismissal of their work and, in turn, dismiss critical perspectives for failing to offer practical solutions. While these two approaches tend to be set up in antithesis to one another, problematically equating, as Kapur states, ‘a liberal rights critique with pessimism, and a liberal rights deployment with optimism’, there are convergences as well as serious differences between them. Both, after all, want some form of social justice or