



Transformations of Political Consciousness in the Process of State Formation in Nepal

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	6
Summary	7
Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	13
Chapter 1: The Land of Guerillas and Extraordinary Mushrooms.....	26
Choosing the Site for Fieldwork.....	26
First as Tragedy and the Second Time as Farce: The Guerilla Trek.....	32
Getting to Know the Kham Country and the Extraordinary Mushroom 'Yarsagumba'	36
Positionality: Reflections on Constructing Fieldwork	49
Chapter 2: Filming Ethnographic Fieldwork or Film as Ethnography.....	55
Introduction.....	55
Thematic Blocks and the First Cut of the Film	59
Reframing the Narrative and Editing the Final Cut	64
Chapter 3: Methodological Considerations, Theoretical Prolegomena and Literature Review	68
Introduction: Different "Ways of Seeing" the Nepali Revolution	68
The Revolution: Between Large-scale/Universal and Local/Particular.....	72
Identity, Ethnicity and Class	75
Political Consciousness and Subaltern Resistance: The Case of Thabang, Rolpa	80
Peasant Resistance: Subaltern Culture and Modernity	89
Peasants, Anthropology and the Idea of Uneven and Combined Development	98
Chapter 4: The Formation of a Hindu Kingdom: The Nepal Himalayas Beyond Zomia.....	111
The Formation of a Hindu Kingdom.....	111
The Stateless and the State: The Magars as Zomia-Thinking	114
Magars as Zomia-thinking	118
Chapter 5: The Mode of Production and the Uneven Development of Capitalism.....	123
Introduction.....	123
Beyond Articulation of Modes of Production in Nepal.....	125

Merchant Capital: ‘Becoming’ and ‘Being’ Capitalism.....	133
The 'Unevenness' and 'Combination' of Nepal's Capitalist Development.....	137
The Role of Merchant Capital in Nepal	137
The Subsumption of Nature and Accumulation without Dispossession	140
The Role of Development and Peasant Social Movements in Rural Nepal	144
Chapter 6: The Socio-Economic Landscape of Mid-Western Nepal.....	151
Introduction.....	151
On Geographical Orientation and Remoteness	152
The Socio-Economic Environment of Kham Magar Villages	155
The Uneven Proletarianization of Peasants in Rukum	160
Chapter 7: The Maoist Diagnosis: Balancing the Social Movement Between the Struggle for Redistribution and Recognition	165
Class and non-Class Struggles and the History of Maoist Praxis	166
Adivasi Consciousness in India and the Redistribution-Recognition Dilemma.....	173
The Struggle for Redistribution	175
The Struggle for Recognition.....	178
Conclusion	181
Chapter 8: Beyond Militant Particularisms: The Prehistory of the Maoist Movement in Maikot village	183
Introduction.....	183
Maikot’s Prehistory of the Maoist Revolutionary Action.....	184
Subaltern Resistance and Militant Particularisms	187
Conclusion	191
Chapter 9: Counterhegemonic Framing and the Uneven Development of Revolutionary Action	193
Common Sense, Good Sense, and the Counterhegemonic Framing Approach	193
The Counterhegemonic Framing Approach.....	196
Building Trust and Reframing Local Political Struggles	198
The Framing Process in Maikot’s Maoist Village Organizations	202
The Subaltern Counterpublics and Becoming a Maoist in Maikot.....	205
Master Frames and the Maoist Counterhegemonic Narrative	210
1. Exploitation, Injustice and Oppression	212
2. Development and Modernity.....	215

3. State Violence, the Escalation of Conflict, and the Framing from Above.....	220
Conclusion	228
Chapter 10: Gramsci's 'Common Sense' and the Formation of the Maoist Base Area	231
Introduction.....	231
'Jan Sarkar': The History of Maoist Rule in Maikot	234
The Question of Transformation: From Habitus to Common Sense	246
Chapter 11: The Narratives of Disappointment and the Post-Revolutionary Common Sense	251
Introduction.....	251
Surul Poon Magar: 'Mero Jibaan Kahaa Pugtyo' (Where has my life reached?)?.....	253
Malti Pun Magar: "After all, war is like this, you get dust in your eyes when you sweep your home".....	260
Abhinam Nepali (Sandesh)	264
'Hanging in Between': The Politics of Disappointment in Post-Revolutionary Nepal	267
Chapter 12: Yarsagumba: The Mushroom at the Top of the World.....	273
The History of Yarsagumba in Maikot	276
Yarsagumba and the Guerilla Economy.....	279
Attending the Yarsa Season in Buki	283
The Transformation of the Governance System: From Autonomy to Dependence ...	289
Conclusion	298
Concluding Remarks.....	305
Bibliography	313

FILM 1: Taking on The Storm: In the Footsteps of Maoist Guerillas in Nepal

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gl8HxhPIYe8>

FILM 2: Mushroom at the top of the World: Searching for Yarsagumba in Nepal

<https://youtu.be/Hpn2Uvxfl8M>

List of Figures

Figure 1: The village of Maikot, Rukum district, Source: Author.....	31
Figure 2: The first screening of Shamans of the Blind Country in Takasera in 1982. Source: Michael Oppitz	45
Figure 3: The screening of films in Takasera, 2017. Source: Author	46
Figure 4: The Districts of the Rapti Zone	153
Figure 5: The redistribution-recognition dilemma (Fraser, 1995: 87).....	174
Figure 6: The Pupal Camp in Buki (2017)	287
Figure 7: With Maikot's Youth Club at the Pupal Camp.....	294

Summary

This thesis builds on an ethnographic study of revolutionary action in rural Nepal by conceptually grounding it in political, economic and historical analyses of capitalist development and state formation. Nepal's hilly periphery has become an important region, where systemic change and the rise of political movements make it necessary to understand the inter-relation between broader structures of power and local cultural meanings of resistance. The recent political history of Nepal has seen the interplay between these forces through the rise of peasant politics that culminated in Maoist politics. This movement process, politically marked by a 10-year long People's War, has led to the establishment of a federal republic and reshaped the socio-political landscape of rural Nepal.

The thesis draws on long-term fieldwork engagement in the former Maoist base area in Mid-Western Nepal. Through participant observation, interviews, life stories and discourse analysis, the thesis explores the transformations of political consciousness in rural Nepal. The first part of the thesis focuses on the 'conditional element of class', through which I explore unifying and pluralizing tendencies of capitalist modernity. By engaging with the topics of modernity, development, state-formation, and the theory of uneven and combined development, chapters 3-7 explore the background of the peasant movement process that is grounded in Nepal's integration into the global capitalist economy.

The second part of the thesis focuses on the 'potential element of class' and the post-revolutionary context of the Maoist insurgency by ethnographically studying the Maoist movement process in Kham Magar villages. The multi-layered analysis of the uneven development of revolutionary action digs deeper into the political process of the People's War to show how the Maoists created their discourse of resistance. I follow these developments that overgrew the Maoist framing process and small scale organizing to the larger political-ideological institutions that established the Maoist base area. The history of Maoist rule in the village of Maikot shows that in the former base area, the Maoists organised the peasant's experience into a thickly interwoven world of 'subaltern counterpublics'. Although the Maoist movement has seen its decline, I argue that to

understand the process of social transformation in rural Nepal, we should investigate the constantly changing elements of the subaltern experience. I explore this through the life stories of former Maoist combatants that map the rough coordinates of the post-revolutionary common sense. This topic is also addressed in the doctoral ethnographic film *Taking on the Storm* (2021), a filmic exploration of post-revolutionary common sense in the former Maoist base area. Maikot's post-revolutionary context is further explored by analyzing the yarsagumba economy, an ethnographic narrative that explores the peasants' increased dependency on this lucrative commodity chain. In the last chapter entitled *Mushroom at the Top of the World* (accompanied by a film with the same title), I show how the yarsagumba economy has created a hybrid form of subsumption, reflecting the contingency and unevenness of capitalist development in rural Nepal. I argue that the post-revolutionary situation in Rukum has increased the integration of peasant lives into dependent precarious livelihoods concealed by politics of autonomy. This has created a situation in which class struggle increases the power of rural elites over the resource-dependent peasantry. Maikot's ethnographic example brings us to a conceptualisation of peasant politics and capitalist development, where the potential elements of class strengthen the power of the rural elites, creating a form of passive revolution.

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Introduction

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionising themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language" (Marx, 1852: 398).

After the second world war, the restructuring of the non-industrialized societies of the Global South integrated peasant populations more firmly within global capitalist relations. Looking at this process of integration and development, some have proclaimed 'the death of the peasantry' (Hobsbawm, 1994); however, instead of straightforward proletarianization, the peasantry became a part of a much more uneven process of development. Within the unifying and pluralizing tendencies of capitalist modernity, a process that can be elaborated by exploring the unevenness and combination of capitalist development, the political subjects in the Global South have found themselves responding to new contexts, structures and scales. Like in neighbouring China and India, the peasant masses in Nepal began to build conscious struggles against broader power structures. While the formation of oppositional projects (and communist movements) in Nepal can be dated to the early 20th century, it was during the 1970s and later in the 1990s that more powerful counter-hegemonic movements emerged.

Throughout the 20th century, this landlocked highland country was ruled by the royal elite, and the monarchical and feudal regime that was put in place had only briefly been interrupted by democratic social movements. Although Nepal had its democracy experiment in the 1950s (Whelpton, 2005), a counter-revolution that followed installed a system of guided democracy (the Panchayat system) that reasserted the power of the landed elites. It was not until the democratic movement of 1990 (*Jana Andolan*), led by a coalition of left parties and other pro-democratic parties that the Panchayat system was formally abolished, and Nepal paved its way toward multi-party democracy, a goal that has been pursued for decades by different 'underground' movements. A new constitution and elections that followed brought hope to the people who had long pursued systemic

change. While the sea of protesters took over Kathmandu, the peasants in remote Nepal were less enthusiastic about recent democratic changes. The localized peasant revolts against the landed elites continued through the country, and the heterogeneous peasant movements expanded their political praxis and joined the Maoist movement that began forming in the middle of the 1990s. In February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), the faction of the communist movement that had adopted the strategy of protracted armed struggle, announced the People's War with a series of attacks in six districts.

The Nepalese People's War was not a single event but a long and complex revolutionary process that can be understood through several perspectives. In one way, it can be read as a peasant movement that asserted itself as a powerful political force by adopting the strategies of a modern Maoist insurgency. Such a revolutionary strategy typically includes three elements: "first, the "spirit" of traditional peasant "rebellion"; second, the ideology and organization of modern "revolution"; and third, the operational doctrines of guerrilla warfare (Desai & Eckstein, 1990: 442). Although this was a relatively small movement at the beginning of the insurgency, the Nepalese Maoists created a movement process that combined different oppositional projects under the banner of the People's War. Peasant village struggles, ethnic organizations, labour movements, union struggles, urban protests, and inter-party squabbles all played their role in this counterhegemonic struggle against the state. The decade-long process, which ended with the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006, achieved its primary goal, and the king handed over the power to the Seven Party Alliance that aimed to oversee Nepal's transition into a democratic republic. The Maoist movement that at its peak counted more than 10,000 armed guerrillas disintegrated, and after several splits, the Maoist parties entered parliamentary politics. The movement process that had established the Maoists as a strong oppositional force was replaced by less radical party politics while the former Maoist base areas were integrated into the state.

The main subject of this doctoral thesis, based on an original ethnographic study, is to understand the transformations of political consciousness and the uneven development of the class struggle in the former Maoist base areas in Mid-Western Nepal. The ethnographic lens is turned to the Kham Magar community, which has historically been

at the margins of Nepal's state formation process. By focusing on the political participation and different trajectories of economic development of a community that was at the centre of the Maoist revolution and formed further oppositional projects against the state, this research studies the relationship between revolutionary practice and world-historical processes. By conceptually grounding the making of the Nepalese 'peasantariat' in the broader historical and political-economic explanations of capitalist restructuring and state formation, the thesis aims to contribute to the debate on social movements and revolutions in the periphery.

This ethnographic study explores 'the uneven development of class struggle' (Smith, 2008: 5) within the historical process of Nepal's state-formation. The background of this process is grounded in analyzing Nepal's integration into the global capitalist economy, a context that is often missing from the anthropological frameworks used for analysing social movements in Nepal. This thesis aims to build a framework that explores the broader economic conditions by examining what Thompson called 'the conditional element of class' (Thompson, 1964). By using this political-economic grounding and building on ethnographic fieldwork of subaltern political projects, the thesis articulates two dimensions of social structuring: the 'conditional' and 'potential' elements of class (Smith, 2014: 162). Writing about an area situated in the middle of the former Maoist controlled base, the study follows the history of the struggle of a community that was once at the centre of the Maoist social movement project and is now adapting to the new class realities of peripheral capitalism in post-conflict Nepal.

Historically, the South Asian periphery has been considered an important region, where in the shadows of the state, social movements had made it necessary to pay attention to the inter-relation between broader structures of power and local cultural meanings of resistance. The recent political history of Nepal undoubtedly serves as a good case study. At the turn of the century, the long-neglected political aspirations of the peasant masses have swept away with the old state apparatus, and the rural proletariat has asserted itself as a strong and decisive political force. In Nepal, the long-brewing political-economic tensions of the most marginalised parts of the country formed fertile ground for peasant rebellions that sprung in villages all across the area and culminated in a decade long People's War. This revolutionary process is not unknown to the Asian continent, and we

have observed in both China and India, where it has created a radically different political environment.

This history of counter-movement formation from below led to the complete restructuring of Nepal's ruling elites, ultimately adopting a new mode of rule: by establishing a democratic (federal) republic. However, while seeing this as one of the main achievements of the broad coalition of oppositional forces is essential, it conceals the heterogeneity of different scales of class and non-class aligned resistances, calls for recognition and redistribution of resources that occurred throughout the revolutionary process. The Maoist path, as it is discussed in the thesis, is full of loose ends; as a mass movement rises, it builds certain forms of the struggle more consciously than others, and while moving through different scales, the movement's political praxis is continuously challenged as it responds to new contexts, structures and actors. All social struggles are full of contradictions, and the Maoist movement in Nepal was no different. However, a very conscious struggle of the Maoist movement process trying to reconcile the discrepancies between theory and action in the long history of revolutionary activity has been overshadowed by other narratives of the People's War. While these narratives, stemming from anti-communist propaganda to the discourses about conflict resolution, have dominated the media, they also sprouted a fruitful academic field full of discussions on Nepal's democratic transition that neglects the role of the rural masses in historical change.

In order to understand the contradictions and transformations of peasant social movements, the argument put forward in this thesis deals more closely with the concept of political consciousness. For Marx, social consciousness is conditioned by social being¹. The method he applied to study consciousness sets out to explain the social and economic phenomena from the objective point of view conceptualised in his critique of bourgeois

¹ Marx wrote extensively about social being and consciousness, but the outline of his approach is perhaps best captured in the following lines: "In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely [the] relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1859, non pag).

political economy. This does not mean that Marx does not address consciousness outside of his economic theory; he does so without falling into the trap of subjectivism; by understanding consciousness as a part of the social whole and proposes that it should be studied not only in its visible parts but also in all its hidden parts in the content of ideological and economic formations. These elements of Marx's material approach outline the two dimensions of his concept of ideology:

"the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic — in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out" (Marx, 1859: non-pag).

These two dimensions explain consciousness 'from the contradictions of material life' and practical consciousness, which is defined as lived class experience. In order to explain political consciousness and its transformations, both dimensions are equally important, and as Jean Comaroff has argued: "these two dimensions of ideology-"theory" and practical consciousness - are seldom brought into satisfactory relationship in the work of subsequent writers in the critical tradition" (Comaroff, 1985: 4).

An excellent example, which is often referred to throughout the thesis, is the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's critique of the determinist view inscribed in the base and superstructure model paved the way from the 'scientific' Marxism of the Second International. Instead of writing about the economic conditioning of consciousness, Gramsci developed a foundation for a materialist approach that benefits from understanding consciousness as lived experience. He outlines the basis of his materialist thinking in the following way:

"Man does not enter into relations with the natural world just by being himself part of the natural world, but actively, by means of work and technique. Further: these relations are not mechanical. They are active and conscious" (Gramsci in Ekers, 2012: 128).

For Gramsci then, the mind possesses the capability for transformative action, and it is therefore much more than a reflection of the material world surrounding it. Social revolutions, he argues, similarly do not happen because of mechanical issues, and it would not be sufficient to explain them only on their terms. The French revolution, he argues, happened "in the context of conflicts on a higher plane than the immediate world of the

economy, conflicts bound up with class "prestige" (future economic interests), and an exacerbation of sentiments of independence, autonomy, and power" (Femia, 1981: 74). Gramsci's critique has left a significant influence on Western Marxism and social sciences in general. His work inspired many scholars across the globe that have studied state-formation, uneven development and subaltern resistance². From his own experience of socialist construction and anti-fascist resistance in Italy, Gramsci was aware that revolutionaries should understand the cultural realities and social circumstances that condition their activities.

To build a genuinely counter-hegemonic movement is not an easy task for any revolutionary movement, and Gramsci was well aware of the challenge behind building grassroots revolutionary projects. The challenge is that any powerful revolutionary project can only be built through the oppressed people's daily realities and lived experiences. However, the critical dimension of subaltern people's inequality lies in their conception of the world that is derived from dominant ideology and is insufficient to produce coherent accounts to change world they live in. That is not to say that Gramsci's theory of political consciousness does not pay sufficient attention to subaltern agency. Instead of drawing conclusions that would lead to romanticising subaltern agency, Gramsci locates it within fields of oppression in which an initially fragmented and contradictory subaltern consciousness can develop into a political consciousness (a process Gramsci refers to as a contradictory struggle between common and good sense) and builds a revolutionary project from below. While Gramsci's thought has been often deployed for studying subaltern resistance, the history of Gramsci's ideas should also be read against the backdrop of reactionary restoration, bourgeois hegemony and the rise of Fascism³. In this respect, Gramsci develops his more most well-known theoretical tools.

² Kate Crehan for example argues that Gramsci was the foremost scholar and activist that advanced the ideas of Marx in the West (Crehan, 2002). Gramsci's thought has been at the heart of many approaches to anti-colonial struggles, and anti-imperial strategies and continues to inspire new generations of Marxists around the globe. One of the reasons why Gramsci's concepts have reached all corners of the world lies in the fact that Gramsci was a scholar that studied both the specifics of the Italian situation and the international – making his concepts available and readily translatable into a variety of different scenarios.

³ Further historicizing Gramsci's ideas, as Morton (2007) has proposed, is important - his work should not be considered without paying attention to Italian and international history and the processes of state-formation and the uneven development of capitalism. To engage Gramsci's ideas in contemporary scenarios of capitalist development, Morton has proposed to think in a 'Gramscian way', rather than uncritically thinking that Gramsci's method is applicable to every situation.

He writes about passive revolution and bourgeois hegemony, processes that have transformed the Italian society without the participation of political movements from below. The notion of passive revolution became one of Gramsci's central concepts, and Gramsci referred to it as a 'revolution without a revolution' (Thomas, 2006: 72). Gramsci's work is thus informative for understanding both the social movements from above and social movements from below.

In a dialectical view of hegemony and subaltern resistance, Gramsci has argued that there are two conflicting 'conceptions of the world' that constitute the worldview of subaltern classes; one that is derived from the dominant ideology, and the other coming from the practical experience of social reality. Such an understanding of the dialectical relation between social structures and human agency that has been undoubtedly derived from Marx⁴ brings us to an important methodological foundation. Social concepts, such as classes, cannot be sufficiently explained by studying only the consciousness of individual actors. Here Gramsci employs history, theories of state-formation and political economy. On the other side, it is equally valid that the functioning of social structures does not entirely determine human consciousness – here, Gramsci develops his 'philosophy of praxis. To highlight the importance of these two dimensions found in Gramsci's work, one of the leading Gramscian scholars has proposed to reconsider key Gramscian concepts in order to revitalise the theory of historical materialism:

"Gramsci was thus able to give due weight to two constitutive dimensions of the Marxist tradition that are not always easily articulated: on the one hand, the critique of political economy, or those elements that tend towards a science of the capitalist mode of production; and on the other hand, a political theory of the working class movement, or what Gramsci famously described as the philosophy of praxis' status as a "conception of the world." The former describes the conditions confronted by the latter, but ultimately, Gramsci insists, it is only the latter that can explain and justify the former, in both theoretical and practical forms" (Thomas, 2006: 76).

In this sense, Gramsci's reformulation of the main ideas of historical materialism remains an inspiration. In the thesis, the first part that more broadly deals with the conditioning

⁴ Perry Anderson observed a similar disjuncture in Marx's writings, between the late Marx (the Marx of Capital) and early Marx's writing's (The Marx of the Communist Manifesto). He observes the following principle at work at the centre of the theory of historical materialism: "The first refers essentially to a structural, or more properly inter-structural, reality: the order of what contemporary sociology would call system integration (or, for Marx latent disintegration). The second refers to the subjective forces contending and colliding for mastery over social forms and historical processes: the realm of what contemporary sociology would call social integration (that is equally disintegration of reintegration)" (Anderson, 1983: 34).

element of social structuring is further explained by analysing the different conjunctures of capitalist development and social and cultural fields of power. To address the scope of uneven development in Nepal and the different combinations with the capitalist mode of production that have challenged the peasant masses, I analyse capitalism's historical, spatial and temporal dimensions with the help of the idea of uneven and combined development. This framework is grounded in the more recent revival of the interest in the theories of uneven and combined development (UCD) initially proposed by Leon Trotsky (1960), but also more recently developed as a part of the Gramscian framework (Morton, 2007; Thomas, 2006; 2009) and broader (Makki, 2015; Davidson, 2017, Smith 2020; Harootunain, 2015; Gill and Kasmir, 2016). In return to UCD with an effort to liberate it from interpretations that see it only as an economic theory, or others that have made more recent use of it in the study of international relations (Rosenberg, 2006), I follow the interpretation of UCD that pays equal attention to the uneven development of both: capitalist hegemony and class struggle (Smith, 2014).

In many places throughout the research, I pin down the relations between political subjects in rural Nepal and broader fields of power, a relation that is seen as both 'socially constitutive and constituting' (Roseberry, 1994). Following ideas that brought the key elements of the historical materialist approach to study non-industrial societies, the thesis also follows the endeavours of authors that have helped to elaborate an anthropological approach to political economy (often referred to as the anthropological political economy school⁵). In this light, I believe that human history should not be described by schemes and mechanistic models but should acknowledge subjective elements and modes of feeling. In essence, all such types of historical models mystify rather than shed light on social change and historical development. Additionally, this thesis aims to contribute to a wider struggle within social theory to shift the focus away from European history and to decentralise theories of capitalist development that emphasize capitalisms singularity.

⁵ A more detailed elaboration of the approach and its contribution to Marxian Anthropology in general has been outlined here: Neveling, P., and Steur, L. (2018). Introduction: Marxian anthropology resurgent. *Focaal*, 2018(82), 1-15.

The thesis is constituted around a theoretical proposition put forward by a scholar who has reflected upon the Gramscian framework and used it in his studies of the Latin American peasantry. William Roseberry has articulated the basis of this kind of materialism in the following way:

"More to the point, among the material conditions, under which they live, is included a set of ideas, or sets of ideas, themselves historical products, that serve as material forces. Here, culture itself is made material. The kind of materialism proposed here, then, is not one that appropriates and subsumes culture and consciousness within an expanding material base, but one that starts with a given population and material circumstances that confront it and includes culture and consciousness among the material circumstances to be examined" (Roseberry, 1994: 41).

Following Roseberry's and other ideas outlined this far, I have structured the thesis into two parts. In the first part, a broader discussion on how Nepal's spatially fragmented and uneven socio-economic landscape has been connected to or disconnected from the historical trajectories of capitalist development is brought forward. It focuses on the conditions of class and other economic relationships through which the Kham Magars and other peasant communities in Nepal have entered the global economy. By drawing on the economic and cultural history of the Nepalese peasantry, this part outlines the layers of unilinear development in rural Nepal and argues that the concept of combining temporal unevenness of peasant communities is central to understanding revolutionary politics (Smith, 2014). This argument shows that peasants' political agency is inscribed in the process of uneven and combined development and central to any idea of state-formation.

In the second part of the thesis, the argument turns from the conditional to the dual character of class. This conceptual move makes it possible to ethnographically investigate both the 'conditional' and 'potential' elements of class through the doctoral fieldwork in Mid-Western Nepal conducted during several visits between 2015-2019. This part of the research focuses on the historical transformations of political consciousness through the movement process initiated by the peasants and the Maoist rebels. The ethnographic chapters provide a multi-layered analysis of several stages of the struggle. Starting at the ideological foundations of the movement, I draw on Maoist documents to show how Maoist theory and praxis ranging from struggles for recognition and redistribution and often shifted between affirmative and transformative action (Fraser, 1995). By following

the lives of Maoist ex-combatants and the social life in the former Maoist base area, I describe the participation in the 'social movement from below' as a 'struggle over meaning' (Cox and Nielsen, 2014: 92). By connecting the local history of struggle, the experiences of social movement participants, and the process of 'counterhegemonic framing' of collective action, I analyse the uneven development of revolutionary action in rural Nepal. Looking at the micro-level of social movement building helps me show how peasants in rural Nepal became active participants in the different strands of the Maoist movement.

Read together; these two parts reflect the thesis's conceptual grounding, also seen in Roseberry's work on the Venezuelan peasants. Like Roseberry's work, the structure of the thesis poses relevant questions about the emancipation struggles of the Kham Magar community against the backdrop of world-historic processes:

"How were we to understand these anthropological subjects in terms of the world-historical processes through which they emerged or by means of which they maintained themselves without simplistically reducing the dynamics of their communities to the dynamics of world history?" (Roseberry, 1994: 147).

Methodologically the thesis is building on an approach that is at the same time historical and materialist, but also political-economic and ethnographic. The development of Marx's own work can serve as an example of a materialist approach that starts with real-life situations. In the quote, at the start of this chapter, Marx argues that: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx, 1852: 398), I have, like many others before me, first interpreted this statement as the central premise of Marx's materialism inscribed in his understanding of the relationship between structure and agency. However, there is more to this passage and Marx's materialist approach of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, as Roseberry has warned: "[i]t is seldom noted that the observation introduces a comment on the weight of ideas in a historical process" (Roseberry, 1994: 40). This approach to culture and consciousness starts with the symbolic analysis of individuals' lives but does not give this part of social life the autonomy that is to be found in cultural anthropology and cultural studies (ibid). The structure of my thesis into two parts derives from this understanding of culture, consciousness, and class. First, culture and consciousness are explained through the

historical developments of material circumstances, in which I explore the materiality of culture (part one). Second, the symbolic struggle of peasants challenging the conditioning elements of class, that is, the social circumstances of oppression, is empirically examined to explain the 'active and conscious' political culture of rural resistance (part two).

Authors such as Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz have placed similar concerns at the core of their research. They conceptualised culture as a social force that has liberated the anthropological subjects of more rigorous theoretical confinements but maintained the analysis of the main social antagonisms of specific modes of production at its core. Following some of the central tenets of this school of thought, I propose that it is not only a tool that helps us explain revolutions and other oppositional projects but allows anthropologists to critically examine the contemporary entanglements of neoliberal capitalism. The strength of this framework thus lies in the analysis of "how capitalist logics seep into people's struggles at all scales to the extent that even the most intimate terrains, which tend to feel the most 'authentic', or 'our own', are already implicated, usurped, and enclosed by capitalist logics" (Neveling and Steur., 2018: 2).

Revolutionary action is only one social activity in which I observe the potential and conditional elements of class. The Khams did not blindly believe in the success of the armed struggle. They are aware that emancipatory struggles are fought on more fronts than just with guerrilla warfare. They recognise the class character of their life journeys' and the exhausting struggles that await them at every step. We have often discussed the political freedoms that the guerrillas had fought for, but I have noticed how they often referred to continuous economic dependence and marginalisation in the same breath. In this way, the Khams talk about freedom with caution, pointing out how they have overcome some of the discriminatory practices of the past but continue, without resorting to abstract thinking, to address the persistent inequality that continues to be a daily reality for most in rural Nepal.

Most Khams are retrospectively disappointed about the outcome of the revolution because the Nepali Revolution, like many others in the Global South, was first divided into smaller units and then kidnapped by an opportunistic revolutionary elite. Although the Maoists managed to capture state power in the consequent years after the revolution,

the promised reforms of the countryside are still due. Instead of constructing a new socialist alternative, a process that could lead to agrarian reforms and collectivisation, the Maoists followed the path of developmentalism and state-led modernisation that eventually transformed them into a typical bourgeois party. Thus, the outcome of the Nepali revolution is another example of what Gramsci would call a 'passive revolution'. Revolution in the sense that the ruling classes were still able to deliver "real historical gains, producing real social transformations that could be comprehended, formally at least, as progressive", and passive, as peasants from all corners in Nepal would confirm, that this transformation mainly occurred "without the extensive involvement of subaltern classes" (Thomas, 2006: 73).

Throughout the thesis, with the help of ethnographically grounded knowledge, I try to rethink some of the presuppositions that anthropological writings have created about the revolution in Nepal. Chapter one outlines the ethnographic approach to the topic and details how I established rapport with the Kham Magars in Rukum. The second chapter discusses the use of visual methods during fieldwork and the process of creating doctoral ethnographic films. The following chapter describes the idiosyncratic literature on the People's War in Nepal and discusses it as the different 'ways of seeing' the revolution. This chapter maps the conceptual and theoretical coordinates of the field of study. Chapter four rethinks how the Kham Magars (and Magars more broadly) can be re-positioned in Nepal's state's formation history. The fifth chapter describes the different historical trajectories of capitalist development in Nepal, redefining the role of merchant capital and the early industrialization attempts at the start of the 20th century. It argues that the transition debate and the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach have concealed a more uneven character of capitalist development revealed by exploring the heterogeneity of capitalist development rather than emphasising its singularity. Chapter six further draws on these conclusions to understand how Nepal's uneven economic landscape has been combined with the global capitalist economy through the development industry. Although capitalism had previously existed in Nepal, it argues that the development industry has significantly impacted the creation of revolutionary subjectivities. The discussion on 'unevenness' and 'combination' presented in chapter seven helps me paint the complex economic landscape of Mid-Western Nepal today.

Through the narrative of de-peasantization and de-proletarianization, this chapter looks at the current process of the uneven proletarianization of the Kham Magars. Chapters eight to eleven look at the uneven development of revolutionary action, the establishment of the Maoist base area, and the Maoist guerilla economy in the village of Maikot. This ethnographic material is followed by exploring how livelihoods were affected and transformed by the revolution. Chapter twelve draws on interviews with former combatants to show why disappointment is an important aspect of post-revolutionary politics. This helps me discuss the coordinates of the post-revolutionary common sense, according to which people feel caught between past expectations and current disappointments. Chapter thirteen brings the narratives of disappointment into the perspective of post-war village restructuring around a lucrative resource found in the highland pastures above the village. In the aftermath of the People's War, the so-called caterpillar fungus became the most important source of income for Maikotis. The chapter follows the history of the local mushroom economy in the village and analyses the different governance systems that established new relations between state and non-state actors. Although the local struggle for the commons has become a source for creating new political subjectivities, I argue that the emergence of the post-war politics of autonomy and other forms of commoning conceal the dependency and exploitation created by the yarsagumba commodity chain. The new field of contentious politics has empowered the rural elites who are negotiating a better position within the state. In conclusion, I argue that reconsidering the outcomes of contentious politics within the uneven capitalist landscape constituted by the simultaneity of different forms of subsumption creates a form of passive revolution.

Chapter 1: The Land of Guerillas and Extraordinary Mushrooms

Choosing the Site for Fieldwork

I first read about Rukum and Rolpa districts in Maoist sources online and in anthropological accounts on Maoism that have picked up on the region's developments after the conflict escalated in the period after the royal massacre of 2001⁶. In these accounts, the Maoists described the villages of this region as communities organized in tribal egalitarian societies, in which they recognized inherent revolutionary agency⁷. This was one of the reasons why the Maoists chose the remote Kham villages of Mid-Western Nepal for their base area. After reading in more detail about Maoist organizing in the region and the scale of collective action that made this area the centre of the People's War, this seemed to be the right place, to begin with fieldwork on subaltern revolutionary action. At the time of my first departure to the field, however, the importance of this region had already begun to emerge within the anthropology of the People's War. Several scholarly publications challenged the mainstream media view that has portrayed Maoists as bandits and violent insurgents with little sympathy for village life (chapter 3).

During preparations for the first field trip in 2015, I read accounts reporting on the Maoist organizing in the village of Thabang in the Rolpa district. The Maoists portrayed Thabang as the 'cradle of the Nepali revolution', and the media soon picked it up as a place where the state had no presence, and the Maoist shadow state model established independent rule. The image of Thabang had captured the imagination of the Nepali (and the international) Left, but there had been relatively little effort from journalists and social

⁶ The Royal massacre is considered one of the decisive turning points in political history of Nepal. In the midst of the conflict between the Maoists and the state, the crown prince Dipendra killed his parents and other family members present at the dinner party at Narayanhiti Palace. After the massacre king Birendra was succeeded by his brother Gyanendra who soon took a more decisive stance against the Maoists. This violent period started by naming the Maoists terrorists, followed by other strict military measures: the entry of the Royal Nepalese army into the conflict with the Maoists and declaring a state of emergency to seize control over the conflict.

⁷ The Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal (Prachanda) said in an interview with reporter Li Onesto: "Yes, in Rolpa and Rukum there are not too many temples, and in the family background in these nationalities, there is a kind of democracy, a primitive democracy. Even male domination in these places is weaker-it is not like in the dominating castes. And at the same time, our party has a long history of working in these areas, like in Thabang and Rolpa" (Onesto, 2000).

scientists to understand what was going on in other parts of this vast region. I thought that places that were central to Maoist organizing but have not yet received scholarly attention would deserve further research in the context of collective action and the post-revolutionary situation. For this reason, my focus moved away from Thabang as the first obvious choice. The other reason was my intention to build the ethnography beyond Thabang's narrative of revolution that dropped a shadow on more remote parts of the region. Thabang's rich history of communist organizing has been studied in great detail (Ogura, 2007, Gidwani and Paudel, 2012; de Sales 2010, 2011, 2013; Zharkevich, 2019; Patel, 2019), linking the village to the narrative of the Maoist movement that established it as the centre of their base area and as the symbol of resistance against the state. While Thabang's history of struggle reveals the ideological foundations of rural struggle, it also conceals parts of the movement building that remained outside the main narratives coined by the Maoists during the People's War.

My primary research interest was to understand the formation of political consciousness on the village level. The motivation behind this was to challenge two contrasting ideas about subaltern agency in Nepal: that there was a pre-existing ideological formation (village communism) that laid the ground for a more 'authentic' revolution; and that there was no revolutionary consciousness whatsoever, that the Kham Magars (or other minorities involved in the war) were mere instruments in the hands of the educated Maoists that came to the region to pursue their agenda. In my view, in both of these versions, the complexity of real-life revolutionary organizing is lost. More importantly, the main issues around class formations, political mobilization, and movement organizing central to social movements research remain unaddressed. Why was this movement formed in this remote part of the country, and why did it draw so many people into its ranks? This seemed to be the missing puzzle in the anthropology of Maoism in Nepal.

So what drew my attention to Rukum district? Both Rukum and Rolpa districts are considered geographically remote (which was even more pertinent in the 1990s than today). Both areas are populated by historically marginalized ethnic minorities, such as Kham Magars, Gurungs and different social formations of Dalits living in villages under Magar rule. The Kham Magar's involvement in the People's War has been well

documented by anthropologists, as this case is very eloquent in showing how the Maoist movement itself has propelled the formation of ethnic identities in an area where ethnic politics have not existed before Maoist politicizing the population (de Sales, 2011). I explore different intersections of ethnic and class identities throughout the thesis, as this remained a fundamental question of post-revolutionary state restructuring. While it is important to deal with the topic of Maoist politicization of ethnicity and the organization of the tribal groups that merged their grievances against the state with Maoist campaigns for ethnic rights and autonomy, these anthropological accounts often provide little insight into village hegemonic relations preceding the war. Outside of the debates on ethnicity, little research existed at the time on class differentiation, social movement building and recent political-economic changes in the area of Mid-Western Nepal.

Outside of these well-established narratives, I came across a memoir that reported on the early village struggle in a remote part of Rukum written by a former Maoist combatant going by the *nom the guerre Ajayashakti*. It is a story of a young Kham Magar, also known as Surul Pun, that depicts the collective action of a village struggling against an unjust landlord. Besides the detailed description of what Surul calls 'village class struggle', his memoir is one of the more detailed and informative accounts of a life of a guerilla fighter published to date (Maoist journals and magazines have published many such accounts in the years after the conflict)⁸. The case of Surul's home village of Maikot presented itself as a perfect opportunity to study social movement building that occurred prior to a more ethnically politicized movement of the later years. Although I could have found a variety of examples of how individuals and whole villages became involved in the Maoist movement, the case of Maikot allowed me to study two periods of village-level social organization: the formation of political consciousness leading up to the revolution and its transformation throughout the different political and economic scenarios that occurred in the post-revolutionary period. In this way, Surul's autobiography drew me into the history of the village with several similar life stories of people's involvement in the

⁸ Michael Hutt has written in more details about the Maoist memoirs as a genre emerging in Nepali literature. He proposes to look at this valuable material seriously when studying the history of the People's war to understand the life histories of combatants, the political imaginary that drove them in and out of politics and the political discourse that brings us closer to understanding Maobadi culture (Hutt, 2012).

People's War. In the following years, these people, with whom I have maintained close personal ties, became closely related to different parts of the doctoral research.

The Kham Magars and the Village of Maikot

The Kham Magars⁹ are an ethnic group living in the hills west of the Dhaulagiri range, in the districts of Rolpa, eastern and northern Rukum. The Kham Magar country (*desh*) is relatively small, and it consists of around 50.000 individuals living in villages scattered around the hilly and forested areas of Mid-Western Nepal. The Khams speak a Tibeto-Burman language, and their socio-cultural space is distinct from the Hindu culture of the plains, although, throughout the centuries, Hinduism has spread to the region influenced the Khams. Hinduization has forced the Kham Magars to abandon some of their cultural practices. The most well-known is probably the imposed restriction of consuming beef (alongside abandoning practices such as bull sacrifice found in Maikot) (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2011: 87). The incorporation of the Khams into the 19th-century legal code Muluki Ain categorized the Magars as a pure caste but not 'reducible to slavery'.

"The Magars were considered a pure caste of alcohol drinkers not reducible to slavery. This position is lower than their rank in Central Nepal, where they are considered degraded Kshatriyas and superior to other tribal groups" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2011: 91).

Living at the state's margins, but not in a space that could be termed stateless, the Kham Magars' socio-cultural world remained distinct from other ethnic groups (the Kham Magar cultural history is explored in chapter 4). The main distinctions besides the language (*Kham*) can be found in the characteristics related to how the Kham Magars organize their livelihoods. For transhumant pastoralists such as the Khams, the seasonal migration of sheep from the high Himalayan plateaus to the Terai's plains and vice-versa has been a central point of everyday life. Subsistence farming remains one of the

⁹ The Kham Magars should not be confused with the Magars, a wider term used to describe Nepal's largest ethnic group that speaks Magar language. Although Kham Magars (often referred to as Khams, or Western Magars) consider themselves Magars, it is possible to make linguistic and other cultural differentiations between the two. The Kham Magar's cultural origins can be traced back to central Siberia, due to the shamanistic healing practices they still practice to this day. However, the term Kham is not used in any specific relation to the Kham region or people of Central and Western China. For a more detailed description of the Magars see also: Hitchcock: *The Magars of Banyan Hill* (1966), and more recently Lecomte-Tilouine: *On Magar Identity and Autonomy* (2006). On the relationship between Magar and Kham Magar ethnic group see also: 'Some preliminary observations on the relationship between Kham, Magar, (and Chepang)', by David Watters (1991).

foundations around which households organize their living, but the Kham villages' economic composition has drastically changed in the last decades. The Kham Magars' livelihoods have been rapidly changing due to other types of economic dependency that have emerged in the area, most notably the labour migration abroad and to the cities in the Terai (chapters 6 and 7).

Kham Magar villages usually consist of one main village and smaller hamlets scattered around, some as far as a full day of walking away. The main village of Maikot is settled on a hilltop and from the south; it appears as an ancient fortress, defending the gates to the high mountains behind it. The centre of Maikot is congested around the Masta shrine¹⁰; however, with all the surrounding hamlets, it comprises nine wards, smaller units that are all a part of Maikot's Village Development Committee (VDC from here on; in Nepali: Ga.Bi.Sa.). In the very centre of the village near the shrine, there is the old village, the central ward called Kanchhabara that belongs to the Pun clan (one of the four clans found in Kham Magar villages). There is a small bazaar in the surrounding area, with two newly built hotels, small shops, a pharmacy, and a space for public meetings. Attached to this area from the east are the so-called *Kami toll* (blacksmith ward) and a small settlement of *Damai* families (the former "tailor-musician" caste). The village stretches further up the hill toward the path leading to Dolpo, where there are smaller settlements of Kaldung, Harpiya, and Dharagaun. Above the village, there is the Putha Himal public school (in operation since 1969), where today, around 400 of the village children receive their early education.

Although Kham Magar villages are not far apart, some geographical and cultural differences within the region set them apart, and the locals are very eager to point them out, whether it comes to dialect, weather, or food. Maikot, for example, is known as a cold place where there is much wind and the harvest season starts much later than in the south. Out of all Kham Magar villages, it is the northernmost settlement, almost bordering the Dolpo region, which sets it apart from other parts of the Kham Magar country. This fact

¹⁰ Masta is a possession cult practiced in Western Nepal, in places like Jumla, Mugu and Jajarkot. The Masta possession occurs through the medium of oracles called Dhamis. In Maikot until recently there were Dhamis that still practiced the Masta possession cult, but only the ritual high priest remains in the village today, the person who performs the main rites for the 'Bhume puja'. In the Masta cult area of Western Nepal, Maikot is the eastern most place where Masta cult is to be found.

is experienced by every visitor travelling from the south making the long day's journey from Takasera to Maikot village, which can last up to twelve hours (although locals finish it in eight). Due to the remoteness of the place, its geographical position and the fact that it lies close to Khams mythological landscapes (such as Pupal lake), Maikot is considered a village where 'traditional', 'ancient' Kham Magar culture is still to be found. In Maikotis eyes, too much modernisation has spread up the hills from the valleys further south. One such thing often pointed out by locals is that Maikot's liquor (*roksi*) is pure and made only from maize (*makaiko roksi*), not like in other places (especially in the rival village of Takasera) where their 'impure' *roksi* is mixed with either rice (*chamal*) or millet (*khodo*), coming from the cities. The examples that set Maikot apart in the locals' view are plentiful: from the absence of blue and silver tin roofs to the fact that the village is not yet connected to a road, and therefore more 'remote and authentic'. Even in the case of the People's War, some ex-combatants pointed out that this was the 'original' place from where the revolution started long before the Maoists came to the region. From the locals' perspective, the Maikot's struggle against invaders from the plains and their malicious habits of the outside world has been going on for centuries.



Figure 1: The village of Maikot, Rukum district, Source: Author

My doctoral fieldwork became intrinsically connected to Maikot village after my first visit to the area in 2015. Back then, I was an M.A. student, and I had carefully tailored a

research trip to the area, my first trip into more remote parts of the country, to help me write in more detail about political formations in rural Nepal. However, I was clueless about what to expect - reading about Maoists organizing in the area and about the Kham Magar's social organization, I knew little to nothing about daily life in the villages. In other words, I knew what scholars had written about the Kham Magars, but I had almost no knowledge of everyday life in the village.

When it comes to the Kham Magars, the most common stereotypes present them as historical subjects who are often exploited by outside actors to fight for a foreign cause. This stereotype is so prevalent that the Khams tell it about their own history. Today many still say that the people before the People's War were naïve participants, and powerful actors often misused their 'goodwill' to achieve their gains. There is a popular anecdote Khams tell about political manipulations of the past. Gopalji Jung Shah was once asked: "Where are you going?" and in response, he said he was going to 'buy some sheep from the hills,' when ironically, he was on his way to collect the votes from Hukam and Maikot villages. I found similar interpretations of why and how the Kham Magars had joined the Maoist movement during my stay in Kathmandu. To the Kathmandu middle classes, joining the Maoist ranks can only be a matter of ignorance or a result of ideological indoctrination that would mold these subjects into puppet-like figures. A popular opinion in the cities is that targeting illiterate and 'uneducated' people was an intentional choice by the cunning Maoist ideologues. Only illiterate peasants in remote Nepal could be persuaded to fight for such an illegitimate cause. This view, which was often propelled by the media, has not paid enough attention to the ground realities of the People's War and disregarded the revolutionary agency of the political subjects such as the Kham Magars.

First as Tragedy and the Second Time as Farce: The Guerilla Trek

Before my first trip to Rukum the political situation in Nepal had already radically changed. The former insurgent party had become a major political force in the country's, and the constitution-making process was in full swing. The topic of the People's War and the Maoist revolutionary politics that spread around the country two decades ago seemed to be seeping into the past. In Kathmandu, at least, it was rarely a topic of conversation. Despite its absence in Kathmandu's daily life, this did not mean that revolutionary history

was forgotten in other parts of Nepal. The amount of academic works published to date is quite an eloquent example of the topic's importance in Nepal's academic and political environment. One only needs to visit the bookshops in Kathmandu, where studies of Maoism, conflict resolution, and the debates on recent political changes and state restructuring in Nepal are plentiful¹¹.

Visiting these bookshops and making my way through the number of recent publications, I quickly realized that only a few studies addressed the social change in rural Nepal throughout the revolutionary period. Alongside the question of the formation of political consciousness in rural Nepal that brought me to this research in the first place, another question offered itself as an important starting point for my fieldwork. When revolutions happen, social scientists tend to write about the formation period of the social movements and focus on large-scale, decisive events seen as critical developments around which other smaller events occur. However, anthropological writings have challenged such views and have not focused on revolutions only as single, linear events that progress through stages but have rather understood social upheavals as parts of other social and political processes. Since the 1960s, when there was still little research done on rebellions outside of a more functionalist framework (Worsley, 1961), a field emerged that partially solved the problem (often connected to revolutions) by starting to pay more specific attention to peasants¹². Anthropologists began to study revolutions by exploring different ways to understand these highly complex historical processes, I argue that we should also pay attention to this subject after the dust of collective action settles down. Nepal's situation presented itself as a perfect place to explore not only 'how' and 'why' people join revolutions, but to explore what happens to the people who have been at the centre of the political struggle after the main contradiction of the conflict was resolved. In other words, I propose to think of revolutions as an expression of struggles between social classes and

¹¹ The number of books available in English language increased in the recent years. There is a significant number of Nepali scholars who have produced invaluable resources in English language. I mostly relied on literature originally or translated in English and some sources in Nepali that I could get translated.

¹² From Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959), to Barrington Moore's *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (1966), to Eric Wolf's *Peasants* (1966) this field would later center around the *Journal of Peasant Studies*. Central to this field of study were the issues of agrarian change, and the issues that concerned 'peasantries and their social structures; the nature and logic of peasant agriculture; peasantries and their "moral communities"; and peasants and politics' (Byres 1994, 2).

as highly unpredictable temporal events, the outcomes of which should be a matter of empirical investigation at different scales.

The questions anthropologists ask about revolutions can be related to the temporality of revolutionary political action, its connection to different conceptions of being human, its relation to modernity, enhancing or discouraging religious practice and the representation of utopian world-making. Furthermore, ethnographic interest in this research is to understand the different ways revolutions continue to shape people's lives. How has the revolutionary action changed through their eyes over time, and in what ways have these different forms of struggle through political action affected them? Regarding the recent revolution and specifically the region of Rukum, the ethnographic insights that would help answer these questions were missing.

After spending some months researching and building personal connections in Kathmandu that would make the process of settling in the far-off district of Rukum more straightforward, the time to set off for the hills was quickly approaching. With my partner Eva, who was joining me for the trip, we were preparing for what was going to be a one-month-long journey that would bring us to the village of Maikot and other villages around Rukum and Rolpa region. We met with several people in Kathmandu from places like Thabang, Maikot and Takasera, to get as much information as possible about what to expect on the path. At several of these gatherings, one thing repeatedly kept coming up: 'the Guerilla trek'.

In March 2004, a total of around 6000 combatants and volunteers from the People's Liberation Army's (PLA from here on) Western Division gathered in Rolpa to launch one of the most significant attacks of the People's War (Ogura, 2004: 86). The attack on Beni was one of the major battles of the second phase of the conflict where the main opponent of the Maoists was not the police force but the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA). The Beni attack targets were the army barracks and the government offices situated around the Mangalaghat bazaar. However, the carefully planned battle, an attempt of the Maoists to show their military strength, did not meet their expectations. After a long night of fighting, the PLA in the forested hills above Beni succeeded in making the final push against the police and RNA based in the town. In this final attack, the PLA captured the

police and government offices south of Beni, seizing weapons and personnel that surrendered immediately. The Maoists, thinking they had won the battle, "poured into the streets, singing and dancing. Thinking the battle had almost reached a victorious end, they prepared to march through the town in celebration" (Adhikari, 2014: non-pag). After this sudden turnaround in the morning, the RNA retaliated with the help of a military helicopter and the Maoists retreated, running back into the hills from where they had come. During the long retreat back to Rukum and Rolpa, many PLA fighters lost their lives after being pursued by the RNA and the military helicopter. Regardless of the relatively even outcome of the battle, the battle of Beni was celebrated as the peak of Maoist military power and one of the outstanding achievements of the People's war. From the Maoist perspective, it continues to be seen in this light to this day.

In 2012, in a ceremony organized by the Nepal Tourism Board, Pushpa Kamal Dahal (most commonly known by his Maoist *nom de guerre* Prachanda), the military leader of the Maoist rebellion and the Prime Minister at the time, inaugurated the opening of a new trekking route, as a move of Nepal's tourism industry to start benefiting from war tourism. "Guerrilla trek", he said,

"has the potential of becoming a war tourism product like in Vietnam, Russia, and China. As war tourism has been promoted worldwide for economic benefit, Nepal's Guerrilla Trek also hold the potential to grab the world's attention. [...] As all know, Nepal has seen big political upheavals and the people's revolution will be of no value unless the country goes through an economic transformation. I hope the Guerrilla Trek will play an important role."¹³

The irony could not have been starker; the Maoist leader who only eight years ago was one of the initiators behind this fierce attack was now, as the state's representative, the leading figure behind the promotion of this battle for international tourism markets. The Guerilla trek is marketed as a trek that offers a glimpse into Nepali political history and broad bio-cultural diversity. It was launched as a learning platform for people that would like to learn more about the movement, about "testimonies of people who were the real force behind the movement, survivors, observers and victims of a decade-long conflict in the post-Maoist heartland" (Rana and Bhandari, 2018: 41). The trek itself has several routes, starting at the point of the conflict itself, in Beni. It continues through the villages

¹³ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-19815779>

of Darbang, and Muna where the path leads over Jaljala pass to Dhorpatan and the broader area of Rukum. This is the point where one enters the Kham Magar country. The trek's total length is from two to three weeks, but the length varies depending on the different trails, some leading through less demanding terrain and are 'lower', the others go through mountain passes (like Phagune Phedi) and are 'higher'.

The trek presented an opportunity to dig deeper into the representations the Maoist politicians have formed about their movement's recent history. As the trek was also heavily endorsed by Khams I met in Kathmandu, to whom this represented a great model to promote tourism in the area, I thought this would be a fruitful departure for fieldwork. In the tourist discourse initiated by Prachanda and the real-life situations of people in these villages, I saw an opportunity to explore two different modalities of the conflict's history and representation. In this preparation for the trip, Marx's opening lines of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* seemed to resonate well with the post-revolutionary situation in Mid-Western Nepal more generally, and with the Guerilla Trek in particular:

"Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." (Marx, 1852, non-pag)

Getting to Know the Kham Country and the Extraordinary Mushroom 'Yarsagumba'

Walking to Maikot, which conveniently lies on the Guerilla trek's trail, soon proved to be the right decision. There is no need to emphasize that speaking Nepali is probably the most important competence that helps establish rapport with people in hill villages. To learn the local language of Kham would make an even more significant difference, but for almost all situations, the knowledge of the Nepali language proved to be sufficient (my knowledge of the language back then was very basic, but it improved significantly throughout the fieldwork). Apart from the language, other ways of establishing rapport in Kham villages turned out to work particularly well, and I soon found out that the recently established Guerilla trek is one of them.

One way to establish rapport in Kham villages is humour. A great deal of Khams' socializing is to make funny jokes in all sorts of situations. David Waters, a linguist who was staying in Takasera with his family throughout 1960s and 1970s, put it in this way:

"One of the great strengths of most tribal people is that they know better than to take themselves too seriously. The flip side, of course, is that they don't take anyone else seriously either. The instinct is to see life in a comic light, and in the end, self-aggrandizement is the biggest joke of all. Village elders, chieftains and headmen come from common village stock, and no one, regardless of status, rises far above his humble beginnings. There are no titles or uniforms to distinguish the great and the humble" (Waters, 2011, non-pag).

In most social situations, humorous situations helped break the ice of more formal settings that often occur when a foreigner enters a family home. In Maikot, I was soon known as the person who liked to make jokes (*jiskeko manchhe*), and my jokes were often referred to as 'dirty jokes' (*naramro jiskeko*); of course, the local rule is the dirtier, the better. Another thing that goes along with making merry in a village setting is alcohol drinking. Sitting down around the fire in a Kham house and being served a bowl of corn beer (*makaiko jaad*) or *roksi* is a ritual probably as old as the villages themselves. Refusing to partake in it could substantially hinder the process of establishing rapport, while on the other hand, taking the time to drink, make fun and listen to stories that start to erupt after the second or the third bowl of *jaad* is drunk has proved to be one of the best ways to establish closer relations with Khams¹⁴.

The Guerrilla trek journey took us through Kham villages in Rukum and Rolpa and soon became a learning experience about all the different ways Khams spend time together. Even more, the Guerilla trek itself became a good starting point for conversations that led to the topic of the People's War. I soon realized that there is another thing that Khams value equally to humour and drinking. The fact that one has some knowledge about other parts of the Kham area is significant to Khams and quickly establishes the person as a knowledgeable and well-travelled individual (*ghumeko/bhujeko manchhe*). Commenting

¹⁴ The experience of Ina Zharkevich in the village of Thabang in Rolpa, just two days south of Maikot reports of a different situation. Although several anti-alcohol campaigns (the first initiated by the Maoists during the war) have changed the practices of alcohol consumption in the village, alcohol consumption and production was still very much present in village social life. Zharkevich found out that the fact that she is not participating in the consumption of alcohol had merely put her on the 'modernizing' side of the debate, that has been fighting the more 'traditional', 'superstitious' side which still saw alcohol as an important part of Khams' everyday life (Zharkevich, 2019: 183).

on the local specificities of different parts of Kham country makes one less of an outsider. Soon people started saying things like: "When we saw that you could make fun as we do, we thought that you are also like us".

Another important aspect of rural life was brought into light during the trek from village to village in the former Maoists' controlled zone. I noticed the importance of travelling, meeting and conversing with people on the way, and at the regular rest stops by the path (*chautaris*: small stoned walls made to rest, spaces where many travellers make a short stop to lift the heavy load off their back). In this way, we met Dhanbir, a trader who was also on his one-month-long journey around Mid-Western Nepal. We were sitting on a *chautari* at the top of the Jaljala pass, the mythological and geographical point of entry to the Kham country, when on the path behind us, walking alone in the snow, appeared a small figure of a man. Greeting us at the rest stop, Dhanbir sat down beside us and inquired about our journey. It is impossible to forget what he was wearing, as he was all dressed up, in a grey business type of suit and black leather shoes, carrying only a tiny daily backpack. He looked as if he had just come on a short trip from the city to visit his relatives, but we soon found out that we were all headed to Dhorpatan, still a whole day's walk ahead of us. Dhanbir kindly offered to be our guide for the day, an offer that was meant to be neither accepted nor refused. He presented himself as a businessman from Burtibang, a town just south of the Dhorpatan plateau. As he proudly pointed out, he was in business in several different fields, and the conversation soon began revolving around his primary interest: a mushroom found in the high grasslands of north Rukum. "The name of this mushroom", Dhanbir said, "is yarsagumba, and I'm going to Rukum because of this. I will buy a whole batch from this year's harvest and sell it in Kathmandu".

"Yarsagumba" is known as the world's most expensive medicinal fungus. By many, it is referred to as a caterpillar fungus (*Cordyceps sinensis* or more recently *Ophiocordyceps sinensis*), but its name most commonly found in Nepal is "yarsagumba" and derives from Tibetan "yartsa gunbu", literary meaning: "summer grass, winter worm". This name directly refers to the yarsagumba's strange life cycle. A fungus infects a larva of a *thitarodes* ghost moth buried in the ground during the winter months, and in the spring, a mushroom grows out of its mummified body (Winkler, 2010). It is found in China, India (Sikkim), Bhutan, and Nepal in the high grasslands between 3,000 and 5,000 meters of

altitude (10,000 – 16,000 feet). In Tibetan medicine, it is used as a powerful aphrodisiac, and it is prescribed for lung, kidney and liver disease. However, it became popular in China and other parts of East and Southeast Asia as a luxurious gift and a culinary symbol. Most of these fashionable products made for mass consumption are produced in small pills, and the price of one pill can reach up to USD 2,000. This product, not often seen in the western markets, has seen a tremendous increase in its market value in eastern commerce. According to some estimates, the price has increased by over 900 % in the first years of the 2000s (Winkler, 2009: 292–295).

In the post-revolutionary period, the different parts of Nepal's countryside were affected by the yarsagumba trading craze. Due to its great value on the international market, it became known as the "Himalayan gold". It was known in the Dolpo region in pre-conflict Nepal, but a 'gold rush' was triggered after the prices skyrocketed during the height of the conflict in 2001. This immediate increase in the mushroom's value was connected to reports that the Chinese athletes increased performance on long-distance runs attributed to yarsagumba consumption (Devkota, 2006). However, what is more likely to be behind the 'yarsa' economic boom, is the shift from its use in Tibetan and traditional Chinese medicine to a more commercial purpose. Recently it has been developed as a commodity for a particular gift economy, a gift with high social value for government officials and other people with important socio-political roles in China (Yeh and Lama, 2013: 323).

The trip through the Dhorpatan hunting reserve with Dhanbir that followed was an introductory lesson into the local yarsagumba trade. Before 2001, the trading of yarsagumba was illegal in Nepal, and it was picked only in a handful of regions, such as the remote region of Dolpo, where it was traditionally used and sold on the black market to Tibetan merchants¹⁵. "Some of the people you will meet in Dhorpatan village are the ones who have started this business", Dhanbir pointed out, thinking of the Tibetan refugees that have settled in the area. People from the south like Dhanbir joined the 'yarsa boom' much later when its value soared, especially after the ban on its trade was lifted by Nepal's government in 2001. In the villages we were heading to, Dhanbir argued, this

¹⁵ The Nepali government made collection and trade of yarsagumba illegal in 1993 (see 'the Forest Regulation (1995) and Forest Act (1993)') in order to protect this precious mountainous resource.

extraordinary mushroom presented the primary source of income in the period after the war. "The 'whole-timers' [Maoist cadres] that have fought in the war, had to come back to the villages after the peace agreement was signed," he said, "they received some compensation from the government, but after that was gone, they had to start making a living". In the post-revolutionary scenario, the yarsagumba economy was one of the most common ways for ex-combatants and other Maoist cadres to re-integrate into village life. To my surprise, the central hub for the yarsa trade and the village that appropriated most of the yarsagumba fields in highland Rukum was Maikot. As Dhanbir pointed out, its northernmost position gave it the best access to the mushrooms growing just at its doorstep. It appeared that the former Maoist guerilla stronghold, in the period after the war, became a trading point for the expensive and recently discovered magical fungus.

The long-day trek with Dhanbir that took us deeper into the Kham country informed me about the unexpected and unexplored post-revolutionary narrative present in Rukum district. Dhanbir's story about this incredibly expensive mushroom that supposedly cures all sorts of diseases first sounded quite extraordinary, but it soon began to make sense after our arrival to Maikot. I was surprised to see that everything in the village was already in full swing for the 'yarsa' season. In the middle of spring, we arrived just in time when after caring for their fields, the local population started to make more time in their day for the most important season of the year: the picking of yarsagumba. The season of 'yarsa' hunting in Maikot starts in the first or second week of May and lasts up until the end of July or sometimes even to the middle of August if the weather, snow conditions and the quantity of the harvest are still convincing enough for the pickers to endure. The Maikotis usually set up three camps (each camp consisting of a thousand pickers or more) in the high pastures above the village, and the village yarsa committee is formed to overlook all aspects of the picking season. Although the purpose of my visit was somewhat different, it was impossible to oversee the daily preparations of people that were soon to depart for the yarsa camps. Little did I know then that in my future fieldwork in Maikot, I will accompany the former guerilla fighters on their month-long journey into the high Himalayan terrain.

Batoko Cinema: Film as a Way of Getting Access to the Field

During the first field trip, I established some of the most important connections that later helped me form the basis of my doctoral fieldwork in Maikot. I met Surul Pun, the former Maoist commander, whose memoir brought me to Maikot in the first place, and I met Chaya Bahadur Pun, the former Pradhan Pancha, the person who had started the yarsagumba trade in Maikot. Both Surul and Chaya opened the door into very different worlds, and with their help, it was easier to follow different research threads: the local history of the People's war, the lives of former Maoist whole-timers, and the post-war development of the yarsagumba trade. During fieldwork, many people from Maikot and other parts of Rukum provided relevant insights for the research, but Surul and Chaya helped me settle in Maikot and make the first weeks of fieldwork in an unfamiliar place a smooth and enjoyable process. The experience I gained in Maikot in 2015 and the trek around Rukum and Rolpa districts later helped me make all the necessary preparations for the extended visit to the field in 2017.

By then, it came to my attention that conducting fieldwork in Maikot was not as accessible in the past, and for the only other anthropologist that had attempted to do fieldwork there before me, staying in Maikot has proved to be a rather unpleasant experience. Tom Fricke, a doctoral student at Madison University, had departed to Nepal to conduct fieldwork in this remote part of Kham country in 1981. After arriving at Maikot, Fricke's stay did not last more than six weeks. In 2002, he wrote that the early departure was connected to the fact that he was often sick and depressed. He reflected on his experience of fieldwork in Maikot by revisiting his ethnographic notes:

"Tomorrow I begin ... The trick is to keep busy. One takes the first step in fieldwork with an absolute lack of certainty about how it will all turn out-you take the step anyway. Everything comes down to hope. I hope this works We never hear about the failures. And failure is my biggest fear, my way of letting everybody down ... But I'm disoriented out here. The strangeness of life. Even people's smiles are somehow unnerving. What do they expect from me? Medicine. Cigarettes. Money. Whatever an American may have that they lack. How can I convince them that I have no key to salvation and still be their friend? (Maikot Journals, 3 April 1981)" (Fricke, 2002: 7)

In spring 2017, I intended to return to Maikot for a more extended period. With Fricke's story in mind, I was afraid that my fieldwork in Maikot could also end prematurely and that I would, like Fricke, for one reason or another, have to search for another field site. Due to my previous positive experiences, I knew that my fear had little ground. However, going deeper into the topic of the armed struggle and the different narratives of the

People's War that were formed in the village did not seem like a straightforward process. Building on the lessons from the first field trip in 2015, I realised how the first ethnographic fieldwork, conducted on the Guerilla trek and other parts of the Kham country, could help establish rapport in the villages. By then, I was already familiar with the names of villages and other important places in the history of the revolution. I was also aware of key events, 'big people' (*thulo manche*) who participated in the struggle and other post-conflict developments. This meant a great deal in the village setting, and soon the initial fear of conducting fieldwork in a foreign place was replaced by an atmosphere of comradeship.

The field trip in 2015 ended with a small filming project in the village of Takasera¹⁶. There I noticed that film and other visual representations are becoming more and more important for the Khams. The camera that I was carrying with me was often the topic of conversation, and several people drew attention to the fact that this work would get seen outside Rukum. As ethnographers, we are often seen as mere bystanders, observers of everyday life situations, and in many cases, ethnographers have faced difficulties in persuading the local population about the importance of their work. In this sense, having a camera with me most of the time (even if not used), enhanced the importance of my position as an ethnographer, and at least from the start this proved to be helpful. A camera always establishes a certain kind of relationship with the world, and it seemed that the Khams were very aware of the power of visual language. This was perhaps more pertinent due to their previous experience with filmmakers that have worked in the region.

During the first trip, locals have pointed out that people in Rukum had not yet had the chance to see the films filmed there. I have realized that I was about to commit the same mistake. Many filmmakers and other storytellers extract stories from far-off places to be seen by western audiences but never bring them back to the place of origin. I did not want to base my further engagement in the field on the same premise. Instead, I reframed my fieldwork in a way that would show a more serious, long-term commitment of an ethnographer that is not interested only in his own research. Thus, out of this initial encounter with films in the field grew an idea to turn around anthropologists' common

¹⁶ The field trip resulted in making the film *Takasera: A Portrait of a Himalayan village (2016)*, an observational documentary about everyday life in this remote village.

logic of being only 'story-takers'. This plan to bring these stories back to the Kham villages was thus inspired by locals of Maikot and by Michael Oppitz, an anthropologist and film director who conducted visual ethnographic fieldwork in Takasera in the 1970s and 80s.

Before departing for fieldwork in 2017, I visited Michael Oppitz at his home in Berlin. It was curiosity about his work with the Khams and the fact that I was also planning to use visual methods during my fieldwork that brought me to learn more about Oppitz's experience in Takasera. His ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in 1977-79, resulted in the ethnographic film *Shamans of the Blind Country* (1981), a detailed investigation into the Kham Magars' healing practices and one of the more successful instances of visual ethnographic fieldwork to date. Oppitz's work, methodology, and experiences with the Kham Magars became an essential part of my fieldwork preparation. While working with the Kham Magars, Oppitz developed two concepts that contributed to ethnographic film methodology and inspired my own visual work in the villages.

The first idea came naturally from the way his visual fieldwork was conducted. Takasera was a very remote place in the 1970s, and in order to film there, Oppitz needed to bring his source of electricity. This made it possible for his team to film in the village, but unfortunately, it was too difficult to build a darkroom in Takasera and Oppitz was left with no other option but to invite some of the shamans to Kathmandu, where he screened to them some of the film rushes. Through this process, Oppitz was able to finish the film, and later, he referred to it as the "ethnography in the darkroom" (Schneider, 2008). Although Oppitz had good knowledge about shamanic rituals, he describes how, in this way, he could understand the deeper logics of the Magar's shamanic rituals presented in the film. This corresponds to ideas of 'being in the field' that go beyond "self as an instrument of knowing" (Ortner, 1995). In an age of digital media, we are never entirely away from the field and knowledge production one related to the traditional forms of 'knowing' has instead become mediated through digital technologies and other new media (Horst, 2016).

The other concept related to Oppitz's film project is what he termed 'the beauty of exactitude'. Without adding or trying to find scenes that would enhance the film's subject's dramatic or poetic elements, Oppitz argued that the beauty in the ethnographic

film should lie in the exactitude of ethnographic representation. It is up to the viewer, he argues, to find the beauty in it:

It produces an aesthetic of its own, a beauty that does not follow the standard rules of artistic conventions. [...] There is a topographical authenticity just as much as an exactitude of mood which you, as a documentarist, have to catch. If you do, beauty and power come automatically. (Oppitz and Alasti, 1986: 74)

Both concepts later proved to be helpful in my visual ethnographic work. The approach Oppitz used with the Kham Magars has been an important learning experience before my fieldwork departure, even though the subjects of his and my research are quite different. More specifically, Oppitz's experience and social connections in the area, including his former research assistant, Rana Prasad Gharti, helped me to pave my way into an area that I knew little about. Apart from his previous fieldwork knowledge, Oppitz entrusted me with his archival visual material, the scenes that were not included in the film (more than 30 hours of digitalized 16mm footage) to use in my explorations of the social and political transformations of the Kham country. Looking at excerpts of everyday, ritual and festive life from 40 years ago made a strong contribution to how I was framing my fieldwork, and later I incorporated some of this archival footage into the doctoral film 'Taking on the Storm' (2021).

After finishing the film, Oppitz returned to the area to screen it for the first time for the local audience in 1982. Screenings were held in the main village of Takasera, but the film was not seen in other Kham places and has not been screened in the area ever since. Following Oppitz's example, I approached a Kathmandu based organization called Sattya Media Arts Collective and their project *Batoko* Cinema (literally meaning "Street Cinema"), and together we decided to bring the film back to the place where it was filmed, to be seen by a younger generation of the local population. Since then, several films have been produced in the area, including my film *Takasera* (2016), and the program for the mobile cinema quickly grew.



Figure 2: The first screening of *Shamans of the Blind Country* in Takasera in 1982. Source: Michael Oppitz

While I saw the project of bringing the films to the remote Kham villages as a point of departure for my visual ethnographic fieldwork, I also thought of it as an opportunity to understand how village audiences understand films and get better knowledge about their particular filmic experiences. This aspect of film perception was interesting with all films, but especially with screening *Shamans of the Blind Country*, a representation of Khams own history screened in the same place where it was filmed. To understand the nuances of the spectator's experience, it would be necessary to inquire about the entire situation of the viewer, the socio-historical context of the film, and all other acts that result from this social encounter. A filmic experience could be helpful for anthropologists to understand better how cinema's experience as a social and cultural practice creates ways for individuals and communities to experience their past and present lives. During the mobile cinema project, I looked closely at how the filmic experience could advance anthropologists' understanding of how a shared representation of social reality is constructed and perceived through generations. I have explored the inter-dynamics of the filmic experience of Khams re-watching this 40-year old ethnographic film about their past in the short film *Disenchanted Cinema* (2017) that was filmed during this mobile cinema expedition.



Figure 3: The screening of films in Takasera, 2017. Source: Author

The three-week-long journey took us through the villages of Thabang, Takasera, Maikot and Rukumkot. In every village, we held several screenings, and in the meantime, tried to communicate our intentions and find out some of the histories revolving around the films and their perception. The screenings were organized with the locals' help, and by the time we came to Maikot, the news about the mobile cinema project had spread to the remotest hamlets high in the hills. People were coming to see the 'old film about shamans' (*puraano jhankriko film*), a local healing practice that at least in Maikot was difficult to encounter since the People's War. It was only much later that I realized how much this film has stayed with the people of Maikot and what it meant for introducing me as someone interested in the 'local culture' (*gaunko sanskriti*). From this point, the film screenings and my film project became essential elements of fieldwork. From the locals' perspective, the fact that I was conducting research was soon sidetracked by the fact that one of the research outcomes is also going to be a film. From the start, this opened up ethnographic possibilities that would have been difficult to achieve without a camera.

The fact that I was making a film soon triggered an initiative from some of the villagers who wanted to establish a 'film committee' to help produce the film. I was invited to discuss the film with the committee, and in return, the committee promised to try to help

with some of the organizational aspects of the filmmaking process. The consultative role of the village film committee became very helpful as our conversations grew into more coherent ideas and filming scenarios. Soon, the different narratives that should become part of the film became a point of discussion with other research participants. What started as a slow and reserved debate soon grew into a stage for individuals and groups to express how their village's portrait should be constructed. From an ethnographic point of view, I found myself in a rather interesting position, a position that is a very eloquent reflection of the position of ethnographic cinema today. The representation of the filmed people is not only in the filmmaker's control, but it is a negotiation between several involved actors, where no one holds the position of 'the knower' (Larcher and Oxley, 2015). Observing and working through this process, I was soon looking at who is putting forward which narrative, how it is constructed, which narratives are not being considered. This became an important exercise for the involved participants, the committee and myself, and it became one of the main focal points around which my fieldwork was constructed.

Putting aside more traditional ethnographic filmmaking methodologies, this was the first step toward a participatory filming process, in which the filming process itself becomes an arena of anthropological inquiry. Here it is worth quoting MacDougall's theoretical intervention against observational cinema in full:

"Film must create forms of understanding which replace those of written word. [...] Ethnographic filmmakers can begin by abandoning their preconceptions about what is good cinema. It is enough to conjecture that a film need not be an aesthetic or scientific performance: it can become the arena of inquiry" (MacDougall, 1995: 129).

Framing fieldwork in this way, I intentionally refrained from separating fieldwork into separate parts that would inform two parts of research: the written and the visual part. Instead, the main research body during the fieldwork became connected to the camera (whether it was turned off or on), and to the ongoing debate on which narratives the film should entail, and soon the different practices: interviewing, observing, filming, and participating, became interchangeable modes of my ethnographic inquiry that I had to switch between, as one switches between different recording modes on the camera.

Among all the revolutionary narratives that remained the main topic of the research, one narrative started to stand out, and it was impossible not to pay more attention to it. It was the narrative revolving around the yarsagumba economy. Like Dhanbir two years before, Maikotis seemed to put even greater importance to this highland mushroom. Former guerilla fighters, village businesspersons, the village youths, in other words, the people of all generations, were equally interested in collecting the precious fungus. The narrative of the yarsagumba economy is not only the narrative of post-revolutionary restructuring of the village, the reintegration of Maoist guerrillas back into village life or of the villagers' shift from subsistence farming to other more lucrative types of earning a living, but it is a narrative that was intricately connected to the history of the People's War. Unlike in other places in Nepal, where the yarsagumba economy emerged independently from the war, in the case of Maikot, the Maoists themselves became tightly linked to collecting and trading the caterpillar fungus (chapter 13). Related to similar methods of sustaining the movement found in India's Maoist heartland (Shah, 2019: 138), the yarsagumba economy in Rukum revealed a narrative that delves deeper into the complexities of Maoist resistance against the state. With the help of the rural elites in post-war Rukum, the Maoists and local business people emerged as brokers who became mediators between the local and international economic worlds through a system of gathering and commerce. Even though the Maoist's intention in this business was to sustain their movement, I explore how the yarsagumba economy became the leading resource, increasing class differentiation in the area in less in a decade. Getting access to the field of the yarsagumba economy in Rukum was critical not only to investigate its history and links to the Maoist movement but also to understand the contemporary local realities of Maikotis that have found themselves on the bottom end of a highly profitable commodity chain. To understand how, through a brokerage system, this remote place has become tied to the capitalist economy in new ways, I needed to attend the yarsagumba picking season during my fieldwork.

Positionality: Reflections on Constructing Fieldwork

Throughout the process of constructing fieldwork described in this chapter, I was able to identify particular experiences, contexts, and other implications that were an integral part of reflecting on my own positionality within the research. Positionality, as it is most commonly understood within social science research, refers to the individual's values and beliefs, or to put it in wider terms, the researchers ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding the research subject (Holmes, 2020). Furthermore, the researcher's reflexivity of the social and cultural values they operate in, and how this influences their research is important to build on individual's ethics and personal integrity within the research setting. Similarly, in the fields of engaged and activist anthropology, authors have pointed out, that no research is value free and outside power relations. Instead all anthropological works are subjected to ethical, political, and cultural considerations and frameworks that can only be revealed by incorporating reflexive awareness into our anthropological writing (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Gupta and Ferguson, 1997).

During the fieldwork in Maikot I was confronted to think about my positionality from the day of my arrival. In the first days, when I was still settling in, and have only had the chance to meet very few people, the village school headmaster Hasti Man Pun, approached me to inquire about my research. Although, I have been trying to establish myself in the village also as a filmmaker, Hasti Man was interested why someone would want to dig into the village's Maoist past. I have given some thought to this, prior to departing to fieldwork, but I haven't really thought about how to communicate my positionality toward the research subject to my research participants. What Hasti Man was asking me to elaborate on, was my personal position on the subject of the resistance struggle. He was especially interested why someone from the outside would be interested in the history of the political struggle in such a far-off place. These were all important questions that brought me back to the reasons why I decided to frame the research in this particular way, as well as acknowledging some of my personal positions that could potentially influence the research outcomes.

My memories from the time I was growing up in Slovenia are full of narratives of resistance. I was particularly drawn to the subject through the war experience of my grandfather, who was a guerilla fighter during the anti-fascist resistance in the Second World War. Because I never attended kindergarten, I ended up spending most of my pre-school years with my grandparents. On several occasions they would take me with them when they traveled out of our home town in north-east Slovenia to visit their relatives and friends in other parts of the country. Everyone from their generation had their own personal experience of war, and this was often the topic of the conversation. Especially for my grandfather and his 'comrades', most of whom were also in some form or the other members of the anti-fascists resistance. My grandmother was a bit younger and had not been able to join the resistance at her age, but she became involved as an activist in the post-war years and worked for her whole life in the local agricultural cooperative.

In a certain way, although without a concrete methodology, spending time with my grandparents was my first fieldwork experience. I became so interested in the narratives of resistance that I began collecting anti-fascist and socialist materials, such as badges, books and posters. Although, I haven't had the slightest idea of the overall picture, the heroic stories of collective resistance against German occupation caught my attention. These early experiences were later contextualized through history lessons and enriched by the experience of my older sister who had enrolled to study history at the University. At this point, at the age of 10-12, I tried to follow her studies while she was dipping her toes into the vast sea of history literature on the topic of WWII. The narratives and experiences of resistance, and other more scholarly engagements on the topic that I was exposed to in my family, initiated the first sparks that later directed my interests toward history and politics, and specifically on the subject of resistance.

What seemed important to share to Maikotis, at this point, was to elaborate on my family's history and the fact that in Slovenia, as well as several other countries in Europe, a few generations ago people have been experiencing similar political transformations. I was communicating this particular aspect of my positionality toward the research subject also because I wanted to show that my engagement in fieldwork does not only come from anthropological curiosity, but also from a longer and deeper understanding and sympathy toward resistance struggles. While this has by no means made me a supporter of the

Maoist cause, I believe it has become an important aspect of my conversations with research participants. Furthermore, my personal experiences have brought me closer to a more engaged ethnography, a moral commitment of understanding and potentially changing the conditions that make our subjects suffer, but also reflecting our privileged positionality (Madison, 2005). While, in my case, I cannot say that I directly share the vision of the Maoist political projects, I do in broader terms support struggles against capitalism from below. While there are definitely parts of Maoist praxis that I think have to be seriously considered in this regard, as I show throughout the thesis, I believe that discussing my personal political experiences, and my activist commitments as an anthropologist and filmmaker provided important contextual background for the research participants that have been wondering about my intentions.

During these first weeks, I started hanging out with some of the people, who later became key research participants. Retrospectively, it is easy to determine a certain gender bias from this early stage of fieldwork. During this time, it was much easier for me to build rapport with men, as I still had very little access to the women's experience of the struggle. This soon changed, as both me and my partner Eva began to be considered less of outsiders. Apart from the few things already mentioned throughout this chapter that helped to build rapport in Kham villages, such as drinking, humor, and screening films, another such entry point to village life was of crucial importance at the beginning of fieldwork. For a couple of weeks, Eva volunteered as an English teacher at the local school. This meant that she made several friends among the village teachers, who shared their own insights into the histories of the struggle. However, her teaching and the fact that she was in close contact with the school children began to open other doors into the social life of the village. The rumors about Eva's work quickly spread all over, and the fact that someone was putting so much work into such an important part of the village community was seen in a very positive light by the parents. While I was busy with meeting people who's contacts I have already gathered in Kathmandu, Eva's work was establishing a very different image of us and our role within the village. In the later parts of the fieldwork, it seemed that everyone seemed to know us, not only due to screening the films, but foremost because of the relation to the school. The gender bias from the early days of fieldwork was thus easier to overcome, and I believe that this is more visible in the film

‘Mushroom at the Top of the World’, where mostly women’s experiences of the yarsa harvest are represented.

It is important to acknowledge that understanding my own positionality toward the research subject and clarifying it toward the research participants took time. Throughout my fieldwork, I have tried to reflexively reconsider the different roles I have adopted as a researcher, and a filmmaker, but also to reflect on my personal history that made it clear to my research participants, why I have ended up studying the People’s War in Nepal. Apart from this, I have tried to reconsider these roles within a broader positionality; the role that I have less influence over, but which mostly determined how the people from Maikot saw me: as a white foreigner, who identifies himself as a man. To recognize in what ways gender, age and ethnic background might influence the research is as important as considering the epistemological and ontological apparatuses that we bring to the field from western-centered anthropological praxis. Although like the gender-bias, I have put effort into overcoming these positions by forming deeper relationships with people, it is difficult to determine in what ways my presence in the field has actually affected the fieldwork process. I believe that by collecting personal narratives of former Maoist combatants it has challenged local and wider power relations inscribed in the way the history of the struggle is represented today. However, by focusing on this, my fieldwork has also concealed other narratives that are important parts of the People’s war. In this sense, I believe that the anthropology of the People’s war in Nepal would greatly benefit from a more in-depth, fieldwork-based research on the relationship between resistance and all gendered identities, and critical feminist research into the everyday life in the village after the revolution.

To further discuss my own positionality within fieldwork, let me briefly discuss the topic of language. The impact of linguistic fluency on the data collection process has not been sufficiently discussed within the discipline (Tanu and Dales, 2015), an integral part of a wider problem that Gupta and Ferguson (1997) referred to as ‘the mystique of fieldwork’¹⁷.

¹⁷ Gupta and Ferguson refer to the lack of fieldwork methods in anthropology courses that lead to very different ideas of what constructing the field consists of. Although they argue that fieldwork has become the key constituting experience for anthropologists, they also confront the idea of the field, as it has been understood within the discipline: “But what of ‘the field’ itself, the place where the distinctive work of ‘fieldwork’ may be done, that taken-for-granted space in which an ‘Other’ culture or society lies waiting to

In order to reveal the process of field construction, Gupta and Ferguson propose to make language as well as other important parts of researcher's positionality visible. Before the start of my doctoral fieldwork in Rukum, language learning has become one of my central concerns, and I have put much effort into learning Nepali. However, although most people speak fluent Nepali in Mid-Western Nepal, it is important to stress that this is their second language that they learn in primary school. To obtain the knowledge of Kham, either to find learning resources or a native speaker that could teach me the language prior conducting fieldwork in Maikot, was an option I considered, but was not able to realize. To enroll in a language class in Nepali, and learn to communicate at least on the conversational level prior to my fieldwork was much more easily achievable. After taking private lessons in Kathmandu, in which we have paid specific attention to the Nepali dialect spoken in Mid-Western Nepal, I was ready to begin brushing the language in everyday situations.

Before my arrival to Maikot, I thought that not being able to speak Kham might be more of an issue that it turned out to be. To switch from Kham to Nepali is a very common thing to do for Maikotis, and they have learned to communicate in this way in almost every situation outside the Kham country. Talking to me, was thus no different than talking to Nepalis from other ethno-linguistic groups. Although it is true that I would have perhaps gathered more accurate data if I would have spoken Kham language, it is also true that most of the ex-combatants were used to speak about the revolution in Nepali, as it was the language most commonly used within the Maoist movement. On the other hand, it would have been a great contribution to the research to be able to operate in Kham, without a need to detour via Nepali, a language that for Kham's in particular embodies a historical power relation (inscribed in the long state-formation process addressed in more detail in chapter 4).

While constructing my fieldwork I have decided to counter some of these linguistic obstacles in two ways. During the first phase of my fieldwork, I have worked with a local interpreter and research assistant Uday Gharti from Thabang, who has previous working

be observed and written?" (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 2). Instead of perpetuating the mystique of fieldwork, Gupta and Ferguson argue, that anthropologists should rather question and explore the possibilities and limitation of the idea of the field (ibid).

experience in this field (he has collaborated with two foreign anthropologists: Anne de Sales and Ina Zharkevich). In the phase, when I was still learning how to speak Nepali, I have decided to work with Uday, who helped me to conduct long-form interviews in Kham language. However, during this process, I had to rely on his translation from what was being recorded in Kham to English. In the later fieldwork phases, and for translations in both films, I have relied on the help of a Kathmandu based research assistant Kapil Bisht, who accompanied me to Maikot on two field trips. Working with Kapil in Nepali proved to be very useful especially when I was using visual ethnographic methods to capture parts of the fieldwork. During these field trips, Kapil also transcribed most of the interviews and translated them into English, which was of great help in the later stages of writing. Looking back at these decisions, I believe that this multi-lingual approach has helped me to gather more accurate data. With the help of both research assistants, I could reach out to people that might have stayed out of my ethnographic gaze. Especially working with Uday Gharti at the early stages of fieldwork was an important learning experience about the local history of struggle. Uday, who works as an English teacher in Thabang, is very knowledgeable about the revolutionary process on the micro level. With this help, we could interview Kham only speaking participants, of the older generation, and other participants who were fluent Nepali speakers, but choose to express themselves in Kham. Both Uday and Kapil were important partners throughout the different phases of fieldwork, and opened up doors that would have otherwise stayed closed. In this way my research gained more ethnographic depth, and the relationship to the fieldwork changed, as Julia Elyachar has proposed, from dyadic to triadic¹⁸ (Elyachar, 2005).

Throughout this process my language of Nepali was constantly improving, and I was able to converse and conduct interviews independently. This was especially useful when filming, as it enabled me to be more spontaneous with the camera in different village situations. Although some of the scenes in the film *Taking on the Storm* were staged and assisted by Kapil, the rest of the visual fieldwork was conducted independently. The extended stays

¹⁸ Julia Elyachar has proposed to reevaluate the role of research assistants during fieldwork. Following Crapanzano, she proposes to understand the role of assistants during fieldwork as the third, that immensely alters the fieldwork experience. This shifts the dynamic, she argues, from a dyadic to triadic, and thus considers the relationship with research assistants and the field as central to any form of ethnographic knowledge production (Elyachar, 2005: 31-32).

in the villages didn't only help me to learn the local dialect, but also helped the villagers to learn how to understand my way of speaking Nepali. This has enabled me to independently conduct fieldwork in most situations in the last stages of the research, but the material was nonetheless still translated by Kapil, in order to produce more accurate translations.

Apart from my positionality within fieldwork discussed so far, I further discuss theoretical and methodological positions on the study of peasant revolutions in chapter 3, where I reconsider some of the assumptions in the field of the anthropology of the People's War. The aim of this approach is to connect a relatively isolated field of anthropology focusing on the Himalayas to the broader field of peasant studies and other anthropological literature studying revolution from below.

Chapter 2: Filming Ethnographic Fieldwork or Film as Ethnography

Introduction

Even though my ethnographic fieldwork was well underway, and I managed to establish good access to the field, writing the thesis and creating an ethnographic film was a long process that lasted more than five years. By the time I arrived in rural Nepal, the Maoist narrative, which was present in the region of Mid-Western Nepal, had been replaced by different post-revolutionary narratives embodied in the discourse of development, ethnic emancipation and labour migration. For an ethnographer, the multiplicity of narratives encountered in the field can present a somewhat overwhelming task. While I tried to follow the narratives as far as possible, time and space constraints compelled me to filter out less relevant narratives I encountered in the field.

The most important lesson came from the realization that writing an ethnography and creating an ethnographic film are, in fact, very different processes that correspond to different modes of knowledge production. Many scholars have addressed the problematic relationship between filmed and written ethnographic works, but only a few have combined the best of both worlds. As Crawford and Turton (2013) see, this relationship's problem is that images and words are hierarchically related. They refer to the visual as

'thin description' rather than 'thick description' as ethnographic writing is usually referred to in anthropology. Ethnographic texts are 'thicker' and not only record/observe behaviour but also interpret, analyze and contextualize (Geertz, 1973). While I do not dispute these differences between text and film, I would like to address their relationship as it evolved throughout writing the thesis and making the doctoral ethnographic film. I propose that although film's weaknesses in this regard are apparent, the strength of ethnographic films lies in some of its narrative and non-narrative qualities by creating ways of representation that move from a more scientific toward a literary and artistic representation of the real¹⁹.

Collecting post-revolutionary narratives in Nepal for the written and visual part of the thesis was a part of the same process but consisted of different tasks. To apply visual ethnographic methods to my fieldwork, I had to learn how to produce film sequences, the visual equivalent of ethnographic notes. However, looking at both written and filmed sequences, combining the two methodologies into a single structural unit did not seem easy. By that I mean, that it was difficult to see how the doctoral thesis and the ethnographic film could function on the same epistemological plane. To integrate the film into the research framework, I related its methodology to the structure of the thesis. In the first phase of my fieldwork, I used visual ethnographic methods to extend and in hierarchical relation to other research methods. Later, however, the visual ethnographic part of my fieldwork became a more independent form of research. In the written and audio-visual work, the challenge of capturing the complexity of the socio-political world in rural Nepal remained a central concern throughout the research. While I was entering all kinds of social relationships during the fieldwork in Maikot and other places in Rukum and Rolpa, the visual ethnography corresponded to another kind of the ethnographic real, which needed to be recorded. In both cases, it has been argued that the ethnographic real is created, not captured (Jarvie et al., 1983). I saw the visual ethnographic approach significantly contributing to this endeavour. Both methodologies are demanding in their

¹⁹ George Marcus (1995) has proposed to adopt an 'image-sequence' based anthropological thought. Marcuse's critique of ethnographic writing introduced a more open view toward cinema. Marcuse has pointed out that ethnographic film has not make the best use of the qualities that make it the most effective, and has called for ethnographic modernism that is based not on the 'repressed' scientific narrative, but artistic expression and experimentation (Mermin, 1997).

own way and are not entirely complementary and compatible. Conducting fieldwork to produce two different kinds of ethnographic real brought me to the question of the relationship between images and words in my research.

Already the first fieldwork engagement in conversations with former Maoist guerrillas in 2015 made me think about documenting parts of their revolutionary experience with audio-visual methods to construct a counternarrative of the revolution. It is worth pointing out that national narratives are driven by two tendencies: one is to represent and reconstruct historical events, the other is to forget parts of the same history. Both serve the political purpose of a nation to reimagine itself outside of the history that created it. Harootunain has pointed this out well:

“It has often been remarked that national narratives invariably conceal and forget that the origins of the nation were forged in bloody violence, often reaching genocidal proportions, and that few nation-states have managed to escape employing this model of selective amnesia provided by capitalism as a necessary accompaniment to constructing the historical representation of its development from origin to the present (Harootunain, 2015: 35).

In this regard, the idea of Nepal is no different. After the People's War, the ruling class's ideological function was to reconsolidate the broken state and narrate the national narrative of development (*bikas*). While there are numerous examples that I could refer to in showing this, I think it is better to stick to an articulation of the ruling class narrative that I found in Rukum. In 2015, the then Prime Minister of Nepal Sushil Koirala visited Takasera to attend the Indigenous People's Festival, where he made a historical speech about the region's involvement in the history of the nation:

“In the years of the war, I have observed that the people of Rukum have struggled for the protection of democracy and for the development of the country. Now it's been many years, and you know the difficulties of the struggle [...] together we have reached to this day [...] Now it's just us, the people's representatives. Now we should forget about the past and develop the country. We should mold it into a modern state. Brothers and sister, we are so rich. The nature has made us rich with water resources. Water can set us free from poverty”.

Koirala's narrative seems to embody the tendency to forget the local history in order to narrate the overall national narrative of development; in its essence, the narrative of capital. However, the lack of integration of regional narratives of the revolution into the broader one, as the Kathmandu elite now narrates it, is omnipresent and overlooks the

importance of the subaltern classes' historical experiences. To simplify it, it is a story mostly told by the upper-caste men, who used the revolution as a tool for social mobility and left their revolutionary roots behind. The Maoist revolution became a national topic, but to my research participants, it seemed that the local contexts from which their grievances against the state emerged had never really reached the public. Looking at this situation from my ethnographic fieldwork in Rukum, I realised that this place had been a part of the same process in the past. The Magars and other ethnic groups in Mid-Western Nepal have participated in different parts of the state-formation process, and despite their efforts to change the world around them, their history has always seemed to be a part of a larger narrative of ruling groups. Looking from this optic, I asked myself the same question as Ranajit Guha: 'Who writes the history of the subjugated people?' (Guha, 1997: 12). Or as Goddard and Miéville posed the question in a more filmic way in *Here and Elsewhere (Ici et Ailleurs, 1976)*, 'who speaks, for whom, and how'?

The most relevant ethnographic task in the aftermath of the revolution, in my view, was to record the uneven histories of peasant struggles within the longer history of marginalization, repression and state violence that turned this region into Nepal's internal periphery. I outlined the initial draft for the visual part of the ethnographic fieldwork as a film project that would capture people's life stories to report on social change and political transformations in the area. By doing this, my intention was also to build a counternarrative to the hegemonic representation of revolutionary history that has not paid sufficient attention to Mid-Western Nepal. I see the film as a political project²⁰, a story-telling technique that would give the Kham Magars a chance to tell the revolution's history from their perspective. The Kham Magars often expressed a strong sense of the need for such work in Nepal's public space. While the Maoists have built a counternarrative against the monarchy, most Khams today feel that their history of struggle is not sufficiently represented within the overall Maoist narrative. I accepted these observations because they led me further into the local narratives of political

²⁰ Regarding my research framework, I see the importance of making the film in its power to communicate this topic outside of the formal academic discourse; a discourse that has greatly de-politicized the topic. With creating an ethnographic film, my intention is to disseminate the topic to a wider audience, while still conveying the central concerns of the research.

struggles, which was the first topic on my fieldwork schedule. These conversations with ex-Maoist combatants and other social movement participants began to draw a broader picture that reframed my visual ethnographic fieldwork to include local perspectives on different historical periods: the pre-revolutionary period, the revolution and the post-revolutionary scenario. The approach to ethnographic film that was coined in the field thus began to include narratives of political participation of the Khams and, in a more general sense, to communicate the power of ideas of the revolution that had changed Nepal's political landscape. In this way, the visual ethnography became integrated into my overall framework, and a hierarchical relationship between text and film was established. However, at this stage, staying within this framework and documenting interviews, following up on different narratives of village struggle, and filming different parts of village life in thematic blocks (something I have picked up from Oppitz's fieldwork in Takasera), proved to be productive for creating both types of the ethnographic real. The narratives that I was constructing consisted of research threads that I soon divided into chapters, and in this way, the film began taking shape as a narrative essay film.

Thematic Blocks and the First Cut of the Film

While constructing parts from the local narrative of struggle in Maikot and elsewhere in the area did not represent a particularly difficult task, the visual reconstruction of the historical narrative of Kham Magars' involvement in the different phases of state-formation presented a real challenge. My idea was to begin the film with the prehistory of the struggle to de-essentialize the Maoist revolution's narrative and place it within the broader history of people's struggle against ruling groups. This was made possible by accessing the archival footage of Michael Oppitz, which he made available for my research purposes. Oppitz's archival footage opened up new possibilities. I categorized it according to thematic blocks that he shot in Takasera between 1978 and 1979 and used it to show the daily life of the Khams before the revolutionaries set foot in the region. Showing a piece of this material was made even more attractive because this was the first visual footage of the region.

If Oppitz was the first to bring the camera into Mid-Western Nepal, the Maoists were probably the second. Although digital cameras were not widely available in Nepal at the end of the 1990s, Maoists have filmed parts of their social movement activities. It was edited and distributed as a part of the party's propaganda machine, and the fact that this was the most well-known representation of the Maoists makes it a crucial element of any visual anthropological research of the social movement. I quickly became acquainted with the number of video and audio recordings made during revolutionary times. Journalists, activists, party cadres, and others I spoke to in Kathmandu and elsewhere, who have collected some of the idiosyncratic visual material, have pointed out the importance of researching and categorizing these data. I realized that poor video storage conditions in Nepal presented a serious concern in preserving this visual history. There was little use of this material in the country, and the fact that it was not adequately stored could lead to the loss of a large portion of it in the coming years. However, it appears that no research body or other state institution in Nepal has expressed an interest in preserving this material and making it available to the public. Throughout my research, I have tried to gather some of the visual footage I have been able to find by contacting former activists, the Maoists themselves, and journalists who visited the area during the conflict. The footage covers a wide range of Maoist activities from around the country, and the proper collection and categorization would require the attention of a visual anthropologist with a research focus different from mine. Choosing the footage that fits the purposes of this research was a much easier task. I was interested in the footage from Mid-Western Nepal and in the footage expressing a more general representation of the Maoist narrative. The analysis and inclusion of Maoist representations in the film are central components that helped me juxtapose this discursive site with the post-revolutionary narrative of Maikot village.

The personal story that stood out and initially brought me to north Rukum, was that of Surul Pun Magar. Surul's narrative in the film helps me move from the macro-historical angle and the broader Maoist narrative to the former guerillas' personal experiences and the post-revolutionary sentiment in the former Maoist base area. I link Surul's story to other similar accounts of the revolution to create a narrative of state repression and

violence inflicted upon the local population during the conflict²¹. This part of the film is closely linked to fieldwork in Maikot and consists of several long-form interviews with former activists and guerrilla fighters that reflect on the post-war politics of disappointment (chapter 12). It is in this part of the film that the village film committee has played a pivotal role. In filming this thematic block, the committee helped me capture different oral histories of village struggle, personal histories and accounts of the revolution, local revolutionary songs, and stories of Maoists' integration back into village life. Furthermore, this collaborative fieldwork in the village setting was later extended to the yarsa fields high above the village.

The last thematic block was to film the harvest of yarsagumba. Without a doubt, this was physically the most demanding part of the fieldwork. In May, the yarsagumba pickers set to the high mountains between Rukum and Dolpo, spending up to three months in the yarsa camps. This journey presents a substantial investment for most villagers. Before leaving Maikot, they must secure a tent, a decent amount of firewood, warm clothes for the whole family, blankets, mattresses, and anything else they can use to make themselves warm at night. According to the committee's advice, we had to plan and prepare all the necessary equipment to spend three weeks at 4500m (15000ft). However, my preparation for this high elevation fieldwork did not start in Maikot. I prepared the gear accordingly, and I was ready to film in such conditions. The cold and moist, the high altitude, and the fact that there was no electricity or phone signal at the camp made me rethink my filming gear choices. The Maikotis have pointed out that staying at the camp for more than three weeks is not a good idea due to the altitude. They have developed a practice that pickers stay in the high camps for no longer than a month, after which they return to the village to rest and stock up on supplies. It made sense to follow the local practice and prepare for one visit of no more than three weeks.

The yarsagumba narrative is central to the post-revolutionary restructuring of local economic relations. I intended to follow the pickers, many of them former guerrilla fighters, on their journey to earn a living in a space they know from the protracted war

²¹ A similar project has been initiated by a non-profit organisation in Kathmandu called VOW Media. The organisation documented and archived more than 100 stories of survivors and victims of the armed conflict. More: <http://www.voicesofwomenmedia.org/project/memory-truth-justice/>

times. This transformation of guerrilla fighters into mushroom pickers, a process that has turned the former conflict zone into the picking grounds of this expensive mountainous fungus, was a moment of post-revolutionary Nepal that I thought should be captured on camera. Although the narrative itself was linked to the Maoist era, it has remained entirely out of the ethnographic gaze of anthropologists that studied the People's War. Joining this journey allowed me to explore their past and present in the landscape that has been intrinsically connected to the Kham Magars in mythological, political and economic ways.

After filming all the described thematic blocks, it was time to revisit the footage in the editing room and put together the film's first cut. The first version of the film comprised six chapters filmed around the topics described thus far. It was structured in the following order: (1) *Lakhan Thapa: The First Martyr of Nepal*, (2) *The Kham Magars of Mid-Western Nepal*, (3) *People's War*, (4) *The Life of a Revolutionary*, (5) *Maikot: A Former Maoist Stronghold*, (6) *After the Revolution*. Following these different narratives throughout fieldwork and creating thematic blocks was a process that organically grew out of the fieldwork process and the collaborative work with the village film committee. However, when I began to assemble the different parts into the film, I noticed that it would be rather challenging to put it together without a more straightforward narrative. The six narratives put together were nothing more than separate units; what was missing was a narrative arc, an author's narrative that would connect the six chapters. I began to write the film's narrative that I could not imagine being done in any other way than as a voice-over narration – a classic approach to essay film and began to notice the limitations of the film's structure. First of all, it was nearly impossible to bring this multilayered and disconnected story any justice through the voice-over technique without resorting to simplifications. The voice-over narration format is very far from ethnographic 'thick' descriptions, and it demands to thin down these observations to smaller, more easily digestible units. The other thing I noticed once the voice-over narration was recorded is that the narrative is causing an over-identification between narration and the images. The voice-over narration was written to be the driving force of the film's first part and contextualise other units where visual footage is not clear enough. This led the film into a strange direction, where in some parts the over-identification and the simplification of the voice-over narration led to results that were obscuring much more than they were

revealing. Another problem that occurred during this stage became apparent when I was choosing the voice-over narrators. Not being comfortable enough to narrate the film myself, and by being financially limited, I wrote to several voice actors hoping to find someone to narrate the film *pro bono*. With some luck, two voice actors from the US responded to my call and recorded a voice-over narration that was put over the film for the first time. Creating the first cut was crucial to see how all the thematic blocks function together and what kind of meanings the overall narrative generates. Although I knew the footage inside out, seeing the film for the first time as a completed narrative was unique.

Reframing the Narrative and Editing the Final Cut

Looking at the visual ethnographic material, after making some distance to it in the year that I was screening the film, I realised that there is more potential to it than I first thought. I began to see that the meaning of the material organised in chapters could be better conveyed through a different film structure. I felt that the narrative essay film structure simplifies the narrative to the extent that it does not correspond well to the heterogeneity of the video material and social change in rural Nepal. Perhaps the problem was also connected to the narrative building resulting from my fieldwork and my intention to bring this historical narrative into a coherent linear story. Furthermore, the film did not reflect my positionality and was lacking reflexivity about the filmmaking process. In short, it was a film about a revolution, but it was not a revolutionary film. Revolutionary and film narratives are not that different. A narrative in film is framed by the author, much like a revolutionary narrative is framed by a revolutionary movement. However, while revolutionary movements build up their narratives, it is important to note that they do so to break the existing ones:

"As a drastic reenvisioning of politics from the ground up, revolution is inscription on a tabula rasa; as pure action, as natality and event, it is somehow innocent of continuity and thus entanglement with what came before—a clean, unreflective break. Narrative, since it is necessarily continuous, connecting a before with an after, violates this revolutionary principle" (Chrostowska, 2017: 117)

The first cut followed an idea present in Bill Nichols' work that sees a formation of a counternarrative as a political tool in the hand of ethnographic film that should work against the narratives of the dominant ideology (Nichols, 1981). In *Ideology and the Image* Nichols' argues that a Marxist film analysis should expose the different ideological contestations within cinema. In his view, the dominant cultural forms represent ruling class ideas that help form its cultural hegemony. One way to counteract against dominant ideology in film, as Nichols proposes, is to form oppositional narratives that work against dominant ideology (ibid). The first cut of the film followed precisely these steps. My fieldwork and the editing process leading up to the first cut were informed by a vision to build a strong counternarrative that would reveal the meaning of the revolution concealed by hegemonic narratives. However, until this point, I focused more on the content and less on the story-telling techniques. While the central idea of my approach remained the

same, a more in-depth review of ethnographic film literature offered a different way out of the first cut's narrative limitations.

First of all, I focused on reflection and reflexivity. Is it not true that both revolutions and film gain their meaning retrospectively? In this sense, like former participants of the revolution that are today reconsidering its meaning, the viewer too brings something unique to a filmic experience – a set of social and cultural predispositions, with which she will interpret the meaning of the film. In this way, reflexivity gains double meaning in film: "Reflection and revolution thus convey the same move: turning around to make something visible again. Revolution can be reflective; reflection can be revolutionary" (Chrostowska, 2017: 97). Similarly, as the spectator, the filmmaker, too, brings intentions into the filmmaking process. To a certain extent, a reflexive approach to ethnographic film helps create more believable works for the audience. However, it is not just a matter of film's reflexivity; a process that reveals parts of the filmmaking process and sometimes the author's subjective function in it. The filmmaker's intentions remain ingrained in the narrative structure, and it is impossible to predict the meanings and the different readings the film will generate with image, sound, or text. As Barthes has pointed out: "a narrative is never made up of anything other than functions: in differing degrees, everything in it signifies" (Barthes, 1997: 89). A Barthesian approach to film proposes that the meaning in film is best understood as a dual process generated by reception and production. "Film perceived in this way is never completely controlled by filmmakers, subjects or viewers", Mermin has proposed (Mermin, 1997: 49). Instead, Mermin argues that the creation of meaning should be understood as a process and the film as the experience which creates it by establishing relationships between the spectators, subjects and the filmmaker (ibid).

As noted above, the relationships formed during fieldwork in Maikot have played an important role in making the film. The research participants were involved in the filmmaking process, and later the screenings of the film's first cut in the village made it possible for them to participate in the last stages of the film's creation²². Although I adopted a reflexive and participatory approach to film, the relationships established

²² Another important element in creating the final cut was another mobile cinema projects that took the first cut through the villages of Takasera and Maikot in the summer of 2019. The aim of these screenings was to gather comments from research participants and insights from other local's spectator experiences that will be incorporated into the final version of the film.

during fieldwork were not well incorporated into the first cut. In the final cut, instead of building a filmic narrative that provides ‘evidence’, I follow Mermin’s proposal that filmmakers should construct narratives that avoid judgement. Instead, filmmakers should “begin to supervise and direct their viewer’s experiences reading and creating meaning from their films” (Mermin, 1997: 49). In this sense, the final cut brings forward the Kham Magars as subjects of history in which they are both creative participants and spectators. Instead of building a narrative out of these different perspectives, I decided to put them into a more reflexive and less determining film structure, as different narrative units generating a variety of meanings.

Another important insight came from Alisa Lebow’s work on the Egyptian revolution. Through researching the different narratives in the aftermath of the revolution, Lebow was looking for filming and other artistic practices that might have emerged in connection to the Arab spring. She conducted several interviews with activists and filmmakers with an idea to create a ‘curated dialogue’ (Lebow, 2016: 282). Detaching the meaning of revolution from conventional ideas that compress revolutions into singular historical events, Lebow constructed a filmic approach that looks beyond such definitions. Through the initial project that involved putting artists and activists in conversation with one another, other connections and networks began to emerge that led Lebow into the direction of creating a non-linear, non-narrative interactive platform FilmingRevolution.org. The idea central to Lebow’s project was to create an interactive digital archive, which resists the temptation to build a narrative and over-determine the collected material. As Lebow points out:

“[r]ather than constructing a linear story that neatly frames that which cannot be contained, [FilmingRevolution](http://FilmingRevolution.org) embraces the logic of refusing to frame or box-in any simple notions of the revolution in Egyptian documentary and independent filmmaking today, resisting the tendency to speak in the language of power by monumentalizing and rigidifying events that defy such easy (or reductive) interpretations” (Lebow, 2016: 291).

Lebow’s methodology, in many ways, corresponded to my ethnographic fieldwork. The different thematic blocks, perspectives, and times covered by this material pointed to multiple narratives and non-linear structures. By developing a concept of non-linear documentary and looking specifically at Lebow’s non-narrative filming practices, I shifted the editing process away from the previous film structure that emphasised a singular

narrative. In other words: the process of construction had changed into a process of deconstruction. Narratives are always constructed, and ethnographic ones are no different; they "satisfy our desire for the coherence that lived experience rarely offers" (Mermin, 1997: 49). In this sense, the first cut's narrative satisfied my desire for a more coherent revolutionary narrative. The challenge of putting together the final cut was to navigate between two contrasting tendencies: one that over-emphasises narrative construction and the deconstructionist tendency that could lead to complete relativisation and political purposelessness of gathered material. Chrostowska, in the following passage well captured the problem:

"How do you represent an indeterminate, unforeseeable collective action - indeterminate in its manifestation, unforeseeable in its consequences, often incoherent owing to the missing reference points for observers and actors alike on a shifting political scene? How do you capture this without, on the one hand, surrendering your image to actuality and contingency - which could only come through as aimlessness, disunity, dysfunction (that is, as disorder, "unrest," or reflexive convulsion, rather than political effectivity) - or, on the other hand, ridding the image of these same qualities, making the *imprévisible* invisible, cleaning up the noise, streamlining the demonstration, narrativizing real complexity?" (Chrostowska, 2017: 98)

The first cut created representations of post-revolutionary social reality that did not correspond well to the complexities of Kham's social experiences. The post-revolutionary discursive space is drastically different. As was the case in the past, Kham's contemporary narratives are being contested and deconstructed by more powerful ones. The narratives of the revolutionary struggle, in which many have found sanctuary from the state's aggression, are only an echo from the past. It is possible to construct very different, often conflicting ethnographic narratives regarding the revolutionary and post-revolutionary context in Nepal (a topic that I discuss in detail in the next chapter). I learned that the problematic ethnographic task in making a film is to resist compressing it into one narrative. The concept for the final cut derived from the discrepancy between Kham's present and the past, a relationship that, I thought, should be represented not as a coherent narrative but through a form that emphasises narrative multiplicity.

Chapter 3: Methodological Considerations, Theoretical Prolegomena and Literature Review

Introduction: Different "Ways of Seeing" the Nepali Revolution

It has been more than two decades since the People's War shocked the urban and rural elites and exposed the unjust nature of the then existing state regime. Since then, Nepal has undergone several political transformations. Perhaps the most complex to understand was the large-scale movement process that captured the country and had since been widely documented and analysed in anthropology and related disciplines. Nepal's geographically challenging, culturally diverse and politically intricate terrain was difficult to grasp. The state of emergency, road blockades and regional conflict zones made it somewhat difficult for researchers to carry out long-term fieldwork during the conflict. Despite these difficulties, numerous accounts fill the gaps in the anthropological knowledge of the People's War.

The "long march" of communist ideas in Nepal, from the foundation of the Communist Party of Nepal in Calcutta in 1949 to a series of party splits and the creation of new underground factions that spread these ideas through the countryside, is in itself worthy of an epic and has been explored by several authors (De Sales, 2010; Adhikari, 2014; Cailmail, 2008-2009; Sharma, 2004). These political developments understood in conjunction with anthropological insights into the lives of Nepalese peasant classes (Regmi, 1963; Pant & Jain, 1969; Seddon et al., 2002) provide the basis of a historical analysis of the social processes that triggered grassroots political movements. Such historical studies and ethnographic accounts have helped contextualise the Maoist insurgency beyond the simplistic explanations of 'why' and 'how' the Maoists' choose the impoverished and politically repressed region of Mid-Western Nepal as their base area.

On the other hand, the literature on communist organising in rural Nepal is full of insider accounts on the early years of the conflict, from the time the conflict had not yet escalated into a stand-off between the RNA and the PLA. However, there are only a few first-hand accounts of the Maoist movement process before the People's War. With the attention of the outsiders mainly focused on development work and politically not so engaged

anthropological topics (for example, a constant focus on studying the Kham Magar have been their healing practices), the majority of the Himalayan scholars of the Himalayas failed to foresee the up-coming political transformations of the rural world they were engaged in. This can be compared to the rise of the Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) in Peru, which also took anthropologists and ethnographers in the field by surprise (Starn, 1991). In Nepal, the Maoist movement's formation and its influence in the countryside remained largely unnoticed by foreign anthropologists until the revolution was already in full swing. Much of what was written later, when many anthropologists in the field suddenly changed their focus to political anthropology, also seemed to look only at the sudden changes in rural Nepal's political reality and not at the long-standing structures that were the reasons behind the revolutionary conditions. However, what most observers at that time perceived as uncharted underground activities is today, two decades after the conflict, a widely explored subject. In this sense, although anthropologists were late to the revolutionary dinner table, the number of resources was made available through secondary sources. In the later years of the conflict, many have also ventured into the Maoist zones to write first-hand ethnographic accounts and provide descriptions of Maoist organising that base their knowledge on participant observation. I do not wish to argue that the fact that anthropologists were slow in shifting their focus to political topics affected the quality or quantity of the material they produced. A large part of anthropological literature on the People's War reconstructs this part of history by analysing available materials: literature and political texts and other publications (such as memoirs) and interviews with grassroots cadres, peasants and activists. However, at the end of the People's War in 2006, an academic field began to emerge that produced a number of different narratives on Nepal's complex socio-political environment at the time.

It has been proposed that the Maoist insurgency could be seen in two phases: (1) the first phase began with the outbreak of the movement and is marked by the movement's formation, mostly limited to western parts of the country, (2) the second phase, equally marked by the movement process, but also by the widespread conflict between the PLA and the RNA (Adhikari et al., 2013). In the first phase of the conflict, the Maoists mostly ambushed state forces and acquired their weapons and ammunition, but most

importantly, they trained their troops ideologically and in guerrilla warfare. The most notable document of that time (1999) is a reportage written by Li Onesto: *Dispatches from the People's War* (Onesto, 2005). It is a text based on travels throughout the Maoist controlled zone, and it presents valuable insights into the lives of 'ordinary' villagers and the motivations of Maoist cadres to join the struggle. Another publication of this kind is Kiyoko Ogura's article: *Maoists, People, and the State as seen from Rolpa and Rukum* (Ogura, 2007). Ogura's often cited first-hand account was the first report from the Maoist heartland during the war that described the Maoist affairs in these remote districts. Ogura's observations are important because she was the first to comment on the revolutionary consciousness in the area and Maoist political organisations such as district and village people's governments (Ogura, 2007). Apart from these two, there are not many studies that appeared during the first phase of the conflict, however many publications which commented on the politics of the first phase of the war were published before the end of the war, in particular: Anne de Sales (2000), Gellner (2003), Karki and Seddon (2003), Hutt (2004), Judith Pettigrew (2003; 2004), Ramirez (2004), Saubhagya Shah (2004). After the peace agreement was signed in 2006, scholars suddenly had much more access to conduct research in previously restricted areas. With a better overview of the situation, which was very unpredictable during the conflict, the number of publications drawing on comparative research and not just single village studies increased significantly. The essential part of this literature is discussed in the following pages, and more of it follows throughout the thesis, helping me pave the way through rural Nepal. Due to spatial limitations and the sheer volume of literature, it is impossible to provide a comprehensive review of all relevant publications to date²³. My aim here is not to revisit this vast body of work but to sort out some of the well-established anthropological themes and approaches that have repeatedly emerged in the anthropology of the People's War and the political transition period in Nepal.

I believe that it is possible to roughly map, at this point, different types of localised experiences of the Maoist movement into three broad categories: (1) the "home-grown" Maoist movement; where the peasant struggle preceded the Maoist political project; or

²³ This has been recently attempted by a group of anthropologists whose work is related to Nepal: see: Shneiderman, S., et al. (2016).

where communist ideology was present and central to the idea of liberation; or where there were autonomous political developments, which made armed struggle feel like an organic social movement (2) the 'negotiated' Maoist movement; areas where Maoists managed to establish base areas or at least became partially involved in the political life of the village, but where this was felt like an intrusion of outsiders, and the Maoists entered into a complex, often long-term negotiation process with the villagers to persuade them to fight for a 'common' cause, (3) the absence of Maoist politics; the rural and more often urban areas where the Maoist movement was not present in any way. Although Maoist activities often took place in these areas²⁴, these activities usually did not pose any threat to public space and remained safely hidden under cover of the night. Such places (alongside Kathmandu, very often the large towns and cities of the Terai) served as the only possible safe zones and hideouts for the many individuals and families who have fled the countryside from the heated conflict between the state and Maoist forces. These three categories often appear (in one form or another) in the studies of the insurgency period and describe different relations between the local population and the Maoist movement. They also inform us of the scale of violence, the different methods of political domination and, through comparative, historical, and localised research, reveal the different layers and faces of the revolution in Nepal.

Considering the idiosyncrasy of these approaches, I suggest that there are different "ways of seeing" revolutions, evoking the words of John Berger, whose meaning is focused more explicitly on how our knowledge and beliefs affect the way we see and perceive art. However, is it not that our perceptions of large-scale events, of revolutions, in particular, are shaped in the same way by different social experiences, as well as by news and media, gossip and history books? In their essence, these political events reflect both ideas of the ruling class and oppositional ideas, and it is this struggle, the struggle for the conception of the world, that was at the centre of the Maoist revolution. The revolutionary movement's task is not only to overthrow the material relationships of the old society, but it is also a struggle over meaning. It is with a particular "way of seeing" coming from the ruling class that the world is formed, as Marx put it in the German Ideology:

²⁴ Mallika Shakya has for example argued that the Maoist movement has been wrongly categorized as only a rural phenomenon, and that their presence was equally felt in the cities (Shakya, 2018: 84).

"The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships. The dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance" (Marx, 1974: 64)

Although one class's ideological dominance over the other is not absolute, we are not detached from these relations as social scientists but subject to the same process. To radicalize the point, all social sciences, not just philosophy, to paraphrase Althusser, are, in the last instance, class struggle in the field of theory (Althusser, 1976: 37). While I see the importance of following this path in a time when class struggle is slowly disappearing from anthropological literature, my task here is, however, much more modest. Looking back at these different accounts, I do not evaluate them through the prism of revolutionary politics, but in terms of their ethnographic insights in relation to the narratives, they helped (re)produce. Most importantly, I examine the meanings that this literature has constructed about Nepal's revolution. This chapter aims to rethink some of the more important theoretical approaches and anthropological insights that have helped construct the current frameworks through which the revolution in Nepal has been represented in the academic world. Putting this anthropological knowledge in a theoretical discussion with the present is an attempt by an anthropologist to understand how his field of study has been conceptually grounded.

The Revolution: Between Large-scale/Universal and Local/Particular

The difficulty of accessing the Maoist base areas of Mid-Western Nepal, for most outsiders, is why there are no written first-hand accounts of the significant political developments in Maoist organising. Few first-hand accounts describe in more detail the formation of political consciousness in villages of Rolpa and Rukum, the establishment of the so-called *Bishesh Jilla* (the Maoist base area, literally meaning: "the special district)", and the ideological and other schoolings done by the party during and after the *Sija* campaign. Alongside journalists who were able to enter the Maoist areas and publish their observations (like Kiyoko Ogura and Li Onesto), few foreign anthropologists were

engaged in long-term fieldwork in areas where Maoists underground activities had already taken place.

The most well-known is the case of Judith Pettigrew, a medical anthropologist who conducted fieldwork in a village near Pokhara in the early 1990s and continued to return to the field throughout the decade. In her book *Maoists at the Hearth: Everyday Life in Nepal's Civil War* (2013), Pettigrew ethnographically presents the experience of a village influenced by the Maoist movement from the outside. In this ethnographic account, which is written as a memoir, we follow Pettigrew's observations, which present a subjectivised historical perspective of social change through personal stories and experiences of individuals living in a village undergoing radical political changes. The book's importance lies in its ethnographic material, but this analysis does not go beyond the 'experience' and the 'local' and fails to explain the backbone of this political transformation in economic, historical and cultural terms. This is not an isolated case.

I argue that ethnographic studies of revolution in Nepal focus mainly on the revolution's empirically observable side. By doing so, they symptomatically replaced the word 'revolution' with 'war' and incorporated topics such as violence, identity, and everyday village life as their primary research focus. They sought to explain the revolution not so much as a material social process but as a symbolically cultural one. Similarly, to Pettigrew's 'way of seeing', numerous studies have put forward the local and cultural side of the revolution without linking it to other socio-economic aspects. After the dust of the revolution had settled down, some anthropologists began to point out the shortcomings of these early writings on the Maoist movement process. Mallika Shakya, for example, pointed out how the anthropology of the People's War helped form images of Maoist activists as 'crude rebels piggybacking on cultural idioms' and of villagers who were most commonly portrayed as 'innocent victims caught in the crossfire between the rebels and the state' (Shakya 2015, non-pag). By dividing the anthropology of revolution into two categories, Shakya brings to light at least two very different foreign anthropologists' interests in studying the revolution. She argues that the first category focuses mainly on the ideology and practice of the Maoist movement in Nepal, while the second focuses more on everyday life in the Maoist villages (ibid). Both have a certain degree of value for the anthropology of the People's War. The first contributes by understanding the complex

inter-dynamics of the revolution: the ideological and political formations that have tackled and eventually merged with the process of state formation, and the second, by looking at the everyday life, which has in many ways been inseparably linked to the former category. The latter category provides a cultural, localised understanding of material processes that can only sufficiently be explained considering the broader forms of the former's social organisation. Shakya points out some of the narrowly focused studies that failed to link the two processes, including Anne de Sales (2000), Judith Pettigrew (2004), Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2013a) and concludes that:

"[i]n sum, it may be fair to say that accounts of the People's War in Nepal have kept the wider, national, and ultimately decisive "politics" outside of their ethnographic gaze. Otherwise, such politics have been reduced without further questioning to "everyday politics"—to the extent that even ethnographies claiming to analyse terror and violence, Jan Sarkar (People's Government), and Maoist model villages have muted the realpolitik that would change Nepal's constitution for good" (Shakya, 2015; non-pag).

Shakya is right in this regard, and this is why bringing together all the specific studies of the revolution does not necessarily lead to a systematic anthropological understanding of the totality of the process. Introducing only a new locale or region within this field of study would not lead to a better understanding of the complex revolutionary process. On the other hand, it would have been more wrong to link the multi-storeyed historical process into a uniform whole. By revealing the limits of conceptual apparatuses of these studies, I argue that we should develop ethnographic approaches to study historical processes that go beyond particularistic anthropology.

The criticism of Sidney Mintz and Eric Wolf, which challenged quite similar anthropological practices more than 60 years ago, is still relevant today. Both authors rejected the very foundations of particularistic anthropology by developing frameworks that grasp the "underlying processes operating in historical time" (Roseberry, 1995). Barrington Moore has outlined his approach in a similar vein in his *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*: "Before looking at the peasantry, it is necessary to look at the whole society" (1993). To achieve this, a consideration of relevant theoretical frameworks of related schools of thought is mandatory. However, most of the literature on Nepal's revolution has been written without including such theoretical considerations

and outside contemporary debates on social movements, especially those emerging from Marxist studies, postcolonial studies, and peasant studies.

Identity, Ethnicity and Class

Even a quick overview of the literature reveals that ethnic identity is probably the most common topic in the anthropology of the People's War. When the revolution entered its second phase, the question of ethnicity became the centre of radical politics. However, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2004) had shown in the case of the Magars that ethnicity became an essential factor in regional politics even before the Maoists incorporated these ideas into their agenda²⁵. Similar scholarly works followed, mapping the complex terrain of the different entanglements between ideas of liberation and ethnic emancipation throughout Nepal.

The Magar Liberation Front (created in 1991) gained popularity years before, in 1993, the year that was declared the "Year of Indigenous Peoples" by the United Nations (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2004: 113-116). Lecomte-Tilouine further explains the background of the early Magar ethnic demands for forming an autonomous ethnic federal state called Magarat. This political structure would ensure political freedom and the right to self-determination in the internally colonised Magar regions. Lecomte-Tilouine, expressing the different opinions of Magar ethnic activists, shows how they have become politically aligned with the Maoist movement, as both movements were politically aimed at achieving the same goals. The Maoists supported *Janajati* nationalities'²⁶ emancipation and the abolition of the caste system and included these demands in their original political program. According to Lecomte-Tilouine, there seemed to be an overlap between ethnic and Maoist demands, but there was a degree of mistrust on the Magars' part that Maoists would misuse their support. In the early stages of the revolution, the Magar activists' unveiling support for the Maoist cause could be seen as a bridge linking ethnic identity and class politics, although concerns that ethnicity could be exploited for the class cause persisted. What followed and significantly escalated after the peace process was the intensification

²⁵ Lecomte-Tilouine is refereeing to the broader population of the Magars, not to Kham Magars specifically.

²⁶ Janajati in Nepali is used in a similar way as Adivasi in the Indian context. It is referring to indigenous groups that resided in the area of today's Nepal prior before the arrival of the Hindus.

of what Lecomte-Tilouine and others have described as the 'politicisation of ethnic activism' (ibid). However, the battlefield where class politics was able to mobilise identity claims within a broader social movement was slowly dismantled on behalf of other powerful political actors who fostered ethnic politics.

In the same way as Lecomte-Tilouine, Anne de Sales argues that revolutionary action came to Mid-Western Nepal from the outside. Seeing the conflict in these terms, De Sales interprets the rise of Kham Magar ethnic identity as one of the outcomes of the state brutality in the region. The Maoists then used this to achieve their own goals with the help of individuals "who are caught in a bind" (de Sales, 2000: 69). However, de Sales argues that the Kham Magars' reasons to join the conflict were more 'political and economic'; she does not point further in this direction. Her analysis understands Khams within a political field instigated by outside forces, while she explains the rise of ethnic politics due to the politicisation of ethnic culture by the Maoists and as one of the outcomes of the coincidental nature of the conflict with the state (ibid). Her analysis sheds light on ethnogenesis processes amid a revolutionary movement and makes an important step towards understanding the role of ethnic identity in post-revolutionary Nepal. In my view, however, this approach does not pay sufficient attention to the process of convergence of class and non-class identities, a conceptual foundation often linked to the anthropological understanding of peasant rebellions. For example, James Scott points to ethnicity as one of the central potentials for mobilisation at the margins, precisely by linking it to class. I quote Scott here in more detail:

"When cultural distinctiveness coincides with class identity, as it does for a portion of the working class and for much of the peasantry, it serves to reinforce both class identity and the potential for mobilisation. The raw materials of class consciousness are, after all, to be sought in the small-scale, daily experiences of the members of that class rather than in their objective socio-economic location taken alone. [...] When class and ethnicity coincide, for example, the consequence is often to strengthen both identities and increase solidarity" (Scott, 1977: 277).

Scott's insights into political struggles are informative because they show the power of overlapping class and non-class identities as the central feature of revolutionary struggles. In Nepal, however, the rise of ethnic politics has been mostly detached from the class perspective that would lead to a broader analysis of the political arena of struggle. Some recent attempts have been made to bridge the two but far away from the region of the

Magars. In a detailed analysis of the formation of Thangmi identities against multiple states and other actors, Sara Shneiderman, following Scott's framework, shows how the Thangmi identity struggles, both in Nepal and India, have evolved along different paths. In Nepal, identity formation was inevitably linked to communism, while in India, the Thangmi identities had more room to develop within the prevailing discourse of indigeneity. Shneiderman's ethnographically constructed example contrasts the current of cultural politics in politically distinct environments considering the class consciousness building project that ideologically suppressed ideas for ethnic differentiation in Nepal (Shneiderman, 2015: 147).

Shneiderman, De Sales and Lecomte-Tilouine rightly pointed out the importance of identity struggles that have been advanced by projects led by Maoist activists and ethnic activists (claiming at the same time to exploit the rise of identity for their own goals and creating conditions for its suppression outside the Maoist movement). In my opinion, however, this understanding of rural struggles should not overestimate the importance of ethnic identity. It is true that following the People's War, emancipation through the affirmation of ethnic identity has become a significant factor in the political projects of many different indigenous communities in Nepal. This should not lead us to the conclusion that peasant political consciousness emerged only through ethnic or non-class related identity frustrations. It should also not conceal the broader picture of political formations in rural Nepal by arguing that peasant struggles were primarily an expression of suppressed ethnic identity. The Nepalese peasants' role has often been understood only in the line of possessing a mere agency to develop a kind of false consciousness of their own position in society (ethnic identity), which has become revolutionary only in so far as outside revolutionary forces have mobilised it. Instead, I argue, a more interesting question could be posed if ethnic identity and class in peasant struggles should be considered related, not excluding categories. In other words, in analysing the Nepalese peasants' revolutionary identities, wouldn't it be more productive to assess this history of organising in terms of both class and non-class identities? In fact, it is also a project that

is deeply embodied in Maoists theory and practice, which has tried to balance national liberation struggles on the one hand with a socialist revolution on the other²⁷.

Following debates on the national question and socialism that have troubled an older generation of Marxists, the Nepali Maoists have articulated socially and historically grounded understandings of the revolutionary process²⁸. One of the central aims, present even in the early Maoist political programs, has been to balance ethnic and class-related demands. While this has been well established in their theory, the revolutionary process exposed a somewhat different dynamic. Dinesh Paudel's work has described the complex relations between ethnic and class politics throughout the Maoist era's different phases. In contrast to scholars who have understood ethnicity only in the context of Maoist politics, a radically different perspective of identity politics is brought to light within this broader framework of class politics. Paudel argues that ethnic politics should be seen as a part of a bourgeois political project that depoliticised the revolutionary ethnic peasant movement and replaced political projects from below with ideas of indigeneity and local identity, thus opening the movement to the identity politics of the elites (Paudel, 2016b). In his article, *Ethnic identity politics in Nepal*, Paudel shows how ethnic politics are not merely a result of the struggle for emancipation but a way for the urban and rural elites to reconsolidate power. A critical element that Paudel understands by evoking Gramsci's concept of 'passive revolution' is that we need to distinguish between the two political projects to understand how the ethnic peasant movement evolved over time. By analysing the changes in contemporary political structures, Paudel skillfully leads us through some of the major transformations, such as implementing the idea of indigeneity, which was crucial to Nepal's politics in the 1990s. Promoted by international development agencies and the state since the 1970s, the idea of ethnic inclusion has sought to limit the scope of political action of ethnic movements. At the beginning of the insurgency, Maoist politics appeared to be the opposite of institutionalised ethnic politics, and many NGOs and indigenous organisations supported by foreign development agencies left the countryside (Paudel, 2016: 557). Paudel argues that it was from the outside that the consolidated

²⁷ I explain the two sides of the Maoist oppositional project in more detail in chapter 8.

²⁸ The Maoists in Nepal have often referred to ideas of Stalin and Mao, and less frequently to Lenin. The ideas of Trotsky, however, are almost completely absent in Maoist political thought and have emerged only recently.

urban ethnic movement "superseded revolutionary politics in rural areas, and indigeneity was mobilised to garner peasants' support for ethnic identity politics rather than collectively and solidarity among the ethnic peasantry and working class" (Paudel, 2016b: 558). Gradually, in the second phase of the People's War, the Maoists started to collaborate with ethnic activists and promoted an idea of identity-based restructuring of Nepal while, on the other hand, slowly abandoning agrarian transformations and other revolutionary agendas. However, according to Paudel, the bourgeois identity politics project was successful only because Maoists' politics have failed. According to Paudel, they were unable to:

"mobilise ethnic issues for the emancipation of the peasantry with concrete explanations and political programs [...] When the Maoists started to decline and suffered defeats and splits, international development programs, especially the NGO-led ethnic empowerment activities, emerged as crucial in uniting ethnic elites and peasants into consolidated forces for ethnic identity politics in Nepal" (Paudel, 2016b: 559 - 560).

Paudel's argument succeeds in connecting the emerging political movements with broader realities of political power. In this way, he can distinguish between the ethnic peasant movement that emerged as a counter-hegemonic force to the monarchical rule during the Panchayat regime and the urban ethnic movement and the 'bourgeois' ethnic project of the elites. During a certain period of the movement process, the political power of the ethnic peasant movement was harnessed by the Maoists, but according to Paudel, it was the political left's failure that did not turn it into an emancipatory political force. Instead, it has been transformed into a different kind of identity politics, the identity politics that has allowed rural elites to emerge and return to the ideology of the development sector (Paudel, 2016b).

Paudel's work brings broader hegemonic relations into the context of the ongoing ideological transformation of the countryside. The area of Mid-Western Nepal then should not be seen only as a space of confrontation between the Maoists and the state, but a space where the development industry, revolutionary politics, and ethnic politics have linked peasants to broader fields of force. Paudel's, Lecomte-Tilouine's, and de Sales' contributions to the anthropology of the People's War show that the different ways of seeing the revolution can lead to drastically different results. In short, what Lecomte-Tilouine is putting forward is the exploitation of ethnic politics by the Maoists, while

Paudel is observing the ethnicization of class politics. While there may be a tendency here to explain these subjects' actions in the context of one of these faceless structures that have strongly influenced the area, I would like to offer an anthropologically more nuanced approach to understanding political agency. In the next section, my attention is turned to the analysis of political agency, looking at the particularly interesting case of the revolutionary village of Thabang in Rolpa. By juxtaposing two conceptual approaches to hegemony and subaltern agency, put forward by scholars who conducted fieldwork in the heart of the former Maoist stronghold after the revolution, I dig deeper into the different ways of seeing the Maoist movement process.

Political Consciousness and Subaltern Resistance: The Case of Thabang, Rolpa

An interesting debate emerged around the village of Thabang in Rolpa and opened up the question of subaltern political agency in the so-called 'village of resistance' (Ogura, 2007). Ina Zharkevich has posed the question in the following way: "How rebellious were the peasants in the Maoist base area of Nepal?" (Zharkevich, 2015). Since the revolution, the research interest in the former capital of the Maoist *Bishesh Jilla* has been growing; however, anthropologists have proposed conflicting interpretations of the revolutionary narratives found in Thabang. Disagreements revolve mainly around the agency of subaltern groups at the micro, village level. In juxtaposing two approaches to the history of struggle in Thabang, I explore important conceptual frictions around subaltern agency, hegemony, and peasant resistance.

The narrative described by Dinesh Paudel and Vinay Gidwani (2012) brings forward Barman Buddha's story, a 'poor peasant' who led the 1954 peasant uprising against Krishna Jhakri, a local tax collector. This historical narrative of resistance in Thabang connects pre-revolutionary life histories of intra-village struggle to show the prehistory to the Maoist movement in Mid-Western Nepal. Paudel and Gidwani write:

"[...] [T]he shepherd boy became a rebel icon, who was to inspire many as the struggle against state officialdom expanded and intensified. The villagers of Thabang continued to battle local elites and state functionaries, and by the early 1970s, they were able to get rid of them entirely. Some surrendered, many fled. The immediate area around Thabang became a "liberated zone," and was thrust into the state's crosshairs" (Gidwani and Paudel, 2012: 259).

Paudel and Gidwani continue to portray similar narratives of struggle that preceded the Maoist People's War officially launched in 1996. Describing the different generations of peasant rebels, they challenge other anthropological accounts which take the label "Maoist" for granted. In their view, describing the prehistory of the movement is necessary to bring to light the long process of creating the 'good sense' and the intergenerational networks sustained by the village's organic intellectuals. These first articulations of a more coherent 'common sense' were more than mere intra-village squabbles, given that the history of communist ideas in Thabang is directly linked to one of the first communist intellectuals in Nepal, Mohan Bikram Singh. Barman Budha and other Thabangis reportedly met Mohan Bikram Singh while in prison, which inspired them to form the *Thabang Kisan Sangh* (Thabang Peasants' Association) under the leadership of Barman Budha after being released from prison (Gidwani and Paudel, 2012: 265). These events and later developments, such as the 1982 election boycott by the Thabangis, in the eyes of Gidwani and Paudel, led to a more consolidated, new common sense, a political consciousness that would form the basis for the upcoming political battles of the 1990s.

Zharkevich (2015), on the other hand, challenges the historical narratives coined by the Maoists and disagrees with the assessment of the struggle provided by Gidwani and Paudel. She suggests that what might seem to outsiders like peasant rebellions on the periphery are much more complex internal power struggles amongst subaltern elites. By saying this, Zharkevich is trying to 'de-mythologise' the historical narrative of the revolutionary village of Thabang. Her research shows how unknowledgeable outsiders often see the power play between rural actors as the emergence of revolutionary consciousness (Zharkevich, 2015). Zharkevich's article is an important intervention because it turns our attention to the internal power dynamics of the subaltern classes and calls into question the homogeneity of subaltern struggles and the different sets of power networks that the subalterns oppose. To address these conflicting conceptions of peasant formation in Thabang, let us first dig a bit deeper into Zharkevich's argument.

Zharkevich reminds us that subalternity is not a unified social position. The peasants are indeed a very heterogeneous group, consisting of groups of different types of producers. Sidney Mintz's detailed categorization of peasant societies shows us that "[...] peasantries

nowhere form a homogeneous mass or agglomerate, but are always and everywhere typified themselves by internal differentiation along many lines" (Mintz, 1973: 93). Such different groups indeed do not form an egalitarian society, as some Nepali Maoist politicians have pointed out²⁹, and Zharkevich rightly argues that there is more to rural politics than some kind of romanticised 'primitive' democracy. To further elaborate on Zharkevich's narrative, let us first examine Mintz's argument to see how he explains the complex power struggles within peasant societies. Zharkevich observes this by analysing pre-war conflicts in the village of Thabang, trying to demystify the revolutionary essence attributed to them by Kiyoko Ogura and Gidwani and Paudel's narrative. Instead of seeing Thabang's history of resistance as an early manifestation of revolutionary consciousness, Zharkevich suggests that these were, in fact, 'struggles of subaltern elites' (ibid). This complex differentiation in peasant societies has been a constant focus in peasant studies since the beginning. Mintz observed this process in the following manner:

"What is more, it cannot be assumed that the more powerful segments of the peasantry are necessarily changing the situation by the use they make of those peasants less powerful than they; often, the thoroughgoing 'peasant' and 'traditional' qualities of the small community or the peasant society depend on just such practices. Part of the difficulty, then, is that in observing how external groups may profit by controlling the peasantry, one may overlook how members of different sectors of the peasantry profit—and, often, remain culturally conservative—by controlling each other" (Mintz, 1973: 94).

In this sense, similar to the concerns of an older generation of scholars, Zharkevich legitimately calls for a closer evaluation of the village struggle history which in many places does not pay sufficient attention to the complexity of all internal power relations. However, what is at stake here is that by pointing out the micro fragmentation and the heterogeneity of the village struggle, Zharkevich is at risk of misrecognising the formation of political subjectivities that have since taken place in Thabang. Another problem arising from Zharkevich's description of the village struggle is that this dissecting of rural political formations leads to an uncompromising view of local political history. What Zharkevich finds in a social group that she calls: 'the ordinary villagers' (villagers, who, in

²⁹ On this topic Prachanda answered the journalist Li Onesto that: "Yes, in Rolpa and Rukum there are not too many temples, and in the family background in these nationalities, there is a kind of democracy, a primitive democracy. Even male domination in these places is weaker-it is not like in the dominating castes. And at the same time, our party has a long history of working in these areas, like in Thabang and Rolpa" (Onesto, 2000)

Zharkevich's view, become political actors only in the context of elite struggles) further underpins her theoretical assumptions that this means that "peasants respond to, rather than actively make revolutions" (Zharkevich, 2015: 374). Further, her informative ethnographic lens shows how politics in the village is conducted. She implies that (1) political affiliation more often occurs through kinship ties than through ideological affiliation, (2) the political actors are mostly local elites, well-educated individuals who can mobilise people because they already possess cultural and social capital (Zharkevich, 2015)³⁰.

Let us first take a closer look at Zharkevich's points above. Her first argument is that there are 'ordinary' villagers and 'the elites'. She gives some clues about who, in her view, are 'the elites' (well-educated villagers and influential families) and who are 'ordinary' villagers (non-educated, politically excluded people). What is missing from her description is the village's actual economic and political composition, which would help us understand how the power relations between the two groups she refers to are constituted. What Zharkevich does provide is an explanation that power struggles are often consolidated through kinship ties and are often nothing more than "events organised by subaltern elites who drew ordinary villagers into their political squabbles" (Zharkevich, 2015). In this way, she explains the pre-war pre-revolutionary formations

³⁰ It is worth noting here that Zharkevich's conclusions are not new. A similar view considering which peasants become revolutionary is held by James Scott, Eric Wolf and Hamza Alavi, although their conclusions do not follow exactly the same premises. Scott and Wolf argue that usually the landless and poor rural populations are not the initiators of peasant revolutions. It is either their social organization (Scott 1977) or the fact that they are bound by dependent and exploitative relationships (Wolf 1969) that prevent them to be openly mobilized against the ruling classes. It is in fact what Wolf calls the 'middle peasants' or peasants that live outside of ruling elites' control that most effectively form rebellions against the state. Wolf adds: "[...] ultimately, the decisive factor in making a peasant rebellion possible lies in the relation of the peasantry to the field of power which surrounds it. A rebellion cannot start from a situation of complete impotence; the powerless are easy victims" (Wolf, 1969, 290). Similarly, Hamza Alavi argues that the middle peasant is most commonly the revolutionary force: "The middle peasants, on the other hand, are initially the most militant element of the peasantry, and they can be a powerful ally of the proletarian movement in the countryside, especially in generating the initial impetus of the peasant revolution. But their social perspective is limited by their class position. When the movement in the countryside advances to a revolutionary stage they may move away from the revolutionary movement unless their fears are allayed and they are drawn into a process of co-operative endeavour" (Alavi 1965, 275). Despite similarities, there is a stark contrast between this literature and Zharkevich's points. While Wolf, Alavi and Scott, were writing from a perspective to explain how such struggles of the peasant masses could potentially become a part of broader revolutionary coalitions, Zharkevich seems to be writing with an intention of deconstructing the potential of the revolutionary movement, rather emphasizing the constraints ingrained in the socio-cultural system of the Khams, such as patronage politics.

and how the village community of Thabang was transformed into supporting the Maoist cause as 'reluctant rebels' (Zharekovich, 2015). While this assertion in a way problematises the 'autonomous political domain' of peasant politics as it is understood in Subaltern studies³¹, the limit of this approach is that it reduces the political domain in contrast to Subaltern studies of the subaltern exclusively to the political domain of the elites.

What is in Subaltern studies, a kind of 'logical flaw' that positions the subalterns' political consciousness into an autonomous domain, is not in line with Gramsci's concept of subalternity (Nilsen, 2017: 60). However, on the other side hegemony should not be simply understood as domination. In my view, both Zharkevich's and the Subaltern studies' approaches do not pay sufficient attention to hegemony as a process. Instead of juxtaposing the autonomous and non-autonomous aspects of subaltern politics, the concept of hegemony should enable us to analyse the meaning of subaltern's relational, political practices. Hegemony is in this sense, as Nilsen understands it, is: "the result of a complex, conflictual process where groups which seek to achieve a dominant position combine the interests of different social groups within a 'historical bloc' that forms the basis for the exercise of power" (Nilsen, 2017: 62). Zharkevich challenges the autonomy of intra-village affairs and the rise of 'authentic' revolutionary consciousness only to show how the subaltern resistance expresses itself through the dominant forms of politics and by using the existing power relations and structures as their means of taking power. What is missing is to show how the same process paved the way for a different kind of politics that had emerged before the People's War and later evolved within the communist movement.

Following Gramsci, Scott argues that one crucial function of hegemony is that it introduces "the social myths and values that justify their [subordinate classes'] exploitation" (Scott, 1977: 273). It is an anthropological task to reveal how strong and present this mystification is by looking at "to what extent the ruling elites' institutions

³¹ Conceptualising the 'autonomous domain' approach to understanding subaltern politics Ranajit Guha argues in the introduction to the Subaltern Studies project: "For parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups consisting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people. This was an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter." (Guha, 1982: 4).

penetrate the rural sector and organise the experience of the peasantry" (ibid). In this regard, Zharkevich's intervention is important. Her article links the politics of the subaltern to the politics of the village elites. It clearly states that at the start of the People's War this "was not the war of the abstract, distant state against the people or 'oppressive' high castes against 'egalitarian' Kham Magars—rather it was the slaughter of fellow villagers by other villagers at the hands of the state, be it police or district administration" (Zharkevich, 2015: 358). What Zharkevich proposes is that in the struggles before the People's War, revolutionary consciousness did not develop, formulating this as a "power struggle within the local elite, over which ordinary peasants had little say" (ibid). What she does not recognise, however, is that the very process she is describing, although not yet politically charged in the same manner as it became later, was an important precursor of structural political change in the area.

If we elaborate on Zharkevich's points through Gramsci's conceptual framework, we may conclude that subalterns and elites are not understood as socially and politically unrelated positions. Gramsci understood the heterogeneity of subaltern groups and how determinate their subordinate relation to ruling groups is. He wrote:

"The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of ruling groups [...] Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately. In reality, even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves (Gramsci, 1992: 54-55).

Whether we observe this on the state or the village community level, the revolutionary consciousness does not emerge as an autonomous oppositional culture, nor does it emerge only from elite politics. How are we then supposed to understand it? Instead, we must identify the political relations between different subaltern groups and dominant groups and understand how these relational processes and power structures shape the subaltern's common sense. This means that in Mid-Western Nepal, we would need to take a closer look at the power and political domination as culturally, politically and socially grounded processes. Gramsci's analysis points out that power and political domination reach all corners of the society, but the spaces needed for counter-hegemonic projects to emerge are never entirely eradicated. In the case of Thabang, what Zharkevich is

observing, is a creation of such a space – and this cannot be reduced to the acts of influential individuals. This was the time when a major transformation was taking place in rural Nepal: the beginning of a formation of a new type of hegemony and the effort for the renegotiation of the old.³²

Out of all the villages in Mid-Western Nepal, this process was the most visible in Thabang. Not only can people's resistance against the state be traced throughout the prehistory of the revolution, but Thabang was also the epicentre of Maoist activities throughout the People's War. By looking at Thabang as a prism for understanding Maoist politics in Nepal, Paudel suggests looking at these processes not as isolated intra-village events but in connection to broader socio-political processes and other landscapes of power. Drawing on the history of the political struggle in Thabang, Paudel identifies four historically articulated relationships between the village of Thabang and Maoist politics: (1) 'the village as an administrative entity', (2) 'the village as an agent of history', (3) 'structuring in the regional networks', and (4) 'the village as a locus of national politics' (Paudel, 2019: 6). Paudel further argues that the long prehistory of political articulations within the village and its continued political interaction on various scales have positioned Thabang as the focal point of regional and later national political networks. Such connections were further made possible by new developmental projects, modernisation programs, and political connections that opened up when a school was established in Thabang. "The school was especially decisive in generating women's leadership at the village level, and it provided a means of political communication with the outside world, as free political activism was banned in the country during the one-party Panchayat era (1960–90)", Paudel argues (Paudel, 2019: 9).

³² Hobsbawm in his article *Peasants and Politics* (1973) demonstrates the political power of peasants and its limits. He argues, similarly to Eric Wolf that peasant movements are more realistic when inspired from the outside, or in other words, when they are able to form wider alliances. The question is therefore not so much whether peasants are able to form some kind of 'authentic' revolutionary consciousness, rather than to question the political structures peasants become part of and operate within. Within such framework, as Hobsbawm points out: "it may not make a great deal of difference whether the peasants are fighting for an entirely different and new society or for adjustment of the old, which normally means either the defence of the traditional society against some threat or the restoration of the old ways which, if sufficiently far in the past, may merely amount to a traditionalist formulation of revolutionary aspirations. Revolutions may be made de facto by peasants who do not deny the legitimacy of the existing power structure, law, the state and even the landlords" (Hobsbawm, 1973: 12).

Another strong connection was established when Barman Budha became a member of parliament in 1990. "He refused to wear the national dress when the king visited the parliament. This was the moment of spreading the message of resistance to the general public of Kathmandu, and Thabang became the pseudo-name for uprising in the public domain" (Paudel, 2019: 10). These and other events in Thabang's political history had established the village as the 'beacon of resistance' even before the Maoist revolution began. Paudel's conceptualisation of the village as the prism through which we can understand political action looks at three elements of political dynamics beyond the urban-rural divide. He is interested in the 'internal structural transformation of a village', 'the changes occurring outside the village', and the 'circular connections between the two' (Paudel, 2019: 13). Instead of focusing on the village as a stage for micro-political battles, this relational approach creates a multi-layered picture of subaltern politics that goes beyond the binary logic of 'autonomous vs subjugated' (Paudel, 2019: 2). By connecting these local histories to broader social structures, Paudel avoids obscuring the local political domain as merely fragmented and heterogeneous by showing the long and complicated process of revolutionary consciousness formation.

Similarly, to Paudel, William Roseberry has drawn on Gramsci's concept of hegemony and elaborated these processes in his article *Hegemony and the Language of Contention* (1994a). Explaining the key elements of how hegemonic processes function, Roseberry does not assume subaltern groups' unity. On the contrary, he urges anthropologists to explore the different subaltern and dominant groups within their 'sphere of influence'. "What associations or organisations of kinship, ethnicity, religion, region, or nation bind or divide them?" Looking at these relations between different groups, I believe that anthropology should further investigate how an 'ideological consensus' is negotiated (Roseberry, 1994a: 360). Paudel explores this consensus's formation through the emergence of extra-local connections, networks and local history of struggle. These hegemonic entanglements of pre-revolutionary rural Nepal are important for understanding the political transformations that have taken place in the later stages of the revolution.

Looking at these political processes, I argue that we should turn away from the questions troubling to Zharkevich. Raymond Williams proposed that hegemony is not a system or a

structure, it is a process, and as such, it is never total. “It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. [...] Moreover, it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance” (Williams, 1977: 112). In her article, Zharkevich demonstrates the case of a village undergoing a transition in which, to put it in Williams' terms, the 'renegotiation of hegemony' within a non-unified subaltern group is taking place (ibid). I argue that this transitional period should be further analysed to understand peasants' complex role in different political projects that clashed at the turn of the century. The shift between different hegemonies and power structures that have integrated Nepalese peasants into developmental, identity politics and other more or less emancipatory fields of power can be one reason why peasants become revolutionary. I argue these developments should not be analysed as autonomous adherents of social change but rethought through the logic of uneven and combined development of class struggle. Following these steps, I propose that such extreme contrasts, caused by the coexistence of different historical moments and combinations with capitalist modernity, produce an environment responding to the ‘old’ as well as to the ‘new’, and give a more accurate context of the rural revolution in Nepal.

The Maoist project was formed precisely around peasants' capacity to form a counter-hegemonic movement against the new strategies of power that have entered Nepal in a more recent phase of capitalist restructuring. The Maoist movement became so widespread in the countryside because of the discrepancies in the power structures that could not form a new political consensus. What appeared to be unimportant conflicts between elites in pre-revolutionary Nepal was an important process through which Gidwani and Paudel argue that common sense was consolidated (ibid). The micro-level struggles in Rukum and Rolpa were a component in the broader field of struggle that has helped forge the substance of revolutionary political consciousness.³³ Although in this

³³ Sara Shneiderman shows how the composition of political consciousness was grounded in collective memory of everyday situations of oppression that were a constitutive part of the state formation process. In her example of the Piskar village, she argues that: “[...] the Maoist movement is deeply embedded in Nepal's violent history of state formation, and is a contemporary manifestation of the long-term interplay between politics and consciousness created by that history”. Piskar was a festival with political content that “criticized local landowners and advocated just treatment of the poor. [...] [L]ocal police forces ambushed the festival and opened fire. [...] Numerous arrests were made on the day of the jatra (festival), and a wide-ranging police dragnet in the aftermath arrested approximately 300 others on the charge of being present at the event. [...] This event shaped the political consciousness of the entire area, and was in part responsible for making Piskar a Maoist stronghold some years later” (Shneiderman, 2009: 289-291).

period, the character of subaltern politics is particularly marked by the political culture of dominant groups, as Zharkevich has rightly pointed out, I believe that we should not disregard the importance of these events in the process of political transformation of rural Nepal. The unarticulated revolutionary consciousness in the pre-war era and the kinship character of later politics does not provide sufficient ground for Zharkevich's conclusion that peasants were merely dragged into the elites' political affairs.

So far, I have provided and reflected on conflicting insights into the conceptualisation of subaltern agency and hegemony in the case of Thabang. Subaltern political subjects in Mid-Western Nepal could not escape the old society's power structures that dominated the countryside. However, the Maoist movement gradually developed a powerful ideological critique that mobilised peasants and formed a rural revolutionary movement. The Maoists and the communist affiliated rural elites have thus unravelled a powerful political potential, the impacts of which we are still observing in Nepal. Retrospectively, as Gidwani and Paudel (2012) described, this political process can be observed at this stage in its embryonic forms. Since then, it has become a broader social struggle and has achieved resistance forms that were not present at this early stage.

Peasant Resistance: Subaltern Culture and Modernity

One of the questions central to any understanding of peasant resistance is the question of modernity. At the height of the Cold War and in the aftermath of the fall of the colonial regimes, postcolonial interpretations of the third world challenged European historiography and theories of modernisation, including that of Marxist descent. Leading postcolonialists such as Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and the Subaltern Studies school proposed alternative histories and theories of development that demanded recognition of subjectivities subjugated to the history of Western capitalist development. While I argue that scholarship on Nepal's recent history benefited from a postcolonial focus, I show how the current understanding of the Maoist revolution within capitalist modernity adopts the idea of a 'time-lag' and a culturalist interpretation of modernity. It ultimately leads to idealising notions of difference in the trajectories of contemporary capitalist development and sees the rural world as 'catching-up' with the modernity of the cities or recognises the contemporary social entanglements as 'hybrids'. By looking at the concept of modernity

as it has been developed by some of the proponents of the Subaltern Studies school, I propose that we should move away from concepts of modernity as historical multiplicity (difference). Following Harry Harootunian's (2010; 2015) theory of historical time, my aim in this section is to rethink the contemporaneity of peasant struggles in Nepal within a theory of modernity that recognises simultaneity of different historical times in relation to the homogenous time of capital.

There has been quite some debate on the theorisation of subaltern subjects in the Global South. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, subalterns were seen as premodern political subjects in European social theory and history. His critique of historicism analyses the political modernity in the Global South and exposes the failures of stagist theories of development by claiming that peasants were already a part of the political world long before their political agency was recognised by the European and national elites. More to the point, Chakrabarty states that a similar idea is inscribed in the Marxist historiography of Eric Hobsbawm. Following Ranajit Guha's critique of Hobsbawm's conceptualisation of the 'prepolitical', Chakrabarty argues that similar examples of historicism can be found in the works of most Western Marxists (not only Hobsbawm), many of whom categorised peasants' political consciousness as 'archaic', and non-European development as incomplete (Chakrabarty, 2008: 12). In postcolonial theory, however, peasants are seen as a part of the capitalist modernity, and their role is not marginal to modernity building. Instead, it is the peasants' political agency that is both political and modern and central to the emergence of capitalism in India (ibid).

The problem with Hobsbawm's resolution of the peasant question, which went as far as to proclaim 'the death of the peasantry' (Hobsbawm, 1994), is that it sees peasants within the stagist theory of development, in the light of which the underdeveloped parts of the world are shaped in the 'image of the West'. The problem with this idea of modernity, as Harootunian has argued:

"lay in its failure to acknowledge that modernity, past and present, was a category of historical totalisation in the medium of specific cultural experiences, demanding the fusing together of distinct forms and ways of temporalising history into a historical unity, but denoting an always incomplete present. (Harootunian, 2010: 371).

In the works of Subaltern Studies, namely Guha, Chatterjee and Chakrabarty, one can observe the theoretical endeavour to detach subaltern culture from the narrative of European history. The Subalternists are thus echoing the postcolonial argument that exposes Eurocentric epistemology and the modernising narratives of capitalist development that subordinate non-European agency to the dynamics of European history. Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* sums up well the argument central to the Subalternist's approach to modernity. He argues that most Western Marxisms 'ascribe at least an underlying structural unity' to the historical process and therefore compress space and time only within the unifying history of capital. Instead, what Chakrabarty proposes is to re-conceptualise the concept of modernity from historical singularity to one of historical difference (Chakrabarty, 2008: 19).

The proletarianization thesis, as the Subalternists have rightfully pointed out, is not as straightforward as Hobsbawm had put it. It is a much more uneven process that creates infinite economic, social, and cultural links between the city and the countryside, enveloping a much more complicated relationship. Neil Davidson described this in the following way:

"The move from peasant to worker involves people retaining links, moving back and forth between rural and urban areas, with a correspondingly complex development of class consciousness. The process is also spatially uneven: in some regions the 'new enclosures' and other processes associated with the emergence of the neoliberal trade and food regimes push small and middling peasants and their offspring off the land and into the cities (though not necessarily into factory work), while in others a degree of 're-peasantisation' in the form of partial reliance on small-holdings for subsistence/income by urban workers still continues in the formal and informal sectors." (Davidson, 2017: 62).

While I endorse the Subaltern Studies schools' efforts to rethink non-European modernity and question the modernisation thesis, I also see a potential danger in their conceptualisation of non-western and western political worlds as fundamentally different. This epistemological break, as has been rightfully pointed out by several authors, is at the heart of Subaltern Studies (Ahmad, 1994; Chibber, 2014; Kaiwar, 2014), and it leads them to "mystify and essentialise both 'east' and 'west'" (Lazarus, 2016: 97). Subalternity is thus seen as opposed to Western modernity and outside capital's

'homogenising' tendency³⁴. This pluralising tendency in the conceptualisation of modernity leads Subalternists into assumptions that heterogeneity caused by capitalist expansion produces alternative modernities. Lazarus sees the problem in the Subalternist flaw of understanding modernity as the 'universalisation of the west' (ibid). The conception of a unified West, an assertion that can be traced back to Said's version of postcolonialism, does not acknowledge the different forms of unevenness, a process central to the conception of both the imperial West and the colonised East. Instead of paying more attention to capitalist accumulation, the Subalternists approach produces alternative modernities of cultural, not temporal difference. As Perry Anderson argued:

“Alas, there is a logical difficulty in this wistful hope, which is insuperable. Alternative modernities, so conceived, are cultural, not structural: they differentiate not social systems, but sets of values – typically, a distinctive combination of morality and sensibility, making up a certain national 'style' of life. But just because this is what is most specific to any given culture, it is typically what is least transferable to any other – that is, impossible to universalise” (Anderson, 2010: non-pag).

Instead of an essentialised juxtaposition between East and West and a conception of modernity ultimately leading to alternative modernities of cultural difference, some authors have proposed a more nuanced resolution of the complexities of capitalist development. It is possible to avoid this argument by emphasising both the unifying and pluralising tendency of capitalist modernity. Davidson argues that while modernity was brought to life by capitalism, it is not determined by it, and more importantly, western modernity, as seen by most Subalternists, should not be seen as the only adherent of capitalism. The very experience of this modernity at the outset was permeated with unevenness. In this way, Davidson argues that different experiences of modernity do not necessarily mean cultural differentiation but are instead a consequence of uneven and combined development. Davidson elaborates this argument by showing how the logic of uneven and combined development is ingrained in the conception of modernity itself. He shows how different experiences of modernity, both 'contemporary' and 'archaic' are inscribed in modernist art, which is, according to Davidson, the cultural logic of uneven and combined development, and not of monopoly capitalism, as Ernest Mandel had

³⁴ Chibber's critique of Subaltern studies although it has been rightfully critiqued for its dismissive tone and misreading of some central Subalternist concepts (Lazarus, 2016) outlines well the problematic of postcolonial studies. Although Chibber puts too much weight on the 'homogenizing tendency' of capital, it helps him to expose how this universal aspect of capitalist development seeps out of the main concerns of Subalternists. I return to this argument below.

argued (Davidson, 2017: 15-30). Similarly to Frederick Jameson's and Harry Harootunain's theory of modernity, this approach emphasises modernity's 'singularity and global simultaneity' (Lazarus, 2016: 97).

Harry Harootunain has pointed out that Chakrabarty's theory of modernity pays more attention to space than it does to time (Harootunain, 2010: 380). Chakrabarty's theory of historical difference posits History 1 in the time of capital, and History 2 in relation to it, by building on the distinction between abstract and real labour. Chakrabarty's reading of Marx leads him to develop History 1 as the history of capital, which extracts, through abstract labour from History 2. This distinction that Chakrabarty ascribed to Marx's differentiation in Capital I between abstract and real labour create "two kinds of histories: histories "posited by capital" and histories that do not belong to capital's 'life process'" (Chakrabarty, 2008: 50). Harootunain raises several problems with this interpretation of modernity. First, he argues that Chakrabarty's analysis does not pay any attention to Marx's observations in Capital and Grundrisse on the uneven development of capitalism and the simultaneity of different modes of production. Creating the difference between History 1 and History 2 based on the logic of abstract labour, Harootunain argues that this leads Chakrabarty to conclude that there is a 'space of historical difference' outside capitalism. "This space of historical difference", according to Harootunain, "has no temporality, which is paradoxical since the logic of abstract labour is driven by an accountancy of time that measures the magnitude of labour needed to produce surplus value" (Harootunain, 2010: 379-380). Although Chakrabarty thinks of History 2 as a space compatible with capital and is not necessarily precapitalist or feudal, Harootunain sees it as another attempt to theorise non-capitalist modernity. He concludes:

Under these circumstances, it can be nothing more than an irreducible cultural habitus fixed in a timeless geographic zone that regulates the reproductive rhythms of its fundamentally unchanging everyday (Harootunain, 2010: 380).

This brings us to the idea of modernity most commonly used in the context of the Maoist revolution in Nepal. A valid representation of how modernity and peasant struggle are intertwined in the anthropology of the People's War can be traced in Judith Pettigrew's work. She argues that the Maoist movement was ideologically important in initiating a new type of modernity that attracted the Nepali village youth to position themselves

against the 'old' society (Pettigrew, 2003: 15). This enabled the young actors to assert themselves as protagonists of modernity in an environment that had been historically excluded from such a discourse. However, the emergence of such modernity appeared to have differed from the one that has already been present in Nepal's urban parts. In this way, Pettigrew argues that the Maoists were successful in constructing an alternative discourse of modernity that would replace the 'old' and challenge the existing (consumerist) modernity of the cities (ibid). The membership in the Maoist party was a ticket to becoming a part of this ideological battle. Similarly, to Subalternist versions of modernity, Pettigrew's analysis draws lines within this conceptual field to divide it by space and thus re-invents the juxtaposition of rural/urban as spaces within modernity that possess different qualities.

Another more sophisticated reincarnation of modernity can be traced in the works of David Gellner. In the most recent version of his work, in which he retraces the various social changes of Nepali society (which Gellner identifies mostly as new identity formations), Gellner evokes Latour's notion of hybridity and relates his usage of modernity to Latour's actor-network theory. In Gellner's view, activists of all sorts embody the concept of hybridity, an example he sees as the most indicative of how modernity can be best understood. The different 'actants' in making a hybrid can be "contexts, individuals, or processes. Such hybrid actants mix, for example, politics and religion, or sport and economics, social service and politics, and so on" (Gellner, 2019: 14). Although Gellner is careful enough not to dip his toes into the problematic waters of different binarisms (premodern/modern, rural/urban), his approach comes with its own difficulties. Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* provides him with a framework that avoids theorising another form of postcolonial cultural essentialism or historical differentially within the theory of modernity³⁵. However, as Harootunain points out,

³⁵ Others have pointed out that behind Latour's attractive conceptual framework lies a anti-Marxist project, that has gained momentum within academia at a time when scholars have been searching for alternatives to Marx. To quote Lossin's luscious criticism of Latour:

"Within the academy, the depoliticised materialism of the actor-network approach has added appeal as an alternative to the problematic spectre of Marx. The vulgar materialism of ANT satisfies a desire to operate in the realm of the real – to 'ascend from earth to heaven' rather than 'descend from heaven to earth', as Marx put it. But ANT is a rabidly anti-Marxist theory that participates in the obfuscation of class essential to neoliberal ideology by providing an alternative, empty materialism entirely detached from any theory of production or social relations" (Lossin, 2020: non pag).

Latour's framework is another form of the Weberian division, in Latour's words, between 'mediation' and 'purification', that corresponds to the spatial and temporal division between East and West, "seeing capitalism as a product of a continuous cultural endowment, whose elements were absent in Asia and Africa" (Harootunain, 2002: non-pag). In this way, Harootunain argues, it is equally valid to argue that "we have always been modern" (ibid).

Gellner's theory of modernity exclusively focused on Nepal's identity machine, explores 'networks' and 'contexts' within which activists work and the cultural environments through which they are molded. Although this approach reveals detailed insights into how activists 'translate, mediate and create' between 'global norms and local realities' (Gellner, 2019: 14), I argue that it does not step much further than Pettigrew's vision of Maoists as the rural agents of modernity. Using a very similar metaphor, Gellner calls activists the 'plumbers of modernity' (ibid). Pettigrew's and Gellner's ideas of modernity develop the spatial and temporal differences they refer to without reference to capitalist development theories and accept Appadurai's problematic idea of 'modernity at large' (Appadurai, 1996).

This conceptual grounding of modernity is not far from Chakrabarty's theory of historical difference, as it promotes, albeit differently, the ideas of cultural heterogeneity as central to the process of globalisation. Without a theory of capitalist expansion, it slips into the problematic culturalist terrain of mapping the differences. This brings me back to the anthropology of the People's War, in which I believe the peasants' role should be rethought in terms of their contemporaneity with capitalism and simultaneity with different historical times. I argue that the scholarship on recent political transformations in Nepal would greatly benefit from an approach that would connect the theory of uneven and combined development to the idea of modernity and peasant resistance. Instead of explaining the subaltern's contemporaneity, the anthropology of the People's War portrays these subjects as victims of larger structures; either ideology or kinship and patronage politics; and ultimately as agents of 'hybrid' modernity. Rethinking capitalist development in Nepal with a historical sensibility that claims its distance to the timeless modernity of spatial or cultural difference is thus completely missing in the recent anthropological literature.

In most cases, the Maoist insurgency has been categorised as an insurrection of a communist movement that has been able to mobilise the rural population using persuasion techniques and violence. In my view, most of these ethnographic accounts fall short in connecting the formation of political consciousness to actual political and economic developments and class formations that have affected rural Nepal. Equally important, they do not pay sufficient attention to the internal colonisation processes of hill tribes (such as Gurungs, and Kham Magars) and other minorities such as the Madhesi in the Terai. The motivations of Nepal's 'rural inhabitants', which are not perceived as full political subjects, are often analysed outside the frames of capitalist expansion and agrarian transformation. For example, Marie Lecomte-Tilouine, in a chapter of the book *Revolution in Nepal*, argues that the revolution was not a peasant war at all. She writes:

"It is well known that the Chinese revolution was born from the association of intellectuals and peasants, who jumped at the opportunity to get rid of their landlords. This is not the case in Deurali, and, more generally, in the region where the Maoist movement developed, since by far the greater part of agricultural land is tilled by its owners and, in any case, agriculture had already become secondary for most 'peasants' in the 1990s. Thus, the redistribution of land played nothing more than a symbolic role in the hills, and in Deurali, not a single plot was seized or redistributed by the Maoists. The People's War was, therefore, not a peasants' war, even if it developed in rural areas" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2013b: 46).

Regardless of how central to the revolution was the redistribution of land, I argue that this fact does not make the use of concepts like 'class' redundant for the historical-sociological analysis. In Lecomte-Tilouine's work, similar to Gellner and Pettigrew's analysis, there is a pronounced focus on identity formations; there are no peasants or proletarians, no relational or broader categories; instead, we read about villagers, ordinary people, and farmers.

One of the reasons behind this may be that non-class identities are often easier to grasp from an ethnographic micro perspective than class ones. The other reason could be that the Maoist People's War expressed a strong non-class character, which made this also an important focus in contemporary scholarship. However, the lack of materialistic grounding of the cultural and political processes studied by anthropologists in Nepal points to a long tradition in anthropology. This point was well elaborated by William Roseberry, who juxtaposed his materialistic formulation of culture against Clifford

Geertz's more idealistic version, expressed in the well-known essay on Balinese cockfights, which takes culture as an 'ensemble of texts'. Roseberry comments on the essay with his sharp materialistic outlook, pointing out that instead of grounding such interpretations into Balinese historical or social processes and thus 'explaining' them, Geertz treats culture merely as a product of these processes. In Roseberry's words:

"[t]he cockfight has gone through a process of creation that cannot be separated from Balinese history. Here we confront the major inadequacy of the text as a metaphor for culture. A text is written; it is not writing. To see culture as an ensemble of texts or an art form is to remove culture from the process of its creation. If culture is a text, it is not everyone's text" (Roseberry 1994b: 27).

In this way, Roseberry warns us against social analysis that examines parts but not the social whole: "Any analysis of class and class conflict in rural regions must not simply add rural proletarians and/or semi-proletarians to traditional concepts of peasantries. We must analyse the process of production and reproduction of the social formation as a whole and the position of rural regions (and social groups within those regions) in the total society" (Roseberry 1978: 4). In Nepal, writings on peasant resistance, Maoist political culture, and the People's War deal with the cultural 'text' in this way.

Instead of seeing how the popular uprisings' efforts have been simultaneously undermined by the expanding developmental sector and the reforms imposed by IMF and World Bank (Ismail, 2017; Paudel, 2016a), such approaches tend to forget about the political projects of the ruling groups. Seeing this neoliberal 'spirit of democracy' (Shakya, 2017: 71) as politically formative class alliances, the analysis of this period in Nepal's history would bring us to a radically different picture of the oppositional projects. In this chapter, I have problematised the widely accepted idea of modernity in the studies of Nepali society, which is related to a much broader theoretical friction within postcolonial studies and Marxist approaches. While such approaches into the Nepali scenario inform us how the harnessed power of identity politics entered the complex political arena through different actors, I argue that Nepal's peasant question should be reframed through the concept of modernity that acknowledges capitalism's temporal and spatial unevenness.

Peasants, Anthropology and the Idea of Uneven and Combined Development

In this section, I focus on the part of the Marxist anthropological tradition that started applying political, economic analysis to non-industrialised societies – particularly, to rethink the position of peasant societies within global capitalist relations with the help of the idea of uneven and combined development (UCD). I see this tradition as especially relevant for contemporary debates on capitalist restructuring for several reasons. First, in the history of thinking about local social relations as part of a broader, long-term historical process, this approach has important methodological and empirical cornerstones for analysing local contexts within the global economy. Second, through its focus on non-industrialised societies and the peripheries of the global capitalist system, it contributed to Marxist analyses that start from the industrial core and to existing scholarship on non-industrialised societies that left the integrations of peripheral contexts into capital relations out of their analysis. Furthermore, by a close analysis of the modes through which these societies connect to global capital flows, this tradition provided a rich contextual understanding of the dialectical relations of integration/delinking, and different forms of accumulation and de-proletarianization, autonomy and dependence that are at work in, and maintain, these societies' position within global capitalist relations. In short, I discuss here the relevance of the school of anthropological political economy and the idea of uneven and combined development as two approaches that have advanced our understanding of capitalist development in the Global South, after being represented for centuries as particular "backward" remnants of the general human historical progress.

Theories of capitalist development grounded in a Marxist critique of political economy, such as dependency, world-systems and the modes of articulation approaches, are building on Marx's understanding of the internal laws of the capitalist mode of production. These theories have advanced Marx's efforts to understand the capitalist mode in historical motion, which Marx began to explain in the case of 19th century England. Here, Marx introduces one of the central ideas of capitalist transformation of the 'periphery', the process of primitive accumulation. While this concept has been understood as a historical example of the emergence and dominance of capitalist relations

over pre-capitalist social formations, several authors draw on Marx's method to explain the reproduction of capital relations and the dynamics of capital in its expanded mode as a continuous process³⁶. To contextualise this current within anthropology, I begin with a discussion of the main ideas of the school of anthropological political economy, which I contextualise within a broader field of peasant studies and theories of capitalist development. By putting forward some of the limits of approaches that study the agrarian transformations of the Global South and, more specifically looking at peasants as the subjects of capitalist transformation, I argue that the anthropological political economy school resolved the conflict between two contrasting approaches in peasant studies: the approach originating from the Leninist tradition and the approach of the Chayanovian tradition. I further draw on important insights of the theory of UCD and the school of anthropological political economy for a more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity of capitalist development and the role of peasant struggles in the 21st Century.

The post-war generation of anthropologists in the US who became interested in the expanded Marxist project is most often seen as emerging from the works of Julian Steward and his Puerto Rico Project. Sidney Mintz, Eric Wolf, Stanley Diamond, Morton Fried, and Eleanor Leacock, among others, were the ones who began to develop their own political-economic frameworks that would lay the groundwork for a materialist formulation of culture in anthropology. Eric Wolf and Sidney Mintz became influential figures, the works of which evolved not only in dialogue with American Cultural Anthropology but also contributed to other fields of anthropology and heavily influenced Marxist understandings of the Global South (Neveling and Steur, 2018). In the same way, as Marx used the anthropology of his day to understand the world and apply his theoretical developments to current political situations, Eric Wolf's work emulated Marx's approach by moving from Marxist theory to the concrete anthropological analysis of the peasant political realities. Moving away from classical anthropology that saw its subjects as powerless people responding to dominating structures, Wolf rephrased the questions of how power works. With a sharp empirical-historical focus, his in-depth studies of

³⁶ There has been a great interest in the process of capital accumulation in the theories of the expanded mode of production; the debate goes back to the 1970s (Amin, 1973; Harvey, 1975). The analysis by William Roseberry (1978) provides a more detailed discussion on the applicability of the concept of primitive accumulation to the peasant economies of the twentieth century.

political-economic formations envision a sphere of interaction, the 'field of force', where juxtaposed positions of power operate. Wolf's work on peasants has helped shift the focus away from anthropological approaches that tend to isolate such political actors from global networks of power. In his work, Wolf has shown how peasant histories and political positions made them enter fields of force in particular places in relation to capitalist development or state formation or other local consequences of domination (Wolf, 1969). As Smith (2014) argues, Wolf's understanding of power was a valuable contribution demonstrating how structural power can operate globally yet find its way into particular settings through local actors. This contribution has further elaborated anthropology's long-standing goal to map, understand and challenge the ever-changing global dynamics of capitalism through its local manifestations (Wolf and Silverman, 2001). In other words, such endeavors opened the door for anthropological research to develop politically grounded understandings of the contemporary global scenarios produced by the constant movement of capital.

Besides Wolf, other anthropologists became involved with mapping the 'nodes of connection' between the global economy and spaces outside of capital's reach. By studying how people and places get disarticulated from the global economy and how they might be linked to larger fields of power, this approach has tackled the complex relations between different political-economic trajectories and political action (Gill and Kasmir, 2016: 89). With the unresolved agrarian transition of the 20th Century in mind, it has been argued that today the old agrarian questions do not seem to be central to the accumulation of capital on the world scale (Bernstein, 2016). However, Wolf's study of peasant revolutions teaches us that when peasants rebel against injustices, their role is tragic, in the sense that the very aspects of peasant political consciousness that help them maintain their traditional role in society make them revolutionary (Wolf, 1969: 292). Wolf's treatment of peasant struggles responded to and still informs debates on capitalist development and peasant resistance³⁷ and is a key orientation point for contemporary debates assessing the potential of reproductive struggles and the commons in the face of the present crisis (Bhatthacharya 2017, Susser 2017).

³⁷ For a more recent reflection of the approach, see the Focaal blog series: Modes of Production, edited by Patrick Neveling and Joe Trapido (2015).

There has been some debate on what can be seen as Wolf's most significant contribution to Marxist anthropology (Schneider and Rapp, 1995; Kalb and Neveling, 2014); however, Wolf's different formulation of agrarian mobilisations and peasant politics has not remained uncontested within the field of peasant studies. The central antagonism between peasant resistance and agrarian restructuring that Wolf addresses in his *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century* (1969) can be traced throughout the formation and evolution of the agrarian question itself. Let us briefly take a look at the early 20th Century classical debates about the Russian peasantry articulated by Chayanov's populism on one side and Lenin's critique of it (most well-represented in *Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899)). We see that the conceptual conflict between both approaches presents the same existing antagonism. The two antagonistic conceptualisations of the peasantry have created methodological and epistemological distinctions between approaches that (1) favour the systemic approach that analyses the peasants through their position in the process of capital accumulation (the Leninist tradition) or (2) produce concepts that create socio-economic and consequently politico-ideological differentiation of the peasantry that make way from the agrarian to more cultural questions (the Chayanovian tradition). On the one hand, deriving from Leninist theory, there is a simplistic resolution of the contradictions surrounding the peasant question. This direction ultimately leads to a certain kind of determinism inscribed in 'depeasantization', a process of the inevitable disappearance of peasants and the dismissal of their agency in capitalist or socialist transformation (Roseberry, 1994b: 177). On the other hand, the Chayanovian celebration of the middle-peasant and the romantic depictions of the disappearing peasant societies has also been widely criticised for leading the debate into the historically and economically decontextualised troubled waters of the cultural turn (Brass, 2000).

The deadlock ingrained in juxtaposing Chayanov and Lenin's approaches has generated a lively debate in the academic world of peasant studies. According to some critiques of postmodernism in agrarian and peasant studies (Brass, 2000), postmodern elements (such as replacing economic categories with cultural ones) can now be traced in the frameworks originating in the neo-populist framework. This includes the works of Eric Wolf, James Scott and other related approaches (namely the Subaltern Studies School) that have, according to Brass, not built conclusive theoretical resistance leading them out

of the framework of historical materialism (ibid). Where other authors have seen relevant departures from Marxist theory in order to revitalise it from its orthodox past and address issues such as Eurocentrism and linearity of history, Brass sees a formation of a postmodern epistemological framework that gives way to the individual/autonomous subject instead of the collective/class structure 'while Lenin and Marx are similarly pushed aside by Gramsci and Foucault' (Brass, 2000: 132).

In a similar vein, other such debates have emerged around the frictions between historical materialist and postcolonial approaches, initiated by Vivek Chibber's critique of the Subaltern studies school in his *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2014). Although this debate has, in some form, been going on since the 1990s, Chibber's sharp discourse has put it back into the spotlight. It focuses on the threads of Subaltern Studies scholarship that challenged the liberal colonial historiography and reconsidered the development of capitalist relations in the region. According to Chibber's reading of Subaltern Studies, this scholarly attempt has mostly failed to achieve its goal because it has not paid enough attention to the all-encompassing 'universalising tendency of capital' (ibid). While Chibber's reading has generated some valid concerns, it seems to be positing Marxism against the project of postcolonialism, a move that should have caused more concern in this ongoing debate – but also a move that does not acknowledge a three-decade-long legacy of materialist critiques of postcolonial studies (Lazarus, 2016: 92). Anievas and Nişancıoğlu have recognised the dangers of Chibber's reading of postcolonial studies, and have argued for a more nuanced understanding of Guha's and Chakrabarti's main arguments (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2017). While giving some credit to Chibber's rightful claims that there has been a lack of theorising the origins of capitalism in postcolonial scholarship, their general concern, however, is to restore the credibility of the Subaltern School's argument against the tendency to over-emphasise the universalism (and uniformity) of capitalist development. "Taking a multiple and differentiated agency as a starting point, and subsequently exploring encounters and interactions within this multiplicity is the kind of approach Marxists should embrace, not reject", they argue (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2017: 58).

Chibber's concerns, translated into the studies of peasant resistance, could be interpreted as the problem of the displacement of universal categories (such as class) and the turn to

more cultural ones (such as ethnicity), and seen, as Brass has pointed out, as the success of postmodernist theory against Marxism (ibid). However, what is at the core of this problem and has been put at the centre of the Subaltern School's research program is to challenge the European historicity of the capitalist process by conceptualising local histories within the universalisation of capital by also addressing its limits. What is problematic here, however, is that the Subalternist conceptualisation of capitalist development in Europe fails to overcome essentialist ideas of European history and fall short in presenting the socio-cultural specificities of different parts of the world as the product of unevenness of historical development (Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2017: 69). This would have helped the Subalternists build an approach where the difference is theorised within the universal, constant movement of capital and not as an "*a priori* property of an immanently conceived homogenous entity" (ibid). Several scholars have argued that it is surprising to consider that nowhere in either Chibber's or the Subaltern studies' work there is any reference to the approach which has attempted to incorporate multiplicity and 'unevenness' within a more general theory of capitalism: the theory of uneven and combined development (Murphet, 2014; Nilsen, 2017; Lazarus, 2016; Anievas and Nişancıoğlu, 2017)³⁸. Similarly to this view, I argue that the anthropological political economy school has offered a solution by problematising the economism inscribed in theories that have resorted to the abstraction of the 'universalising tendency of capital'. Wolf's work has widely demonstrated that there is no apparent reason why this tendency should be leading anthropology out of a broader mapping of all the histories of power in the Global South. In this way, I believe, it is not difficult to agree with scholars that have proposed that the conflict between Lenin's and Chayanov's approaches: in its extended version, the conflict between the universalising tendency of capital on one side and the cultural differentiation of the peasantry, on the other, are not necessarily mutually exclusive positions (Smith, 2020).

Instead of being the protagonist of the cultural turn, I argue that the anthropological political economy school's main contributions should be seen in the larger field of theories

³⁸ This is even more surprising, due to the fact that Chibber correctly identifies UCD as the theory that evades almost all Subalternist accusations against Marxism, but fails to incorporate UCD or any other theory of capitalist development into his book (Lazarus, 2016: 102).

of capitalist development. By looking closely at the global and the local, the spatial and the temporal elements of capitalism, the anthropological political economy has challenged a more economically reductionist view of capitalist accumulation emerging from the analysis of the older generation of dependency and world-systemic theorists (Gunder Frank, Wallerstein, Braudel). However, it would not have been fair to say that these scholars have not paid any attention to the heterogeneity of capitalist development. Efforts of authors such as Giovanni Arrighi, in particular, can be seen in this light. Arrighi has shown how 'these systemic processes do not act as a steamroller'; instead, local histories, class perspectives, and political projects from below have an impact on the course of development (Silver, 2019).

Due to these characteristics, the anthropological political economy school project can be connected to the idea of uneven and combined development developed initially by Leon Trotsky. Although UCD, as Trotsky developed it, is not necessarily at the heart of this approach, Lesley Gill and Sharryn Kasmir (2016) remind us that tracing the historical and spatial unevenness has been long on the agenda of anthropological research. Pointing to authors such as Wolf, Roseberry, Mintz, and more recently Smith, Narotzky and Snider, they outline this approach as:

"particularly useful for exploring the political conflicts that lie at the heart of capitalist development and that unfold over time and across space in divergent, irregular ways. It draws attention to the making and unmaking of diverse assemblages of power-laden social relationships, the intense and often violent, space-making struggles that shape their rise and decline, and the conflicting claims to authority that drive contending projects of rule." (Gill and Kasmir, 2016: 90).

Although well represented in anthropology, the concept of 'unevenness' of capitalist development, as Gill and Kasmir have argued, has been brought to new life in the works of different authors in related disciplines³⁹. Initially, the concept is related to Leon Trotsky's work, who used it to explain a different path of economic development for early 20th century Russia that would not resemble that of the West. In Trotsky's view, because capitalist development in the West was already in a phase of mass industrialisation, the peripheral economies could not launch their own industrialisation projects by merely

³⁹ See: Barker, C. (2006), Neil Smith (2006), Callinicos, A. (2007), Davidson, N. (2006), Morton (2007).

following the same steps the England and France (Trotsky, 1960, pp. 4-5). Instead of linear and homogenous development, the Russian path, as Trotsky saw it, would be 'uneven and combined'. In Trotsky's view, the condition of capitalist relations in Russia was radically different, precisely because the transition to capitalism had already occurred in the West. This brought Russia to a specific historical situation, where certain stages of capitalist development did not need to be re-invented but could be merely adopted from the West. Specific spaces or economic spheres could now be 'combined' with more advanced parts of the global economy, skipping certain stages of economic development. Trotsky termed this as the "privilege of historic backwardness" (ibid).

The idea of uneven and combined development has been, although less frequently, also connected to the works of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci developed his own theory of philosophy regarding specific historical (and geographical!) situations of Italy. Already his pre-prison writings established a detailed geographical and historical sensibility of capitalist development in Italy. In an unfinished essay entitled '*Some aspects of the Southern question*' (1926), Gramsci analysed the conditions of uneven development as a central dynamic of modern state formation. This spatial relation, which Gramsci observed between the Italian South and North, is not exclusively a ruling class strategy to maintain its territorial and economic sovereignty. Instead of seeing this spatial and class division of his country only as the restoration of class interest, or as Gramsci would have termed it, as a passive revolution, he explains it more widely against the backdrop of the uneven logic of capitalist accumulation. Contextualising Gramsci's concept of passive revolution within the idea of uneven and combined development, David Adam Morton has provided us with critical insight into Gramsci's understanding of the linkages between state formation and capitalist development:

[...] [T]he strategy of passive revolution becomes the historical path by which the development of capital can occur within spatially- (peripheral capitalist development) and temporally-(organic junctures) linked conditions of uneven and combined development but without resolving or surmounting those very contradictions of accumulation. As a result, it not only represents the type of emergent class strategy undertaken in establishing and maintaining the expansion of the state, but also the ways in which capitalism is forced to revolutionise itself whenever class rule is weakened or a social formation cannot cope with the need to expand the forces of production (Sassoon, 1987: 210). Passive revolution is therefore a mode of class rule associated both with ruptural conditions of state development, ushering in the world of capitalist production, and class strategies linked to the continual furtherance of capitalism as a response to its crisis conditions of accumulation (Morton, 2010: 332-333).

Such a reading of Gramsci that unravels different logics of historical and geographical developments of the state, while also paying attention to the different scales of capitalist development, lays out a conceptual tool to understand specific social formations, not only within a single, unified historical time of capitalist modernity but as different temporalities of capitalism. In the Prison Notebooks, Peter Thomas has argued, Gramsci shows the "non-contemporaneity of contemporaneity itself" (Thomas, 2017: 24). For Gramsci then, capitalism was a conglomerate of multiple rhythms that form a relational matrix of different temporal regimes on a national and international level. Learning from the Italian case, Gramsci understood well how national states are "fractured into competing times" (ibid), which often express themselves through divisions such as developed/underdeveloped, rural/urban, centre/periphery. The different historical times also relate to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which in this way gains a more spatial-temporal interpretation. Thomas argues:

The Marxist notion of class struggle is thus progressively reformulated in the Prison Notebooks in terms of a clash not simply between different interests, subjects or modes of production, but also between different temporal regimes. Their 'contemporaneity' is not given, but rather, only emerges temporally – and temporarily – as a function of the social and political hegemony of one social group seeking to impose its own 'present' as an insurpassable horizon for other social groups (Thomas, 2017: 23-24).

The process of deconstructing the hegemonic contemporaneity of Italy leads Gramsci to an understanding of the national scale, not as a unified entity, but as a field of struggle between different historical times. The model of plural times operates within the universal logic behind the movement of capital that produces 'the homogenous, empty time of capital' (Makki, 2015: 489). "The two temporalities coexist in tension with each other and shape the dialectic of the abstract and the concrete, the universal and the particular, and the uneven and yet combined forms of social change" (ibid). For Gramsci, these contradictions of capitalist expansion, "the non-contemporaneity of the present" (Thomas, 2017: 22), reveal not only the central characteristic of capitalism but its internal contradiction that is never fully resolved. In this sense, according to Thomas, Gramsci's work theorises modernity as passive revolution (Thomas, 2006). Although in a different way than Trotsky, Gramsci should be read as a theorist that has extended and applied the

idea of uneven and combined development to analyse the spatio-temporal dynamic of capitalism. As Fouad Makki has put it:

"It is only through a more differentiated conception of historical temporality that the relationship between capitalism's abstractions and the concrete time-spaces generated by uneven and combined development can be properly appreciated". (Makki, 2015: 489).

Like Gramsci, who has taken the idea of UCD and shaped it to make sense of the historical and political aspect of Italian state formation, others have similarly made use of UCD to fit their own frameworks. Wolf's approach in *Europe and the People Without History* expresses his most developed and well-elaborated idea of capitalist development that Wolf associates with Ernest Mandel's work. He argues that Mandel's approach makes important distinctions from world-systems theorists: (1) the capitalist mode of production 'does not transform all the people of the world into industrial producers of surplus-value, (2) the logic of the capitalist mode of production should not be taken as an *a priori* default setting that determines all other modes, but instead the relations between them should be a matter of empirical investigation, (3) it acknowledges the heterogeneity of societies and is not 'obliterating that heterogeneity in dichotomies such as 'core-periphery' or 'metropolis-satellite" (Wolf, 2010: 297).

These distinctions lead Wolf in a direction that does not prioritise the world-systemic approach over the agency of social formations. In this sense, Gavin Smith has pointed out that Wolf's idea of UCD was to address the uneven development of capitalism and the 'uneven development of class struggle' (Smith, 2020). Smith argues that the broad and sometimes elusive interpretation of the concept makes it possible for different authors to approach the concept from very different angles. He identifies his own approach to UCD with Eric Wolf's understanding of the concept and draws on three characteristics of the idea of UCD that reframe this concept to make it particularly useful to study contemporary peasant movements. The first characteristic refers to the 'unevenness', as a particularly useful concept for studying the spatial-temporal aspects of capitalist development and distinguishing UCD from other theories that are often "very stripped-down understandings of actual history or histories" (Smith, 2020: 122). Smith contextualises the other two important characteristics of UCD through the works of two

authors that have studied peasant revolutions in the 20th Century: Eric Wolf and Eric Hobsbawm.

In the works of Eric Hobsbawm, he argues, there is an overall tendency to describe the idiosyncrasy of revolutionary subjectivities. The application of unevenness in Hobsbawm's work is thus less related to economic development and more to political agency and social movement organising. This approach develops an understanding of unevenness that, in Smith's words, relates to the "uneven unfolding of historical time seen from the perspective of revolutionary politics". (Smith, 2020: 120). In Eric Wolf's work, however, and here Smith refers foremost to the *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, the concept is employed not only to reveal the unevenness of the economic landscape and the differentiation of peasant's political consciousness but to map the different variations of social relations emerging from the combination of the heterogenous peasant society 'within the overall social formation" (Smith, 2020: 129). Therefore, Wolf's lens is not turned to the idea of UCD from the perspective of class struggle, but instead, he sees the idea of class struggle through the optic of UCD, that is, through the heterogeneity of capitalist development and the plurality of historical times. As Roseberry puts it:

"[For Wolf] the analysis of the actors and their interrelations necessarily involves a variety of historical dimensions... Each of the relevant groups may be bearers of distinct historical currents, they may mask different historical 'moments,' but in their interrelation within a particular arena, a particular field of power, they constitute a unique social and cultural configuration" (Roseberry (1995: 58), quoted in Smith, 2020)

This leads Smith to conclude that this application of the idea of UCD has made an important move from geography to the field of social sciences and humanities. What is important in Smith's distinction between Hobsbawm and Wolf's works is his assertion that people's struggles against certain kind of domination and the combination of these struggles with popular movements in other social spheres should be based on an analysis of unevenness and combination of capitalism.

This conclusion brings an important challenge for anthropological approaches that study peasant resistance. Throughout this chapter, I showed the wider problematic surrounding the peasant question and the theories of capitalist development. By tracing the idea of UCD through the works of Trotsky, Gramsci and Wolf, I discussed how the long-standing

project of studying capitalism in its 'expanded reproduction', was theorised through the prism of spatial-temporal unevenness. Some recent calls for a more rigorous understanding of historical materialism have led away from conceptualising the differences and heterogeneity of social formations, causing an unnecessary move from anthropologically grounded understandings of peasant struggles. In peasant studies, Wolf and others have challenged this conceptual grounding by using the concept of unevenness. Wolf's most significant contribution is his expanded version of the theory of uneven and combined development that incorporates class struggle within the uneven development of capitalism and paves the way to understand UCD as an anthropological concept. This concept, as Gill and Kasmir have argued:

"[...] [H]elps us to envision a broader arena of struggle, involving varied state, corporate, and social actors, beyond what one observes in fieldwork, and it allows us to grasp the social ruptures and continuities that constantly reconfigure spatial relationships and drive the process of capital accumulation, enabling some political projects, while marginalising others. A focus on unevenness can therefore overcome the problematic, ahistorical formulations of micro–macro or local–global relationships that have long plagued anthropology, by encouraging us to conceptualise the mutual constitution of these scales of action (Gill and Kasmir, 2016: 99).

Taken together, the contributions to the peasant question from the anthropological political economy school and the theory of UCD revitalise the peasant issue in the light of dynamics of global capitalism today. I argue that looking at the peasant question in this way might help us reframe theories of development and the world system in ways that go beyond the dualism ingrained in either systemic/local, dependent/autonomous domains. In this section, I have traced some important efforts to conceptualise peasant struggles within a theory of UCD that have marked essential departures from economist theories of peasant life. However, the 20th Century is over, and the institutional and social infrastructures that supported and defined debates in peasant studies are going through a rapid transformation. While undergoing deep institutional and disciplinary changes in the context of the neoliberalization of the academy and the downturn of Western hegemony in knowledge production, anthropology has tried to keep up with the changing role of the subaltern classes, the neoliberal globalisation of peasant societies, and the anti-systemic movements that continue to emerge under the ongoing crisis of the system. With or without anthropologists' help, the struggles have been rearticulated and reorganised,

with an important question for anthropology still echoing in the background: how can these productive methodologies that have helped conceptualise the political world in the 20th Century be translated into today's situation? I argue that it should be on the agenda of contemporary anthropology to integrate the legacy of the anthropological political economy school and the theory of UCD that have brought anthropologists to address the specific questions about fine-tuning our knowledge between the interests and actions of the subaltern classes, and systemic political-economic transformations of global capitalism. Following Wolf's steps, we are again in a position to pose the question: who are today's people without history, and how do they respond to the contemporary dynamics of capitalist modes of production and domination? How do we understand and connect to their struggles and the forms of agency, knowledge, and politics they represent?

I have tailored my research framework to study political transformations in rural Nepal by integrating the ideas presented in this chapter as one of the thesis's central concerns. While I engage with the idea of UCD as the key theory to analyse capitalist development in Nepal, the inspiration for this thesis has been largely drawn from Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars from the 20th Century*. The initial idea for the thesis was outlined as an additional chapter to Wolf's book, which would contribute to his study by analysing in similar terms the uneven development of revolutionary politics of the last peasant revolution of the twentieth century.

Before I go deeper into this topic, I address the historical and political-economic aspects of the development of capitalism in Nepal. To understand how this part of the world has become wired with capitalist relations and in what ways it has become a part of the global capitalist economy, it is imperative to further develop an understanding of Nepal's political-economic landscape as both 'uneven' and 'combined'.

Chapter 4: The Formation of a Hindu Kingdom: The Nepal Himalayas Beyond Zomia

The Formation of a Hindu Kingdom

To understand the heterogeneity of Nepal's socio-political landscape and the uneven political-economic restructuring in the region, I first look at the long process of Nepal's state formation. The pre-19th century area of Nepal was a collection of small kingdoms and principalities that corresponded to the region's diverse geographical layout. These small agrarian systems became integrated into larger political units with the expansion of the Gorkha Kingdom, which formed a foundation for the later politically more unified Kingdom of Nepal⁴⁰.

In the 1760s, the Gorkha expansion reached the Kathmandu valley and proceeded east and west to conquer smaller independent principalities, both by conquest and conversion to feudatory status (Regmi, 2011: 4). By incorporating many of the formerly independent political units into the Kingdom of Gorkha, this small tributary state slowly expanded to the fringes of the East India Company territory. The extension of its limits to the south ended with the 1814–16 war between the British and the Nepalese (Seddon, 2002: 28). The conflict that escalated in 1814, known as the Anglo-Nepalese war, ended with the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815-16. However, the main reasons for the war might not have been Nepal's territorial expansion, but a combination of boundary disputes, control over trade routes and the East India Company's strategy to assert itself as the dominant power in the region (Mulmi, 2017). The Treaty of Sugauli was a significant blow for the Nepali government. It was forced to agree to the terms put forward by the East India Company and to comply with a new agreement between the states that formed a subordinate relationship, marked by territorial concessions, establishing formal foreign relations through a representative in Kathmandu and the beginning of the recruitment of Nepali

⁴⁰ Also known, as a Hindu Kingdom, as referred to in the title of the chapter, the monarchical system in Nepal officially existed until 2008. All other religions, except Hinduism were banned, and the state legislature was shaped according to Hindu Law. The Muluki Ain, adopted during the Rana dynasty in 1854 is probably the best-known example of the Hindu state-formation process. This civil code defined the national caste hierarchy of the young Nepali state, and classified the Hindu castes and other ethnic groups into different categories. This created a 'centralized agrarian bureaucracy' (Regmi 1976a: 225), a process described further below.

soldiers to the British Army (better known as the British Gurkhas). The territorial losses were immense (amounting to around 30% of the territory), including important territories of Kumaon and Sikkim, which opened up the strategic land trade routes to Tibet that the British authorities had been keen on capturing so long (Mulmi, 2017). After these territorial concessions, the need to colonise Nepal, if it ever existed, diminished completely. Albeit Nepal was not under direct British rule, the state apparatus slowly fell under Raj's influence.

The British soon became a powerful political force in 19th century Nepal. Nepal's political position within the new world-hegemonic order could be described as a specific form of rule, which Mahmood Mamdani calls 'indirect rule' or 'decentralised despotism' (Mamdani, 1996). This system is known in Asia and Africa as a ruling technique in which the hegemon does not directly colonise the country but creates a protectorate, a relatively enclosed political unit that is submerged to the hegemonic state's political power. The reshaped power balance in South Asia during the British Opium Wars with China left Nepal with no potential allies that could help turn the anti-British sentiment into a political force. As a result, the British became even more involved in Nepal's internal political scene. However, the British aimed not to rule Nepal but to shift the balance of power in the country and align the political elite of Nepal to their interests. The reasons for this are well-known: before the Sugauli treaty, the British regional political goal was to gain control over the north-south trade route with Tibet. While the interests to directly colonise Nepal might have disappeared, there were still economic and political reasons for the British to control Nepal, one of them being the Terai region in southern Nepal, a region rich in resources.

John Whelpton writes about Bhimsen Thapa as an example of a ruler who tried to consolidate political ties with the British. He thoroughly respected the agreement from 1816, which dictated the Nepalese to accept a British representative in Kathmandu and gave up a substantial amount of previously conquered land (Whelpton, 2005: 42, 43). Nepal came closer to the British in the following decades, after Jung Bahadur's 1851 visit to the United Kingdom and significantly after he had helped East India Company to crush the 1857 rebellion in India (Regmi, 2011: 20). According to Whelpton, we can determine the important transformation in 19th century Nepal. It is the closed patrimonial system,

which was based on revenue collection and agricultural production, that dominated the first part of the 19th century, and the regime based on British co-operation, which started in the middle of the century and came into force most prevalently in 1885, when as Whelpton puts it: “[...] full-hearted identification of the ruling family’s interests with those of the British Raj came [...]” (Whelpton, 2005: 50). Therefore, in economic and political terms, Nepal became a dependency of the British Empire. This relationship formally lasted until 1923, when the British government officially recognised Nepal’s political independence. However, forms of economic subordination have continued to characterise Nepal’s relation to world-systemic processes.

In the nineteenth century, the Kingdom of Nepal was an agrarian society. Territorialist in the form of rule, the early Nepalese state’s exclusive land ownership was strengthened through a tenurial scheme. This scheme was attributed to land, not to the ruling subject, and Richard Burghart has argued that the implicit differentiation between the kingship and the state had to be made in order for the concept of the modern nation-state to develop. The break began to emerge within the national administration after the shift to a system of guided democracy (known as the Panchayat system) in the 1960s (Burghart, 1984: 103-113). Apart from the latter, Richard Burghart has argued that there are six episodes in total that have been key to the formation of the concept of nation-state in Nepal. He states them as historical events:

“(1) the demarcation of a defined border (1816); (2) overlapping of the boundary of the realm with the boundary of the possessions (c. 1860); (3) the interpretation of country in terms of species (c. 1860); (4) the designation of Nepali as the official language of Nepal (c. 1930); (5) the implicit differentiation of the kingship from the state (c. 1960); and (6) the formation of a culturally unique polity (c. 1960)” (Burghart, 1984: 113).

In other words, Burghart depicts the key historical developments of the Nepalese state that are important for our understanding of the state formation process. He moves from describing the ‘intercultural’, to explaining the ‘intracultural’ elements that comprise some elementary restructurings throughout Nepal’s history. I observe it as two inter-related processes: (1) Nepal’s slow integration into the capitalist system, which is marked by its relation to the British Raj and India and characterized by its confined political life at the South Asian periphery, and (2) Nepal’s internal state formation and restructuring

of relations of production that is characterized by the socio-cultural transformations and shifts in governance regimes. As Burghart points out, what can be observed within this latter category is the overlapping of two systems of governance over territory: an ‘ancient’ Hindu realm and the concept of king’s possessions. Further, he emphasises the shift from the territorial concept of the rule to the making of the social (caste) based rule (Muluki Ain), the making of a national language, the separation of kingship and the state through making a system of guided democracy in the 1960s, more known as the Panchayat system. Finally, he points out the creation of a basis for nationalism, mainly to distinguish itself from the Indian state, by constructing something known as ‘Nepaliness’ (a concept reportedly coined by king Mahendra himself) (Burghart, 1984: 113-121).

To draw a broader picture of the state-formation process, I argue that this era is marked by Nepal’s transition between two ‘modes of rule’ or ‘logics of power’: territorialism and capitalism (Arrighi, 2010: 34). As Arrighi observes, the territorial and capitalist logics of power revolve around territorial expansion and accumulation of capital in different terms:

“In the territorialist strategy control over territory and population is the objective, and control over mobile capital the means, of state- and war-making. In the capitalist strategy, the relationship between ends and means is turned upside down: control over mobile capital is the objective, and control over territory and population the means” (Arrighi, 2010: 35).

According to Arrighi, these two logics do not function in separate domains but have been inter-connected in the formation of the world hegemonic order (Arrighi, 34-35). In the next chapter, I thoroughly explore how this interconnectedness, not of a unilinear succession of logics of power, but the synchronicity of historical temporal forms has characterised Nepal’s uneven political-economic landscape. Before I turn to the analysis of Nepal’s uneven development, I would like to address the process of early state-formation and the vast area of non-state space comprised of social groups without a sense of belonging to a state or ruler. Throughout this history, I reconsider the role of Magars in the state-formation process.

The Stateless and the State: The Magars as Zomia-Thinking

The Kingdom of Nepal during the Rana regime was an extraction machine with a limited capacity. Its administrative network stretched throughout the central and eastern hills and the Terai but was unable to cover the whole territory of today's Nepal. It is worth considering how the Hindu kingdom's power operated and how the expansion of its political authority created antagonistic relations with the people subjected to its power. This discussion helps us outline the mode of power that preceded the modern Nepalese state and played an important role in creating state and non-state spaces. In this section, I argue that the concept of Zomia is useful for the investigation of the Himalayan past as a space of cultural, religious, ethnic fluidity and to understand cultural articulations that go beyond specific nation-states. In my view, it is vital to understand the different hegemonies historically produced by the Nepali state and other agents of power and their influence on places that were previously outside its direct control. In Nepal Himalayas, 'Zomian' groups living in the hills formed a heterogeneous socio-cultural field, formed and maintained relations with the state, and subsequently became influenced or incorporated in state-led development.

Scott's analysis of peasant societies in Southeast Asia is a step toward building a comprehensive framework of pre-capitalist and stateless histories of highland Asia. By describing their interaction with the state, which ranges from strategies of resistance to escape techniques, Scott brings into the discussion a narrative of peasant politics and economy, particularly important for the Himalayan region (Scott, 2009). Scott uses the concept of *Zomia*, a geographical category initially coined by Willem van Schendel (2002). Scott's Zomia differs from Van Schendel's geographical concept by defining the area through the 'upland' Southeast Asia's social and political history. However, it is interesting that while Scott is describing a proportionally large section of Highland Asia, he pays no attention to the Himalayan region of today's Nepal. According to his geographical layout, Zomia reaches as far west as Sikkim and offers no attention to more western places like Nepal or Northwest India. Scott geographically maps it in this way:

"From north to south, it includes southern and western Sichuan, all of Guizhou and Yunnan, western and northern Guangxi, western Guangdong, most of northern Burma with an adjacent segment of extreme [north]eastern India, the north and west of Thailand, practically all of Laos above the Mekong Valley, northern and central Vietnam along the Annam Cordillera, and the north and eastern fringes of Cambodia" (Michaud in Scott, 2009: 14).

I have no intention to argue or try to provide evidence that the Tibetan-Burmese tribes of Mid-Western Nepal should be a part of Scott's conceptualisation of Zomia or should be, to any extent, understood within the area of Southeast Asia. Although the political history of these tribes and their relation to various forms of domination is very complex, Scott's argumentation that only the modern state is capable of complete domination over the peoples at the margins seems to hold some ground. To free themselves from the domination of agrarian states that had established themselves in the plains where rice cultivation was possible, the people of Zomia adapted more radical social and economic organisations to survive in a stateless space. Different forms of social organisation, most often kinship structures or ethnic identities, became more 'fluid' alongside farming techniques and crops that would also be adapted to live on a constant move away from the state's reach (Scott, 2009). Scott's descriptions read as if he was describing Nepal's hilly areas:

“As a general rule, social structure in the hills is both more flexible and more egalitarian than in the hierarchical, codified valley societies. Hybrid identities, movement, and the social fluidity that characterizes many frontier societies are common. [...] Zomia is thus knitted together as a region not by a political unity, which it utterly lacks, but by comparable patterns of diverse hill agriculture, dispersal and mobility, and rough egalitarianism, which, not incidentally, includes a relatively higher status for women than in the valleys” (Scott, 2009: 18-19).

At times Scott's narrative tends to come close to the dangers of romanticising the pre-capitalist, 'stateless' past by describing it as an autonomous, bounded and well-organised space. The moral economy school, as William Roseberry has pointed out, has been predominantly focused on the analysis of “a relatively unambiguous transition from an ordered past to a disordered present. We instead need to view a movement from a disordered past to a disordered present” (Roseberry, 1994: 58). Scott's Zomia has been critiqued for endorsing the economic autonomy of the 'rural other' (Brass, 2017), and by reflecting Scott's previous work on the 'moral economy of the peasant,' it has essentialized the juxtaposition between Western and Non-Western societies (Neveling, 2015: 209). Beyond Scott's view, I argue, a more contradictory concept of consciousness should be coined to help us understand the political agency and subjectivity of people living between non-state and state spaces.

Sara Shneiderman calls this ‘Zomia-thinking’ (Shneiderman, 2010: 293). Shneiderman brings forward a critical claim to explain the difference between how the state has been understood and represented in the academic world, in both the Himalayan studies and Southeast Asian Studies. She critiques the ‘old ecological models’ and orientalist ethnographies of the past centuries that tried to view the Himalayan region as a culturally complex whole on the ‘Indo-Tibetan interface’ and beyond state power. She rethinks the concept in Nepal’s historical context and puts it in a new outfit, which appears to be more useful when thinking about Nepal’s state-formation process. Shneiderman thus proposes an attempt to “simultaneously acknowledge the role of states in shaping highland communities and to investigate indigenous forms of consciousness and agency within such processes” (Shneiderman, 2010: 299).

In this way, Shneiderman inspects her own ethnographic material to provide a valid account of a representative Zomian-thinking consciousness, which, she argues, has not disappeared even in the time of the modern state Nepal. The case of the Thangmi, a cross-border community that divides their time between India (Darjeeling), Nepal and the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), shows how people try to make the best of their struggle against three different states. This ‘circular migration’ and interaction with different states are among the main characteristics of Thangmi identity. Adding a new formulation to Scott’s concept of ‘ungoverned’ or ‘non-state consciousness’, Shneiderman addresses an important political tool of modern states: the recognition of minorities. To have control over a powerful political tool of seeking recognition within multiple states, the Thangmi have maintained “aspects of an ‘ungoverned’ subjective sensibility on the one hand, while gaining pragmatic benefits from the state on the other” (Shneiderman, 2010: 311). The described case of the Thangmi, a people that still think of themselves as ‘non-state people’, is just one ethnographic example of a Zomian-thinking group within an area of today’s Nepal. Others have proposed similar frameworks of state-formation. Campbell, for example, emphasises the heterogeneity of the state rather than a dualistic state-local impasse and urges us to reconsider the territorial claims or the ‘politics of belonging’ of Himalayan communities (Campbell, 2011: 237). These claims have formed different state and anti-state political ideologies and people-territory relations. These specific modifications of the concept of Zomia urge us to take into account regional and

local relations between people and multiple others, such as states, developmental organisations and other powerful actors and their ‘selective hegemonies’ (Smith, 2011). The state integrational and territorial politics are providing new schemes and frameworks of belonging. The actions of communities that defy complying with such frameworks of recognition or belonging can be described with the concept of Zomia-thinking.

Magars as Zomia-thinking

Another example of a Zomian-thinking community could be derived from ethnographic literature on the Magars. The Magars do not represent a typical Zomian group. They have been in contradictory relations with the ruling groups for the last two centuries, oscillating between the core of state-building endeavours and the polity's fringes. The Magars move from building alliances with the state and resistances against it, maintaining strong anti-state sentiments as a part of their political consciousness. In the next paragraphs, I explore how the Magars, despite strong connections to the state, remained a Zomia-thinking community.

Since the 19th century, Nepal's state-formation has been centred on building a Hindu kingdom where all land belonged to the king. The ritual and proprietary concepts used in the nineteenth century, such as possessions (*muluk*), realm (*desa*), and country (*des*) were the pillars of the mode of rule. There were moral aspects of one's belonging to a particular country, such as language (*bhasa*) and religion (*dharma*), but the autonomy of the country was undermined by the power of the realm and the possessions of a king (Burghart, 1984: 108). These described concepts made a distinction between the ruler, land and the people, as Burghart elaborates, this made: “the difference between the contractual affiliation of a tenant to his king and the natural or ancestral affiliation of a native to his country” to prevent that the people's ancestral authority king's proprietary and ritual authority would not come into conflict (ibid). The king saw himself as the absolute authority in the Hindu Kingdom realm, and Hinduism became a dominant religion and a powerful cultural hegemonic force that affected the lives of hill tribal groups.

Magars have played an important role in this early process of state formation. When the Hindu state elite sought to assimilate all of Nepal's ethnic groups into a formalised caste hierarchy in 1854 *Muluki Ain*, the Magars were classified as “non-enslavable alcohol drinkers”; a category which inferior to the upper castes but still superior to the “enslavable alcohol drinkers”, the impure but touchable castes and the untouchables (Höfer, 2004: 34). So coercive was the Hindu moral order that even much predating the Hindu law that ordered tribal groups to strictly observe Hindu principles (mainly kinship rules and the sacredness of the cow), tribal groups had already aligned their religious customs to fit the dominating order. In the case of the Magars, their symbolic world, due to the early Hinduisation, was shaped by Hinduism to the extent that it is difficult to distinguish what is particularly Magar and what Hindu.

Lecomte-Tilouine writes about this process in her description of the evolution of the Bhume festival, which, she argues, is an example of incorporating the Hindu earth goddess into a Magar ritual practice. By arguing that the earth goddess Bhume derived from a Hindu deity, Lecomte-Tilouine unequivocally shows how the Magars have incorporated Hindu symbols into their ritual practice to maintain territorial power. She writes: “The Magar Mukhiya had been doubly legitimized: by a direct relationship with his ancestral land through the worship of Bhume, and as a representative of the Hindu king during the Dasain festival” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2011: 79)⁴¹. To further elaborate on this close political relation, Lecomte-Tilouine examines how conversely, the Magar rituals became a part of the state religion.

The Magars' relatively privileged position in 19th century Nepal's legal code is an example of a tribal group that has successfully maintained good relationships with ruling groups. According to Lecomte-Tilouine, the Gorkha chronicles report of Magar's important ranking among hill ethnicities positioned only after Brahmins and Khas. There are early indications that the Magars participated in establishing the government of the Thakuri kings, and although this meant the annihilation of their own country, some established themselves in important administrative positions. The Magars also played an important role in Prithvi Narayan's conquests, constituting a substantial part of the army (Lecomte-

⁴¹ The Magar Mukhiya is the local tax collector and community leader.

Tilouine, 2011: 93-94). Looking at the nature of historical relationships within state religion, Lecomte-Tilouine proposes to read the Magar's participation in state rituals as a tactically important integration of a statistically significant group. By examining Magar elements, namely the functions of Magar priests and the sacrifice of a pig, Lecomte-Tilouine argues that these rituals inform us about an integrated, complex, yet contradictory position of the Magars within the state. This ruling technique fortified a subordinated relationship between two historically closely related groups. Lecomte-Tilouine's main argument is, therefore, to explain the role of the Magars in the new state by considering "[t]he ability of the Thakuris to incorporate religious elements of the conquered population within their own religion [...]" as one of their main 'sources of power'. (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2011: 119).

The Magar's close relation to the ruling groups has not made them oblivious to the exploitation and lack of autonomy within the governance system. Another case that shows how ambiguous the Magars position had been throughout the formation of the early state is the case of the Magar rebel of the 19th century. A legend and partly a historically verifiable story, Lakhan Thapa has become a myth of great political importance for the Magars. It is not easy to reconstruct the actual story due to various existing interpretations. However, Lecomte-Tilouine has provided us with a helpful interpretation that cuts across many relevant and irrelevant sources. Lakhan Thapa and his story leading up to his immortal fame as the first martyr of Nepal have to be put in historical context. As mentioned above, in the aftermath of Prithvi Narayan's conquests, the Magars constituted an important part of his army, and it remained so in the first part of the 19th century and at the time of the Ranas. Lakhan Thapa was one of the soldiers in the Magar battalion, where he had attained the rank of captain and left the army by 1869. After subversive activities in the army, Lakhan Thapa and his friend, Jaya Simha Cumi Rana, received three months leave and went back to their hometown in Gorkha. In a village called Bungkot, they started to establish a rebel kingdom, a utopian society that was meant to undermine the rule of Jang Bahadur. The plot against the king failed with Lakhan Thapa and his accomplices being arrested at his fort and hanged near the Manakamana temple (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2001: 88-89). Presenting the story, Lecomte-

Tilouine observers how the image of Lakhan Thapa has been constructed and reproduced through time:

In this posthumous psychological portrait and biography, Lakhan Thapa is presented as the very archetype of the Magar: a modest villager who emigrated to India, a valiant soldier and faithful friend, moved by the suffering of his people, and, finally, a martyr. All of these aspects link him with the self-portrait the Magars make for themselves: with their supposed 'rightness', and to their shedding of their blood for the motherland which they have established as a symbol of their identity, as their insoluble print on the country (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2001: 91).

Comparing different texts and portrayals of Lakhan Thapa, Lecomte-Tilouine brings to light the ideological elements of Lakhan Thapa's struggle and its importance for the Magar ethnic movements. This historical account can be read as a struggle of a messianic movement, the likes of which had occurred in India. Lecomte-Tilouine writes:

Numerous parallels can be drawn between this rebellion and revolts organized during the same period among the tribal groups of India. The leaders of these revolts were ascetics, holy men, reincarnations. They were endowed with magical powers, notably the ability to transform bullets into water. They promised their followers the return of a Golden Age when the tribes were not dispossessed of their lands (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2001: 95).

This analysis of utopian uprisings, the last hopeless attempt of subordinated tribal groups to gain autonomy and independence, should not be seen as the definitive powerless position; its sacrificial nature instead forms a basis of the political myth that became central to the Magar's political consciousness (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2001: 95). It represents the Magars' role within the state-formation process, which oscillated between the ruling class's subordinated servants and the rebellious kings of the hills.

These two examples show how Magars have been closely linked to the ruling groups' state formation efforts but maintained utopian and subversive consciousness. This premise of the Magars' political consciousness, based on political domination by other ethnic groups, later became an important element of anti-state struggles used by Maoist and ethnic social movements. The Magars' role in the state formation process, a group that has remained Zomian-thinking, and maintained close relations to the ruling groups, brings us to an important point in discussing non-state spaces and Zomian groups in the Himalayas. Rather than seeing Nepal's hill communities as bounded or isolated

inhabitants of non-state spaces, the Magars' example shows that the local, regional and national relations should be considered to show how these complex political relations had been formed throughout history of state formation. The spatial dichotomy between state and non-state spaces conceals more than it reveals, and although Scott's framework helps to unwrap the authority of national culture into a complex network of regional narratives, it also perpetuates this dichotomy. This confines Scott's narrative of Zomian groups to a spatial, historical difference that is inapplicable to today's situation.

While Scott explains the historical unevenness of the heterogeneous social space, the concept of Zomia lacks understanding of the different combinations of these social formations with world-historical processes. In the case of Magars, or more specifically Kham Magars the task would be to explain both the uneven and combined forms of social change. The concept of Zomia-thinking can help us understand how subversive consciousness is connected to both parts of the process. I argue that in this way, peasant consciousness can be understood beyond the modern/traditional dichotomy. When thinking with Scott's framework, what is useful is his understanding of state expansion into societies where the state is less present. Scott's understanding of state expansion as a 'civilizing process', as the state 'getting a handle over society', shows how stateless spaces are turned into administrable zones (Scott, 1998: 185-190). The Magars were submerged to the early processes of state expansion, and even throughout the process of capitalist development remained Zomia-thinking, mainly anti-state oriented people. What categorically changed the creation of state spaces was the state's outreach to reconfigure the countryside and incorporate it into the capitalist present. This is perhaps best exemplified by the narrative of developmental programs and other narratives of capital that I explore in the next chapters.

Chapter 5: The Mode of Production and the Uneven Development of Capitalism

Introduction

The unified militarised tributary state that was established after Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquests had direct consequences that resulted in the strengthening of the state apparatus. Ludwig F. Stiller has called this expansion of the army and the state apparatus: 'the land-military complex' (Stiller, 2017: 274). After the Rana dynasty took over in 1846, a political system that stayed almost unchanged until 1951 came into place. Before the Ranas, the central government did not directly collect tax from the peasants; these rights were delegated to local administrators. As a strong unifying force in Nepal under the Rana rule, a civil administration emerged, which replaced the decentralised revenue system (Regmi, 2011: 25). This meant that the revenue system collected more revenue than before, and consequently, a higher appropriation of surpluses became possible. The land in Nepal during that time was mostly state-owned, albeit alienation of land increased, and a landowning elite (*rajas, birta-owners and jagirdars*) emerged within a state landownership (*raikar*) (Regmi, 2011: 39-41). By alienating the land, the Nepalese peasant was deprived of the rights that generations before played an important part in their reproduction of life. These rights, such as the communal right to the forest, steadily declined throughout the 19th century. Further alienation of the commons accessible to their ancestors, such as hunting, fishing and transhumant pastoralism, caused further differentiation between the peasants (Seddon, 2002a: 60, 61).

The most common land tenure systems in use were: *raikar, birta, jagir, rakam, sera* and *kipat*. *Kipat* was a form of communal tenure, under which the land belonged to the local ethnic community, the government not being able to collect taxes directly, except from *kipat* owners. As Regmi (2011: 3) observes, this system was most commonly found in eastern Nepal's hill areas. The most common system of the time was *jagir*, under which the land was allocated to government officials, and it was used for the enrichment of the political elite, "whose power was based on control of the administration rather than on

the ownership and inheritance of property" (Regmi, 2011: 42). The new landowning elite, Regmi argues, was not involved in agricultural production. Instead, they were 'absentee landlords' and played no direct political or economic role in village life (Regmi, 2011: 43). The land appropriation processes that fuelled the expansion of the state apparatus resulted in the fact that there was less available land for peasants. Less possible future expansion meant more burdens on the peasants within the existing land tenure systems, and smaller holdings for the individual peasant households in the long-term. The peasants had to pay approximately half of their crop to the landlord; if they failed, their dependency was transformed into a new form: debt, slave, or bonded labour were the most common. This was often the case, as the peasant could hardly meet the landowner's demands and gradually became more dependent. The amount of revenue varied from one part of the country to the other, and there were different types of labour to be found: slave labour and bonded labour, in particular, were common in the western hills from where people were also frequently sold to India (Whelpton, 2005: 52, 53). When in debt, *bandha* (bonded labour) was the peasant's only solution to 'free' the peasant farm from debt, a dependency that usually lasted for their entire lives.

As Seddon (2002a: 26) has pointed out, we cannot say that capitalist agriculture existed in 19th century Nepal. However, due to emerging market opportunities, small commodity production expanded. Looking at the historical literature of Nepal's trading relations, it is clear that markets have existed for a long time. It was not only the Newars, the well-known traders of Kathmandu valley, that have established trading relations on the vital trading routes between India and Tibet. Other hill tribes, like the Sherpas, had for long maintained trading routes with Tibet (von Fürer-Haimendorf, 1988). On trade routes in different parts of the country, pockets of merchant capital thus emerged, but very little of this form of capital was invested in agriculture of commodity production. The merchants were non-capitalist middlemen who played the role of mediators in the circulation of commodities between different, relatively independent communities within the country and abroad. Alongside this process in the Terai and Kathmandu towns, petty commodity production on a larger scale started taking place. While in some instances merchant capital tried to transform the petty commodity production, especially in the case of the cotton weaving, into domestic industrial production, and turn domestic labour into wage

labour, such attempts often failed to subordinate the labour process to the logic of capital (Blakie et al. 1980: 126). Before the 1950s, to draw the broad picture, Nepal's uneven economic landscape comprised of different systems of land tenure that each in its own way created new forms of economic dependency for the peasantry and small commodity production that in some cases tried to transform itself into industrial production but mostly failed because of the dependent form of merchant capital that already existed in Nepal. Regarding these early stages of capitalist development in Nepal, I pose the following question: How did capitalism develop in a country where almost no industrial production emerged until the second half of the 20th century? In other words, why did industrial capitalist relations not emerge, and how did Nepal's non-capitalist formations become a part of the emerging global capitalist economy?

Beyond Articulation of Modes of Production in Nepal

Before I continue discussing the history of capitalist development in Nepal, a reexamination of the concept central to Marxian analysis of socio-economic relations is imperative: the mode of production. Marx refers to the concept of the mode of production in different ways. He sometimes refers to it in a more narrow sense, as the labour process, or in the broader sense, as the 'economic formation of society' (Banaji, 2010: 350). Although the concept of the mode of production is Marx's central tool in his theory of history, it has been often understood in a strict sense and only in the economic dimension. Several scholars pointed out (Worsley, 1984; Banaji, 2010; Wolf, 2010) that Marx's own understanding of the mode of production was not that straightforward and should be revived from economistic interpretations. Banaji, for example, argues that the mode of production, in Marx's view, is a very complex entity that should not be reduced to the labour relations that are central to their existence. Equally so: "[r]elations of production are not reducible to given forms of exploitation of labour (Banaji, 2010: 353). In this section, I challenge a widely accepted approach of articulation-of-modes-of-production, in Nepal's case and more widely, that has been, and remains, a widely used approach to analyse capitalist development. By pointing out some of the shortcomings of this approach, I reconsider some critical readings of capitalist development in South Asia that

help me theorise the relations between capitalist and non-capitalist forms of production in Nepal.

Following Marx's own attempts to describe 'pre-capitalist' modes of production, one of the contemporary usages of the mode of production approach has been connected to the analysis of capitalism in its expanded reproduction. In other words, within Marxist scholarship, a question persisted that was not adequately addressed by Marx's conceptualisation of 'Asiatic modes of production': in what way were 'pre-capitalist' economic forms subsumed in the rise of the capitalist mode? To answer this question, scholarship within the Marxist tradition has produced a substantial contribution to the theories of capitalist development by employing the conceptual groundwork of the French philosopher Louis Althusser. The analysis of the latter was made possible with Althusser's principle of "articulation" that "determines the interrelationships between the various instances within a social formation" (Resch, 1992: 83). The understanding of how "articulated" structures work within a single mode of production, while not possessing the same power, became central to the differentiated understanding of capitalism, an important addition to the then well-established world-systems and dependency theories (Worsley, 1984: 34; Roseberry, 1988: 167-168). While the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach was an important step towards connecting the different, simultaneously existing parts of capitalism and understanding the relations between them, I argue that it did not sufficiently explain the ongoing dynamics of the uneven process of the reproduction of capitalism.

In Nepal's case, several scholars have used this approach to explain the emergence of capitalism and, more importantly, the persistence of feudalism (Blakie et al., 1980; Sudgen, 2013). To understand the argument of the 'articulation of the modes of production', I look closer at a contemporary study that applies this approach to study 'pre-capitalist reproduction' in rural Terai. Fraser Sudgen (2013) argues that semi-feudalism persists in Nepal's economic landscape even in the era of neoliberal globalisation. Sudgen argues that the 'system grounded in state appropriation of surplus', or in other words, the *birta* land tenure system in eastern Nepal, was slowly transformed into a decentralised system of absentee and other types of landlordism. Semi-feudal modes of exploitation

persist, and according to Sugden there are few other surplus accumulation types, but the surplus appropriation through ground rent remains predominant (Sugden, 2013: 17).

What this argument implies is that semi-feudalism is a stage in the prolonged transition to full-fledged capitalism. In the last instance, the argument resembles de Janvry's (1981) model of the process of semi-proletarianization. De Janvry's model positions peasants in the process of capitalist accumulation, and he shows that a certain discrepancy occurs in the class-formation of articulated, as opposed to disarticulated accumulation (De Janvry, 1981: 23-31). De Janvry conceptualises this discrepancy as 'functional dualism' between articulated and disarticulated economies. In articulated accumulation, the full process of proletarianization occurs, in contrast to disarticulated accumulation where "from the standpoint of the labour force, labour is only semi-proletarianized [...]. Functional dualism thus provides a structural possibility of meeting the necessity for cheap labour that derives from the laws of accumulation under social disarticulation." (De Janvry, 1981: 37). In this sense, De Janvry sees the process of 'de-peasantisation' as an incomplete process of proletarianization, as a result of 'functional dualism' and thus finds middle-ground between Leninist and Chayanov's approaches to the peasant question (Roseberry, 1994: 182), a conflict I have tackled in the previous chapter.

Along the same lines, Sugden argues that it is a broader function of imperialism and feudalism that persist in Nepal's Terai region to provide cheap semi-proletarian labour for the emerging industrial sector. Here is how he explains this articulation:

"First, control over land by an absentee landlord elite constrains farmers from meeting their subsistence needs through agriculture due to rent obligations. This drives tenant farmers to simultaneously compete for work in the industrial and urban sector, where they are willing to receive wages below subsistence levels. This benefits capitalism in both the manufacturing industry and the urban tertiary sector on which the former depends." (Sugden, 2013: 21).

According to Sugden, this explains how the semi-feudal type of exploitation occurs and defines peasants' role in the system of peripheral capitalism and how it is reproduced today. The process described by Sugden has caused a wave of internal migration of the 'semi-proletariat'. In Nepal, this process is at its peak in the Terai, the fertile and industrially more developed region, in the south of the country. The region has attracted vast numbers of the rural working force from the hills but has not fully transformed them

into an industrial workforce. This class of rural proletarians is often 'stuck' between self-subsistence farming in the village and precarious labour jobs in the Terai. The other telling example of how the consequences of de-peasantisation are absorbed by international capitalism must be understood in a regional or even global context. Nepal has become an exporter of the working force for the international labour market (Seddon et. al., 2002b).

However, while Sudgen is describing a central contradiction of the reproduction of peasant life, this view of Nepal's economy holds that 'pre-capitalist' structures persist because pre-capitalist formations are crucial for reproducing capital at the periphery. As Worsley has pointed out, the problem with this understanding of capitalist development is that it ultimately leads to a certain determinism by the economic base. In Worsley's view, this analysis's problem extends further when the economy is considered the most significant 'instance'; other social institutions are considered merely as 'state apparatuses' (Worsley, 1984: 34, 35). Similarly to Worsley's critique, William Roseberry has argued that the inadequacy of the mode of production theory can be seen in its incapacity to understand the economic complexity of non-capitalist societies. He writes:

"Unfortunately, both dependency theorists' and mode-of-production theorists' understanding of anthropological subjects in terms of capitalist processes too often slipped into a kind of functionalist reasoning, explaining the existence of traditional or non-capitalist features in terms of the functions they served for capital accumulation (source of cheap labor, market for dumping excess goods, and so on" (Roseberry, 1988: 170).

The same problem present in the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach is also very apparent in Sudgen's analysis. Sudgen understands non-capitalist formations only as parts of the broader process of capital accumulation. While it is undeniable that non-capitalist production and the sphere of social reproduction have not stayed unaffected by capitalist expansion, the economic determinism present in the articulation-of-mode-of-production approach leads Sudgen's to the conclusion that this dynamic is the central feature of capitalist development in Nepal.

Another contemporary critic of this approach, Kalyan Sanyal, is convinced that the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach has misinterpreted Marx when theorising the economic structure of the Third world. According to Sanyal, the articulation of 'pre-

capitalist' modes in the capitalist system should not be seen only as fulfilling 'capital's economic need' (Sanyal, 2007: 49). Sanyal argues that it is not self-subsistent capital that they are observing, but capital in its becoming, a process different than what Marx describes in Capital volume 1. "What they fail to see", he argues, "is that capitalist production, to ensure its self-reproduction, has to depend on its outside, then, as Marx emphatically puts it in Grundrisse, it is not self-subsistent capital but only capital in arising" (ibid). Sanyal's intervention provides a powerful critique of the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach and the proletarianization thesis but offers another postcolonial interpretation of historical and cultural difference. Sanyal is describing an important contradiction of 'peripheral' capitalism: on one side, the capital accumulation process that 'invades what lies beyond' and makes capital become self-subsistent and on the other side the production of what Sanyal calls 'post-colonial wasteland', the non-capital, the reversal of primitive accumulation. "Like the proverbial Sisyphus, capital is engaged in a task that is never accomplished: its being is forever postponed" (Sanyal, 2007: 52) Sanyal's interpretation of capital accumulation leads toward a postcolonial interpretation of the economic domain and positions the peasants, not in a distinct structural position within relations of production, but characterises the postcolonial 'wasteland' by the lack of such relations. Sanyal describes it in this way:

"Bereft of any direct access to means of labour, the dispossessed are left only with labour power, but their exclusion from the space of capitalist production does not allow them to turn their labour power into a commodity. They are condemned to the world of the excluded, the redundant, the dispensable, having nothing to lose, not even the chains of wage-slavery. Primitive accumulation of capital thus produces a vast wasteland inhabited by people whose lives as produces have been subverted and destroyed by the thrust of the process of expansion of capital, but for whom the doors of the world of capital remain forever closed" (Sanyal, 2007: 53).

According to Sanyal, it is this postcolonial wasteland populated by surplus populations that constitutes non-capital. This economic area resides outside of self-subsistent capital and is different to Marx's concept of the 'reserve army of labour' that has been conceptualised within the area of self-subsistent capital (ibid). In this way, Sanyal's framework understands this economic wasteland, not as a space that is yet to see further capitalist development but a space that has been completely disarticulated from it.

Other scholars working on peasants studies have described this contradiction without the need to resort to a postcolonial interpretation of capital accumulation. Susana Narotzky

has called this 'dependent autonomy', a categorisation of peasant lives as dependent precarious livelihoods that are obscured by the 'ideology of autonomy', an enclosed cycle of the reproduction of their life that is defined by the lack of access to the means of production (Narotzky, 2016: 309). This constant negotiation process is a constant struggle for the simple reproduction in the uneven development of capitalism that, according to Narotzky defines the contemporary peasant logic. This process in the recent wave of de-peasantisation has to be further understood in two different ways. First, it produces the 'reserve army' of the global working force, which means that is unevenly consumed by the international labour market. In this sense, the peasantry is a relative surplus population. Second, a part of the population that moves from its peasant past does not become a part of global capitalism as a reserve to the labour market; this forms absolute surplus populations.

I argue that this crucial difference between absolute and relative surplus populations cannot be fully explained with the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach. This theoretical framework considers de-peasantisation and semi-feudalism only as stages in capitalist development, as evident from Sugden's case. In other words, it does not address the issue of absolute surplus populations as one of the effects of global capitalism. As Smith (2011) argues, populations can be made relative or absolute surplus populations due to enhancing productivity. When capitalism permanently disarticulates parts of an economy and does not absorb it in a different form, the populations dependent on the redundant economy become absolute surplus populations. Smith argues that this is one of the effects of global capitalist production that 'prioritises enclosure over productivity'. It is a by-product of primitive accumulation, and it does not have only political-ideological consequences, as it is conceptualised in the 'political society' concept by Partha Chatterjee (2011). According to Smith, it has less to do with governance; the effect of capital to produce 'selective hegemonies' therefore not only functions in political, but also in the economic dimension. Surplus populations are an economic, not only political moment of capitalism (Smith, 2011: 14 – 15).

Another scholar that has put forward a convincing critique of the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach was Jairus Banaji. For Banaji, the main problem with this approach already occurs in the definition of capitalism. Despite the absence of a capitalist

mode of production in 19th century India, Banaji maps the emergence of capitalist relations in the countryside through the expansion of the monied capitalist class and the function of the merchant capital. The distinction between different forms of capital, described by Marx, help Banaji to provide a history of 'the subsumption of labour into capital', without the tendency to categorise rent, interests, or other forms of surplus-value, as remnants of the old system (Banaji, 2010: 279). Banaji's intervention is based on an informed reading of Marx and builds on the differentiation between two different kinds of subsumption of labour that Marx described in an appendix in Capital Volume 1: formal and real subsumption. While real subsumption corresponds to the emergence of 'the bourgeois mode of production', in short, the production of capital that creates a *capitalist* labour process according to its need for accumulation, formal subsumption does not imply such a radical transformation of productive forces. Formal subsumption "presupposes a process of labour that is 'technologically' continuous with earlier modes of labour" (Banaji, 2010: 280). The main distinction between the two is that in the latter, the labour process is not fully transformed by the capitalist process, and it remains, in terms of scale, technology, and organisation of labour of a character that might resemble pre-capitalist modes of production. However, Banaji warns that this appearance is misleading and that small peasant producers instead enter the capitalist process through different forms of formal subsumption. He shows how the system of advance payments in 19th century Indian commodity capitalism served as a system of capital being advanced in the form of money, which already implies the appropriation of surplus-value by the monied capitalist (Banaji, 2010: 303). In Banaji's extended argument, this also means that rent can be seen as such an advance that ensures the capitalist extraction of surplus-value. Seen together, this process creates a crisis of the peasants' reproduction and creates a 'capitalist production without its advantages', or as Banaji puts it:

"When the process of production of a small-peasant household depends from one cycle to the next on the advances of the usurer – when, without such 'advances', the process of production would come to a halt – then in this case the 'usurer', i.e., the monied capitalist, exerts a definite command over the process of production. This control or command is established and operates even when, as in this case, the labour-process remains technologically primitive, manually operated, and continuous with earlier, archaic, modes of labour" (Banaji, 2010: 308).

What Sudgen is observing in Nepal, when writing about pre-capitalist formations that resist capitalist expansion, is from Banaji's point of view, already a capitalist process.

Sudgen concludes that the persistence of rent, or taken broadly, the landlord class as a whole, is preventing the country from full-fledged capitalist transition – that Sudgen only understands in the form of the transition to industrial capitalism. This argument evokes a stagist conceptualisation of capitalist development, inherited from classical Marxism that Sudgen criticises but later adopts throughout his research. What is more, unlike Banaji's, this framework cannot sufficiently explain the emergence of capitalism in Nepal. An older generation of dependency and articulation-of-modes-of-production scholars, from whom Sudgen derives this framework, had sought to explain this, not through the analysis of Nepal's economy but by looking at its integration into the world economy as a dependent peripheral economy. Seddon puts it in this way:

"It is certainly to India's advantage to have, on its doorstep, an economy, which provides a market however small and peripheral for its manufactured goods, but which at the same time, by virtue of its own failure to develop any large-scale commodity production, is able to provide labour and primary products for the Indian economy and recruits for its army. The failure of Nepal to develop large-scale commodity production is thus in large part a result of the domination of the Nepalese economy by India [...]" (Seddon, 2002a: 41).

According to this argument, it was mainly because of economic dependency and the prevalence of merchant capital that a more industrialised state could not have developed. As exemplified by Seddon, this approach analyses capitalist relations in Nepal only by proposing a general theory of capitalist expansion from the outside and the subordination of pre-existing 'pre-capitalist' modes to the dynamics of the world market. As Banaji rightfully observes, this tendency, present in the Gunder-Frankian approach, focuses only on the 'general determination' of the reproduction of capital on the world scale. Banaji concludes that:

[t]his general determination becomes its *idée fixe*, its peculiar obsession, so that it then supposes that it is sufficient to point to the dominance of the specifically capitalist mode of production on the world-scale to establish the prevalence of capitalist relations in India (Banaji, 2010: 332).

In the view of dependency scholars, capitalism in Nepal only really occurs through the integration into the world economy, a process that is hindered by pre-capitalist formations and other forms of underdevelopment, a characteristic ascribed to the whole country – an unavoidable effect of Nepal's peripheral situation. According to this logic,

while capitalism is an economic reality coming from the outside, what remains to be determined is the 'articulation' of other modes of production – which are, in its essence, economic realities that exist only within the national boundaries. To construct a more complex way of how capitalism works in Nepal, I propose that we should not describe the articulations of different modes of production. Instead, let us follow Banaji's attempt to theorise the articulations of different forms of capitalism (Banaji, 2010: 360).

The mode of production then, as Peter Worsley proposed, should not be understood only as "system of technology, nor a stage or type of society, but a heuristic tool which he uses to focus upon the strategic relationships of power and wealth" (Worsley, 1984: 35). Nepal's economic landscape is thus not simply a composition of two different modes of production but a much more uneven economic formation consisting of various surplus appropriation types. This discussion has shown that appropriation types do not form sufficient ground to determine the relations of production. In this way, the emergence of capitalist relations in Nepal can be dated much further back and is not limited to the liberalisation period of the 1950s. Industrial production developed throughout the 20th century in some areas of the Terai and Kathmandu, but outside of these regions, there existed a much more ambiguous relation between non-capitalist and capitalist forms of accumulation.

The scholars I engage within this chapter all in their way theorised the capitalist process in its relations to the outside, non-capitalist economic forms. In the next section, I continue with analyzing the complex structure of capitalism in Nepal and show how these historical temporal forms work in the context of capitalist extraction of surplus-value.

Merchant Capital: 'Becoming' and 'Being' Capitalism

To move beyond the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach, we should ask the following question: if merchant/rent capital in Nepal is not a remnant of the past, and is not merely blocking the development of industrial capitalism, how to understand it? A critical insight comes from Banaji, who distinguishes between two different types of merchant capital. First, merchant capital can be defined as surplus from trading, the process I describe at the start of this chapter. Merchant capital in this form existed in

Nepal for centuries, especially on the important trade routes, and it does not imply the existence of capitalist relations. In this form, merchant capital is a mediator between different, relatively independent small producers and its surplus mainly derives from differences in prices (Banaji, 2010: 279). In the second form, merchant capital is a part of the life process of industrial capital. By making this distinction, Banaji is able to demonstrate that merchant capital plays a function in the total circulation-process of capital and differs from the merchant capital in its pre-capitalist form. According to Banaji, the existence of this form of merchant capital alone can be sufficient ground to determine the emergence of capitalist relations⁴².

While Banaji's reading of Marx and his theoretical contribution to the analysis of capitalism in India is crucial for understanding the deep embeddedness of capitalist relations in processes that had been misrecognized as pre-capitalist, this approach also succumbs to categorising merchant capital as a stage in a broader accumulation scheme. The conceptual grounding, Banaji has laid out by analysing the capitalist process on the ground through the logic of formal subsumption loses its power when Banaji puts it in place in the total process of capital circulation. Here again, the process of the reproduction of merchant capital is capitalist only because it is an extension of a broader logic of capital, in its essence, a form of industrial capital. Banaji thus also implies a hierarchical relationship between the two, assuming that formal subsumption will eventually be transformed into real subsumption, which leads to the realization of industrial capitalism.

Harootunain points out this apparent tautology in Banaji's theory of capitalism. Banaji's capitalism, he argues, is confined within the limits of small capitalists on the one side and determined by the expansion of the industrial capital on the other. Banaji connected the two systems into another linear and stagist theory of capitalist development, and as Harootunain argues, this would not have been so if he would accept the possibility that

⁴² Banaji analyses the expansion of merchant and commercial capital into the small-production economy in Deccan. This process was led by a new class of monied capitalists: brokers, moneylenders, bankers; their roles, as Banaji points out, were often embodied in one person. The monied capitalists used a system of advances to accumulate the future surplus-value of the small producers. Banaji argues, that advance payments already constitute a capital relationship, because what is advanced is actually capital in the form of money. The surplus-value in this case is extracted in the form of interest and the fact that small producers become dependent on loans, gives the moneylender control over a part of the production process (Banaji, 2010: 303-306).

the two systems co-exist. The two systems: formal subsumption based on absolute surplus-value, and real subsumption based on relative surplus-value, do not necessarily determine each other. “After all, why else was Marx prompted to declare that formal subsumption can coexist with or alongside the most developed forms of capitalist production?” (Harootunain, 2015: 218).

Harootunain’s interpretation of Marx, similarly to Banaji, brings the concept of formal subsumption into the core of the analysis of capitalist development. Harootunain argues that starting with the commodity, as Marx did in Capital I, leads to totalizing notions of the process of capital; in the final stage, this is the completion of the process of real subsumption. Such a theory of capitalism, according to Harootunain, while it was necessary for understanding the whole life cycle of capital, congeals the history of capital’s becoming; the process of piling up different temporal moments into a single history of capital. This can be observed in Marx’s work through the difference between capital’s becoming (the ‘agglomeration’ of different ‘historical presupposition’) from being (realized real subsumption) (Harootunain, 2015:33). While the commodity form and Marx’s analysis in Capital I corresponds to an abstracted, fully developed system, within homogenous capitalist time and without history, Marx developed formal subsumption as the concept that provides a history to capital’s life process. However, Harootunain points out that Marx’s focus was turned to capital, and not to the history of precapitalist formations with good reason: “formal subsumption could be understood without referring to real subsumption, but real subsumption could not be grasped without formal subsumption” (Harootunain, 2015: 47).

Harootunain follows Marx’s attempts in Grundrisse to resist the temptation that led so many Marxists to form their theory of capitalism only from Capital I’s abstract perspective, that is, as a completed totality. Instead, Harootunain puts formal subsumption at the core of his analysis, which leads him to map the ‘heterogeneous noncapitalist temporalities and spaces’ (Harootunain, 2015: 41). This theoretical contribution, which Harootunain argues is already present in Marx’s later work, captures both the uneven, temporal and the universal, homogenizing tendency as two moments of capitalism in dialectical motion. “History, in this register”, he argues:

“could no longer move along a “one-way street,” endowing it with singular meaning. Appearing from the ruins of universal history, a temporalizing rhythmology of capital comes into sight, empowering time accountancy and periodic crises that transform the historical environment of the present into a scene where “politics attains primacy”. For Marx, once having liberated history from philosophy, time or temporality is left to temporalize itself in the present, from the process of production and reproduction where uneven political and economic intensities surface and generate unscheduled struggle” (Harootunain, 2015: 45).

By liberating history from the history of capital, Harootunain, provides a theoretical framework that posits two forms alongside each other. The formal subsumption, a form that subsumes practices from earlier modes, exists alongside real subsumption that creates new ones, completely transforming the labour process according to capital’s need. However, despite these differences, capital is reproduced through both forms and entrenches their mutual co-existence. For Banaji, formal subsumption is the basic framework that helped more complex capitalist relations to emerge (Banaji, 2010: 326). While this leads him to explain how capitalist relations emerged internally, and not only through the expansion of the world-system, it does presuppose that formal subsumption is superseded by real subsumption. Harootunian’s reading of Marx proposes that we should see the two systems of consumption as separate and corresponding to two different forms of surplus value: absolute and relative. This differentiation implies that formal and real subsumption constitute parts of every capitalist process, also in its more developed form. While formal subsumption signals capitalism’s uneven and contingent development, subsuming what is at hand, the effect of real subsumption is “to remove even the hint of contingency—history—that had accompanied capitalism’s own accidental appearance in the scene of history”. (Harootunain, 2015: 59).

In this sense, uneven development is not only the uneven transition to real subsumption but should rather be seen as the co-existence of separate forms of subsumption that create a temporally uneven, historically contingent, contradictory and incomplete capitalist process. To further explain the matter, Marx introduces the ‘transitional’ or ‘hybrid’ form of subsumption, the subsumption of which is never (in formal or real form) complete. It was these forms, as Harootunain points out, that explain the role of early merchant capital. The hybrid form of subsumption is not under complete control of the producers, which means that formal subsumption is not taking place, and the labour process thus remains outside of capital (not yet productive labour) (Harootunain, 2015: 65). This

means that merchant capital, in its essence a form of surplus-value without an established capital relation, is partially reproduced by the capitalist process and exists alongside it. It is a sign of capitalism's existence, but it is not itself fully capitalist (ibid). In other words, it is a form of capital that signifies both 'becoming' and 'being' capitalist. The difference here to Banaji's conception of merchant capital then is that this is not a stage or form of industrial capital, but it is a 'hybrid' form, both capitalist and non-capitalist, that exists within and alongside capitalist relations (more about the hybrid form of subsumption in the yarsa economy follows chapter 13).

The 'Unevenness' and 'Combination' of Nepal's Capitalist Development

The discussion on the temporal unevenness of capitalism emerging from the productive juncture between Banaji's and Harootunain's understanding of formal subsumption of labour into capital provides crucial insights for the analysis of capitalism in Nepal. In this section, I follow their attempt to move beyond stagist theories of capitalism by applying the conceptual differentiation between different forms of subsumption to Nepal's history of capitalist development. By rethinking Nepal's 'pre-capitalist' pasts, not as remnants of feudalism, but as historical temporal forms that share contemporaneity with the capitalist present, I comment on parts of the history of capitalist development that has been hidden under cover of capitalist modernity that assumes completion. I aim to explain further the relationship of the capitalist process with its non-capitalist 'outside'.

The Role of Merchant Capital in Nepal

An important intervention in the historiography of capital in Nepal comes from Stephen Mikesell's study of the Bandipur merchants. The merchant class that expanded its influence in 19th century Nepal, through bazaar towns such as Lalitpur, Bhatgaun, and Bandipur, have fortified their grip on the extraction of surplus value from the countryside. Subsuming agricultural labour and small commodity production from the hills and creating a consumer market for industrial goods from India, this process established capitalist relations in Nepal long before the so-called democratic revolution of the 1950s (Mikesell, 1999: 186-187).

Much like Banaji in the case of Deccan, Mikesell follows the complex process of capital accumulation that established the well-known Newar mercantile families of the central-west and south Nepal. The merchants' influence extended their grip on peasant land through a system of rents and loans, thus opening agriculture and domestic production to the circulation of capital⁴³. Mikesell observes:

“Taking advantage of the peasant hunger for credit—arising from the centuries-old inequalities in landholding and distribution of agricultural products which had culminated in and underwrote the Nepali state—the merchants loaned a portion of their profits to peasants in the surrounding countryside. The peasants mortgaged their accumulated wealth in jewellery, farm implements, animals, land, and even rights over their children. Formidably high rates of interest enabled the merchants to slowly alienate this peasant wealth and labour and increasingly assert more direct control over agricultural production, displacing older claims on the peasant labour. The surpluses alienated in this fashion were entered in trade” (Mikesell, 1999: 235).

While merchant capital penetrated deeply into Nepal's countryside by the middle of the 19th century, it is equally important to observe the other side of this process. Mikesell notes how the Bandipur merchants have already established themselves into the strategic position on the trade route between the North Indian plains and the Himalayan hills. In turn, this tied the Nepali countryside to the world-historical processes of the time: most notably the expansion of industrial capitalism and its commodity chains. Mikesell exemplifies how the goods from the new global connection already found their way to Nepal by pointing out that the machine-made clothes from Britain were already found in the bazaar towns in the south. The expansion of foreign industrial markets, through the role of merchants, according to Mikesell, became a step in the life cycle of industrial capital:

“As the bazaar merchants traded increasing quantities of industrial commodities, however, their relationship to the countryside slowly changed. With the new trade, the bazaar merchants of Bandipur became incorporated in the circulation of industrial commodities, in which the sales of cloth to villagers became the last step in realizing the price of the product necessary for sustaining and expanding factory production in India, Britain, the United States and, eventually, Japan. The merchants' orientation and commitment gradually shifted away from the community of the villages around Bandipur, with its moral imperatives and obligations, to the goal of expansion of markets for foreign commodities” (Mikesell, 1999: 236).

⁴³ This process can be related to the expansion of the monied capitalist class described by Banaji (2010). Blakie et al. for example show how in the Terai in the 1970s there was a well-established system of advance payments and loans controlled by the merchant class. The money lenders advanced the loans to the farmers against the value of the crop, accumulating 40% of the crop's market value (Blakie et al., 1980: 133).

Mikesell further claims that traders' economic activities and their embeddedness in the domestic and foreign markets have prevented them from becoming industrial capitalists. This transformation has been attempted several times, as the government promoted domestic industrialisation at the start of the 20th century. Mikesell refers to the Saraswati Cloth Factory (1932-44) as one of the last such attempts to initiate large-scale industrial production. This project was responsible for the destruction of the local household textile production, subsuming women's labour into the capitalist process of the factory. The project eventually failed due to difficulties in the supply of material and the merchant's role in international trade. According to Mikesell, because of their role as the mediators of value in the cycle of (foreign) industrial capital, merchant capital remained in circulation, and it was not invested in production. Instead of launching domestic production, merchant capital remained tied to the trade with India⁴⁴ (Mikesell, 1999: 253).

In this excellent example, Mikesell, like Banaji, recognizes merchants' role as mediators between the capitalist and non-capitalist worlds. Throughout the 19th-century, merchant capital in Nepal existed as a form of hybrid and formal subsumption; it appropriated surplus-value through rent and interest rates, but it did not completely subordinate the labour process to the process of capital. In the case of the Saraswati factory, what Mikesell observes is already an attempt to transform formal subsumption into real subsumption of labour. Similarly to Banaji, Mikesell relates the two forms into stages, arguing that it is the subordinated nature of Nepal's merchant capital that prevents the development of the domestic textile industry. However, unlike in India, where in Deccan and elsewhere, a more exhaustive industrialisation process was already taking place, the real subsumption thus masking the previous forms of surplus extraction – Nepal's failed industrialisation project points precisely at the unevenness of this process. The Sarawati Factory and other early industrialisation attempts should not be seen as a failure of capitalism but as a much

⁴⁴ Shakya points to another such example within the textile industry. She argues that the Marwari-Rana alliance, dating back to the 19th century when the Ranas began supporting the East India Company, began an industrialization project for textiles and consumer goods in the 1930s. Shakya argues that it was the Ranas who invited the Marwari traders to open up their businesses in the border towns in south Nepal, and points out that the Marwari-Rana-led capitalist development in Nepal, was successful also because it obtained the support of the British (Shakya, 2018: 18-19).

more uneven process within which formal subsumption can exist as an independent form and does not need to be superseded by more developed capital. The early industrialisation attempts are thus proof of the uneven totality of capitalist development, not of the underdeveloped form of production relations. Instead of providing proof of Nepal's semi-feudal nature, the failed late industrialisation attempts point out capitalism's true heterogeneity. Formal subsumption exists, as Harootunian points out: "alongside the capitalist mode of production in its developed form and, at the same time, in its absence" (Harootunian, 2015: 223). While Mikesell does not apply the concept of formal subsumption in his study of mercantilism, it is evident that he understood the expansion of merchant capital and its control over the countryside in the form of advances, interests rates and rents. He attributes the expansion of capitalism to developed capital elsewhere, diminishing the expanding role of merchant capital, which was already commodifying household labour and creating new forms of subsumption of agricultural produce (cash crops) and subsumption of nature.

The Subsumption of Nature and Accumulation without Dispossession

Even closer to this definition of capitalist relations is Paudel's description of the commercialization of the commons. Paudel clearly understands the problem with the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach. His ethnographic fieldwork leads him to understand the expansion of capitalism in Nepal through non-capitalist forms but fails to conclude more generally what kind of implications this brings to the overall theory of capitalism.

In a groundbreaking paper entitled 'Re-inventing the Commons' (2016), Paudel looks at the appropriation of surplus-value through community-based development programs, and along the way 'reinvents' the concept of formal subsumption which he calls 'accumulation without dispossession'. Paudel's skilful and detailed ethnographic analysis leads him to conclude that the process he is observing is different from the on-going process of primitive accumulation because it appropriates value through non-capitalist relations of production without changing them. What is striking here is that Paudel ethnographically develops a form of accumulation that points to uneven and non-linear

development of capitalism but fails to draw broader conclusions to capitalist development in Nepal due to the limits of the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach that he embraces.

First, let us look at his main argument. Paudel argues that community forestry was first established in Nepal to secure the livelihoods of rural communities. However, throughout the last decades of the 20th century, development programs introduced ways to commercialise and commodify the commons. The timber and non-timber forest products have been commercialised through intermediaries, entrepreneurs and contractors that have found ways to exploit community labour. This process consisted of the community forestry training the local capitalist class (entrepreneurs) with the necessary skills to make schemes that used community labour to produce marketable timber products. This created a specific situation where (and Paudel states several examples) the production of commercial products was able to employ non-productive labour, thus integrating previous modes of production into the capitalist accumulation schemes. The employment of indigenous systems of labour and other community practices that were mobilised by capital indicates a system of accumulation where peasants are not separated from their means of production (Paudel, 2016: 5, 14-15).

In this way, Paudel provides an alternative explanation to Harvey's 'accumulation by dispossession', which explains the appropriation of commons within the context of separation of peasants from the land, reflecting Marx's ideas on primitive accumulation. Paudel turns this around by showing how peasants remain in control of their commons but, at the same time, become a part of the accumulation scheme, which Paudel calls 'accumulation without dispossession'. In Paudel's words, this creates the following situation: "[l]egal ownership of the means of production in this instance, community forests remains with the community, but the surplus-value produced by application of labour is privately appropriated in the form of forest-based market commodities" (Paudel, 2016: 5). What is surprising nonetheless is that Paudel comes to this conclusion while at the same time maintaining an articulation-of-modes-of-production approach that he describes in the introduction of the paper. This leads him to conclude that 'accumulation without dispossession' can mobilize pre-capitalist forms of production to produce surplus-value, and maintain their original form. However, he continues: "This emerging

situation does not replace ideas of primitive accumulation and accumulation by dispossession; rather, it provides insights from a *particular* [emphasis mine] instance of accumulation in the commons where commercialization and commoning co-exist” (Paudel, 2016: 19).

Strikingly, Paudel describes the tree but fails to see the forest. ‘Accumulation without dispossession’ is, according to Paudel, an extension of the primitive accumulation thesis that explains more recent features of the relationship between commercialisation and commoning. However, what is for Paudel a ‘curious phenomenon’ (ibid), could be indeed understood outside the particular character he ascribes to it as the central dynamic of the uneven capitalist process. While Paudel explores how the non-capitalist practices are subsumed into the domain of capital, he limits himself to the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach discussed in the previous section. While he questions the functional dualism of De Janvry, the implication of the co-existence of different forms of accumulation, he implies a hierarchical relationship. The existence of pre-capitalist forms is preserved and exists simultaneously with more developed forms of capital. In Paudel’s reading of Marx’s capitalist expansion thesis, the connections between them are made explicit as “society embarked on the trajectory from formal subsumption of labour to capital to real subsumption” (Paudel, 2016: 4).

What would happen then if Paudel would position ‘accumulation without dispossession’ as the central dynamic of capitalism and not merely as a mere contemporary feature of capitalist development? This step could reveal more about the history of uneven development of capitalism in Nepal and explain how social labour has been subordinated to capital. Formal subsumption is an important element of capitalist relations that operates equally well in the absence of more advanced forms of capital. Only a historical analysis of complex combinations of different formal and real subsumption dynamics would reveal the actual unevenness of the history of Nepal’s capitalist relations. Although Paudel is right, in many parts of the country, this is a more recent process. However, a historical analysis of capitalism in Nepal would reveal a more complex picture of the different agglomerations of ‘historical presuppositions’ and their embeddedness in socio-economic and cultural systems around them. My analysis in the next section goes into this direction, but its scope is much more modest, and it does not dig deep into Nepal’s history.

In this section, I have proposed crucial conceptual improvements that go beyond the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach and reveal the uneven economic landscape of incomplete capitalist modernity. I argue that through this optic, we can observe how capitalist relations have slowly been seeping into the everyday life of peasants. To individuals in rural Nepal, this lived reality does not necessarily indicate that they are a part of larger accumulation schemes, which makes the concepts such as 'accumulation without dispossesion' and other forms of formal subsumption of rural labour even more relevant. By understanding how the peasants past is integrated into the capitalist present, an anthropological task is to unwrap the layers of peasants' ambiguous role in capitalism today.

The Role of Development and Peasant Social Movements in Rural Nepal

In Nepal, the Western ideas of democracy and socialism were imported, especially from China and India. The first signs of the anti-Rana movement go as far back as the 1930s when the first pleas for social change were published in Nepali language magazines in India, and the *Praja Parishad* underground organisation was established in Kathmandu (Baral, 2006: 17). However, the anti-Rana movement is more commonly connected with the establishment of another political organisation: The Nepali National Congress that was formed in India in 1947. Three years later, the Nepali Congress party was formed (built from two previous factions of the same political line: Nepali democratic Congress and Nepali National Congress), and by 1951 the pro-democratic movement had achieved its first goal. By putting pressure on the Rana rule, all parties involved, namely India, the Nepali Congress and King Tribhuvan, successfully ended the 100-year long Rana dynasty rule. This short period before the formation of the Panchayat system has often been referred to as Nepal's own democratic experiment.

In the 1950s, the government's progressive ideas that had a great desire to modernise the country worked against the traditional isolationism of the Ranas. The government launched 'planned development', a strategy that would drastically change Nepal's economy and significantly affect its society. As Nepal was opening up to its own anti-politics machine⁴⁵, it is interesting to observe retrospectively how little planning was actually done from the start. Panday pointed out that: "[t]here was no discussion or analysis of how these projects would affect the national economy and society, and in most cases, the achievements fell drastically short of the targets" (Panday, 2012: 84). Even though king Mahendra again took full control of the state in 1961, with the promulgation of a constitution that marked the start of the Panchayat regime, an early idea of a democratic state was born and remained present in the underground political world until the 1990s. The first free elections of 1959, even though consistently blocked by monarchy

⁴⁵ The anti-politics machine is a conceptual apparatus which, according to James Ferguson, endorses particular economic and political doctrines that structurally alter the development of the state and its integration into larger systems (Ferguson, 1994).

political structures, were an important exercise of democracy (Whelpton, 2005). This set the stage for further political developments for an idea of a democratic Nepal.

The impulse for modernisation coincided with the strengthening of the international foreign aid apparatus that has forged the 'Third World' as we know it today. The planned development schemes, a booming industry in Nepal, profoundly affected the state in the second half of the 20th century. It is perhaps best observed through economic initiatives, such as USAID's development schemes, that had initiated literacy and entrepreneurial programs, microcredit systems, and larger infrastructural projects, such as roads and bridges. Today the development industry's reach has extended to the remotest parts of the country, where NGO's, state-led and private developmental agencies are engaged in a variety of different programs. Many authors have addressed the effects of the development sector in Nepal's economic history, and recently, anthropologists started to explore the more long-term socio-political role of development in Nepal's state-formation process (Pigg, 1992; Fujikura, 2001; Paudel, 2016, Panday, 1999; 2012).

International development is not a new phenomenon in Nepal. The country's aid economy that has been developing since the 1950s has been increasing in scope since Nepal's first democracy experiment. As the development agencies and western countries stepped firmly into Nepal's economy, development formed "an overt link between it [Nepal] and the West" (Pigg, 1992: 497). However, in the nation-state's constantly changing character, the emerging development sector presented a much more significant influence than just linking it to other parts of the world. By outlining the discursive elements of the country that seemed above all suitable for foreign aid, Pigg finds in Nepal a perfect example of an 'underdeveloped country' that can serve as a 'guilt-free platform for western aid':

"Nepal's sovereignty during the era of colonial expansion in South Asia lends itself perfectly to this narrative. Development narratives about Nepal (as recorded in genres as diverse as agency country reports and television documentaries) stress that it was only "opened" to the world in the 1950s. This insistent phrasing creates the impression that history began for Nepal only when contact with the West activated it. The country's mountainous terrain, for its part, evokes Western images of a Shangri-la removed from time. Mountains also serve as a trope for the looming constraints nature imposes on human actions. The images of Nepal as a place out of time, a place victimized by its rugged terrain, lend credibility to the programs of development intervention, while usefully romanticizing Nepal" (Pigg, 1993: 47).

Stacy Pigg observes the development industry as another hegemonic process that has proved highly formative for the young Nepali state, entering and ultimately transforming the national development logic. The Panchayat system was opening up to its own 'anti-politics' machine, which Pigg calls the 'bikas apparatus' (the development bureaucracy and the emerging NGO sector), and also helped to form the 'ideology of modernisation' that "accompanies the nation's pursuit for bikas" (Pigg, 1992: 511)⁴⁶. It became a powerful model which drew the remotest parts of the country into its network. This process changed the social places and social meanings for the rural people and how other, more powerful segments of the national society look at the 'periphery'. In Pigg's own words, this created an:

"[...] [I]deology of modernization [that] becomes hegemonic to the extent that the social map it draws serves as a guide in orienting people in all sectors of Nepalese society. The ideology of modernization guides Nepalese people in a changing Nepal in the same way that a map and compass serve a person traversing an unknown landscape" (Pigg, 1992: 510-511).

This new landscape that Pigg is describing has become a category used by the state, the development sector and internalised by most Nepalis as the discourse of awareness (Fujikura, 2001). Among others, the Maoist party had, to no small extent, followed the then-existing model by installing village people's governments and dissected the social territory along lines mapped by the *bikas* apparatus. In the shadow of the Panchayat system, until the early 2000s, when no real change in the countryside had yet occurred, the official VDC (Village Development Committee or *gaun bikash sammiti*) local structuring almost completely overlapped with the old Panchayat one. As the successor of the long on-going political structuring at the local and national level, the village became an entry point for most Nepalese into the national society, and as Pigg observes, this mostly occurred through the discourse of *bikas* and the ideology of modernisation; the

⁴⁶ Pigg argues that in terms of discourse development, most commonly expressed in Nepali by the term *bikas*, became not only a term used for international development, but a word that ascribes social meaning to places, and more importantly describes a relation between these places in terms of development and underdevelopment. This dichotomy constructed a social map of how Nepalis understand their own society. In the local understanding of *bikash*, therefore, a notion of development as an external force that has yet to reach Nepali villages prevails. In this common understanding of *bikash* that emerges from Nepalis' social experience with the development apparatus, the development/underdevelopment dichotomy has direct social consequences (Pigg, 1993:54).

development discourse thus became an authoritative way of representing the social world (Pigg, 1993: 46).

The discussion above brings us to the conclusion that development, on the one hand, functions as an ideology that de-politicises social change, and on the other hand, as a political tool that enforces it. Although Pigg predicts that development could have sprouted disillusionment and dissatisfaction, a possible source that might give way to radical social movements, she does not investigate further into the political consequences underlying this claim. In Nepal, the connection between development and peasant movements has remained underrepresented in recent scholarship and has been seriously considered only by a handful of authors. What did this mean for the parts of the country where development had already established itself as a powerful socio-political force? What role did the development projects play in forming revolutionary subjectivities, and how did the local population receive them?

Lauren Leve (2009) addresses both the failed development thesis and empowerment through development as two contrasting approaches that have produced similar results in rural Nepal. Both models, she argues, share several predispositions about subaltern subjectivity: development as a unilinear progression based on subjective transformation, the conception of the development subjects as 'incomplete', and presupposing the subject's emancipation through neoliberal ideas of freedom (such as the autonomy of the market) (Leve, 2009: 352). Leve is proposing that theories of development, empowerment and resistance that she observes in rural Gorkha represent ideas of the self that do not correlate to the actual experiences of women she has studied. By imposing all sorts of assumptions about rural women in Nepal, these models miss the fact that local moral economies also shape women's values (ibid). Local issues that women are concerned with, she argues, are much more about morality than consciousness, a point that the development discourses misrecognises by understanding rural women through "the modernist ideal of the autonomous self who seeks absolute freedom from the sacrifices and suffering associated with social constraints as the essence of human subjectivity" (Leve, 2009: 306). The self, instead of on the idea of autonomy, is based on social relationships and commitments (ibid). Leve's argument evokes Scott's

interpretation of rural struggles as an expression of peasant's moral economy and connects the logic of capitalist development to its outside element.

The links between revolutionary consciousness and development were further explored by Paudel, who analysed the role of development in the formation of revolutionary subjectivities in the Rapti Zone. According to Paudel, the Rapti Integrated Development Project (RIDP) implemented by USAID empowered many peasant leaders that later became actively involved in the Maoist movement. Paudel goes straight to the point, arguing that peasants' political consciousness was transformed through a process where they "enrolled themselves as development subjects in the 1980s and emerged as a revolutionary force in the 1990s" (Paudel, 2016: 1030). The development industry's role that is often seen only in its capacity to undermine social movements and de-politicise the state is described in Paudel's contribution as an ideology that has a 'double life'. Development is not only "generating the conditions of subordination for development's own reproduction" but it "can generate the possibility of rebellion by creating negative consciousness of the process of othering" (Paudel, 2016: 1025). Paudel shows that Maoism was able to consolidate subaltern rebellions within 'the ruptures inherent to development hegemony' instigated ideological frameworks through which peasant activists were able to transform a "rebellious consciousness into a collective anti-state force" (Paudel, 2016: 1029-1030).

What does this mean for the political subjects in this reconfigured political landscape? In other words, if primitive accumulation as the driving force of capitalist expansion has often been one of the structural causes to which peasants responded by defending a peasant moral economy, in what way does peasant consciousness correspond to development? Paudel has argued that developmental projects are 'hyper-political instruments' and not only an anti-politics machine (Paudel, 2016). It is important to understand how Nepal's anti-politics machine has consolidated the struggle from below into the ideology of modernisation and empowerment. However, at the same time, this process does not eliminate possibilities for the formation of revolutionary subjectivities. In Nepal, capital exploited labour through different accumulation forms, and instead of transforming peasants into a fully industrial labour force, it enlisted them on the path of uneven proletarianization. The development schemes intervene in this process, and as

Paudel shows, this creates 'de-politicising and 'rebellious' consequences as unintended by-products. The historical opportunities that arose from these trajectories of economic development, political empowerment and social transformation gave birth to the Maoist movement. Although I argue that the Maoist revolution's history is much more heterogeneous, Paudel describes an important element of Nepal's uneven development of capitalism. This conceptual move elaborates a much more complex relationship between the hegemony of development and rebellious consciousness. Paudel's development theory produces subjects that correspond to Sanyal's conceptualisation of post-colonial capitalism⁴⁷; like capital, the subjects are also 'always becoming' (Paudel, 2016: 22).

Instead of being the leading reason for peasant organisation, I suggest reading Paudel's argument as one of the several possible combinations of social formations in rural Nepal with capitalist modernity. Although Paudel is right that the developmental programs have initiated both negative and positive responses from peasants, I argue that his conceptual intervention should be reconsidered within a broader picture of 'unevenly combined social forms' (Makki, 2015: 489). Outside and in the Rapti zone, the logic behind political consciousness formation comprises many elements. Paudel's argument shows how political consciousness formation can be related to developmental empowerment, contributing a missing aspect to understanding peasant societies and social movements in the restructuring of global capitalism. This conceptual move is necessary to reposition the peasantry into an uneven space and time of capital that has been created by the historically incomplete process of capital accumulation. Although capitalism in Nepal developed before the rise of the development industry, the development programs

⁴⁷ Sanyal argues that development can be understood as the reversal or the other side of primitive accumulation. As the political management of the 'postcolonial wasteland', the development industry is produced to compensate for the destroying forces of primitive accumulation (Sanyal, 2007: 124). In this view, development's mission is to complete the uneven integration of non-capitalist economic forms into a uniform version of capitalism. This creates an apparatus that extends over the uneven temporal-spatial capitalist landscape and imposes an undifferentiated conception of historical temporality. The development discourse, what Pigg calls the *bikas* ideology, then serves as a hegemonic language employed from the space of the homogenous time of capital that creates specific conditions within which a certain ruling class can maintain itself (Sanyal, 2007: 143). Instead of acknowledging co-existing temporalities, the main goal of the development apparatus is to bridge the time-lag.

accelerated the combinations of the uneven temporal forms with the homogenous time of capital, producing 'the uneven development of class struggle' (Smith, 2008: 5).

Chapter 6: The Socio-Economic Landscape of Mid-Western Nepal

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, I argued that the differentiation between different forms of subsumption and the development industry's role in Nepal's state-formation process paints a much more uneven political-economic landscape. The development of capitalism was not subordinated only to the logic of real subsumption of labour; it has emerged in the countryside in the forms of formal subsumption and the spread of intermediaries, such as borderland brokers; in its essence, the expansion of commercial and merchant capital. While the links to forms of international and industrial capital in India remain important factors of capitalist development in Nepal, I argue that it is equally important to pay attention to the capitalist and other economic relations within the country. As Trotsky put it: "The force of this law [uneven development] operates not only in the relations of countries to each other but also in the mutual relationships of the various processes within one and the same country" (Trotsky, 1969: 255). Capitalist development in Nepal was thus not only combined, as the Gunder-Frankian thesis proposes, or as development theory would see it, but also unevenly developed; and it is through the processes of uneven integration of non-capitalist socio-economic forms into the capitalist process that the totality of this world-historical process is best understood.

Before I discuss capitalist relations in Mid-western Nepal, I believe we should ask the following question: What exactly is capitalism, and how do we recognise capitalist development on the local level? Following Anievas and Nisancioglu, I propose to refrain from simple, over-generalised definitions of capitalism because such definitions tend to conceal more than they reveal. This is especially true for late industrialisers like Nepal, where capitalist relations did not take any of the well-known forms. Anievas and Nisancioglu, argue that we should not understand capitalism merely as 'generalised commodity production', 'accumulation of capital through the exploitation of wage-labour' or 'market dependence' (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 8). The theory of uneven and combined development enables us to grasp different scenarios of human development and the multiplicity of connections between them, which leads to a social analysis that

entails several social factors that go beyond a more rigid analysis of only economic forms of development. This is an essential step away from the abstract, homogenising explanations toward a "relational-processual approach [...] uncovering the concrete living aggregate of definite social relationships" (ibid). Anievas and Nisancioglu continue with their broad definition of capitalism:

From this perspective, we argue that capitalism is best understood as a set of configurations, assemblages, or bundles of social relations and processes oriented around the systematic reproduction of the capital relation, but not reducible – either historically or logically – to that relation alone (Anievas and Nisancioglu, 2015: 9).

By keeping in mind that these 'configurations' and 'assemblages' take numerous forms, I continue mapping the socio-economic landscape of Mid-Western Nepal. My intention here is to show the complexity of the productive and reproductive sphere outside of the narrow definition of the capital-labour relation. I argue that uneven and combined development in its broader definition can help us grasp these processes and relations as they emerge within states and internationally.

On Geographical Orientation and Remoteness

When referring to Mid-Western Nepal, I have in mind one of Nepal's five development regions officially in place until 2015. I keep this categorisation, initially introduced by Nepal's developmental state apparatus, as the main geographical orientation point because I refer mainly to the period before the new constitution was formed in 2015. It is also a mapping of the country that is still much more present in daily conversation than the new division into provinces (Nepālkā Pradeśharū). The old development regions were as follows (from west to east): Far-Western, Mid-Western, Western, Central, and Eastern. The Mid-Western region was divided into three zones: Rapti, Bheri and Karnali. While some of the claims I make in the thesis can be applied to the whole development region, I mostly use the term Mid-Western Nepal in a narrow sense, as a synonym of the development region's central zone and the area where I have conducted fieldwork: Rapti Zone. Rapti zone consists of 5 districts: Rukum in the north, Rolpa in the centre, Salyan in the west, Pyuhtan in the East and Dang in the south. While I have spent most of my time in Rukum district, I have visited all of the districts on several occasions during my fieldwork; for example, on the Guerilla trek journey and during the mobile cinema

(*Batoko Cinema*) project. To refer to the broader region, I have thus adopted the term Mid-western Nepal, and when I refer to the specific part of it, I use the name of the district or, more specifically, the name of the village (also referred to as the Village Development Committee (V.D.C.)).

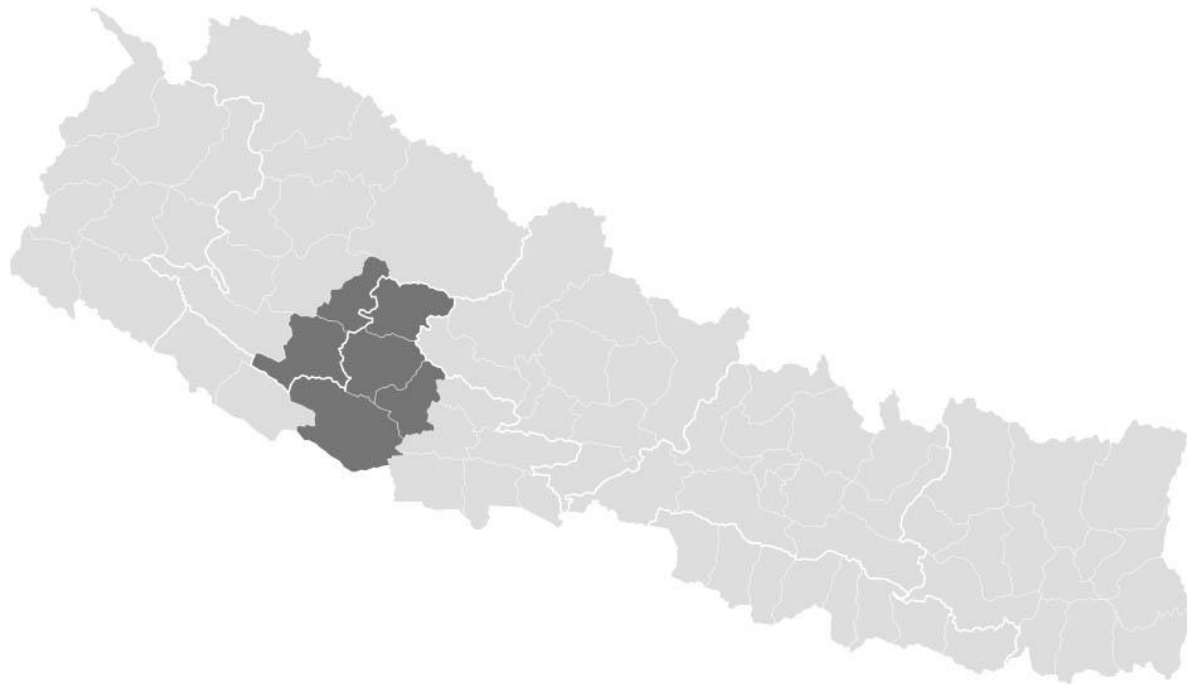


Figure 4: The Districts of the Rapti Zone

This vast, hilly and mountainous region borders the Dolpo region to the north, where it turns into high mountainous plateaus, the land of yarsagumba. The mountains above these plateaus are a part of the Dhaulagiri range and are in most parts not passable by foot; some reach over 7000 meters (with the highest peak just a bit above: Putha Himal (Dhaulagiri VII, 7246m, 23772 feet). In the east, the area borders and partially includes the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, the only hunting reserve in Nepal. Initially planned by UNESCO and WWF, the hunting reserve consists of a large part of north Rukum, where Maikot V.D.C. is located. It remains an important area for the locals, as many of the village's communal pastures lay within the reserve, and it also employs a small number of Maikotis as tour guides for private enterprises that bring foreign hunters to the reserve. In the south, the hilly areas continue deep into Rolpa and end at the height point of the Jaljala pass, another sacred place for the Magars of Rolpa that traditionally use it for

bhume puja (the celebration of the goddess of the earth). From here, the road connections are plentiful as the hills slowly dissolve into the Terai plains, where just south of Rolpa, the more urban and commercially developed district of Dang, is located.

Until the 1970s, the capital of Rukum was a small village in the east of the district, called Rukumkot. For the period until 2015, Musikot became the capital of Rukum, and the new constitution again shifted the administrative centre of the *gaunpallika* back to Rukumkot. Historically East Rukum, the geographical area of today's Takasera V.D.C. had belonged to different power centres. In the 1970s, it was a part of Baglung district, a more commercially developed area south of Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve. Later, in the newly formed Rukum district, it fell under the influence of Musikot (a place in west Rukum with a majority Chhetri population). It is not surprising then that it is here again that the new constitution draws the line on the map dividing the former rebellious district down the middle into separate electoral units.

Compared to most of Nepal, this area was considered remote until the end of the People's War by both locals and outsiders. Today it is being dissected by road projects that are penetrating this region from all sides. There is an extension of the road from the Salyan district that goes through Musikot to Takasera. Takasera V.D.C. is almost connected to the Baglung side to the east (first buses and smaller vehicles already connect Taka and Burtibang, although the road is not yet driveable all year round). While most people would still consider the area remote because of the time one needs to spend on the road to reach it, a more accurate picture on the ground tells a very different story. Mid-Western Nepal and Rukum and Rolpa specifically have become linked to regional and global narratives in several ways. The most eloquent is the example of work migration abroad, an economic reality for many Nepalis throughout the country. The process of subsuming the rural labour force has been more pervasive in Nepal's hilly areas, where non-agricultural income has been a defining feature of the rural economy (Seddon, 2002: 22). It is not surprising to meet people in the villages who have worked in more than five countries worldwide.

Despite the inadequate and insufficient road connection, the seeming isolation from the world is a matter of perspective. Even in Maikot, one of the more remote villages, today

one can find a mobile signal, wireless internet connection, while in villages in the south, one can find Western Union and other money transfer systems that link this area to the international remittance economy. Dil Bahadur, from Takasera, who visited and worked in seven countries, has pointed out that today this area 'finally became a part of the world'. Dil Bahadur returned home to be closer to his family and today runs a small homestay in the village. "Today", he points out, "some of the technological development I saw abroad is already reaching the village". For Dil Bahadur, this is perhaps best represented in the fact that he can use video calls to contact his 23-year-old son Amrit who took a job as a security guard in Saudi Arabia. Others have pointed out how the region is connected to Nepal's urban centres, especially to Kathmandu. Migration to Kathmandu to complete high school and university degrees has become very common for young men, less so for women, who more often stay in the village and marry at a much younger age. I spoke to several people who have started businesses in Kathmandu and Dang, and others who, mainly from Takasera, have invested in buying real-estate in Dang, a popular destination for Khams seeking a more urban upbringing for their children. However, Rukum and Rolpa remain 'remote' in the image of most locals whose lives have remained bound to the regional narratives. There is a common expression in Rukum referring to the village's remoteness and lack of development: "*nabhaeko thau*" (non-existing place). However, after putting these perspectives into the broader picture of the global combinations of the local, it would be misleading to portray it as a remote or isolated place.

The Socio-Economic Environment of Kham Magar Villages

Kham villages are often described as economic units determined by the subsistence and solidarity economy and their close dependence on the commons. While it is true that some of these elements play a significant role in village life, this perspective tends to confine Kham's economic activity to the natural economy. Anthropologists should be careful not to perpetuate the myth that Kham's lives resemble a kind of 'primitive communism' (Zharkevich, 2019). To understand the villages' economic composition that has radically changed over the last decades, we should instead investigate the accumulation schemes that have enrolled peasants into multiple world-historic processes. One way this has occurred in the Rapti zone is through development; as Paudel has argued, developmental

projects have played a role in producing developmental empowerment and revolutionary subjectivities (Paudel, 2016). However, this process has been a long-time in the making and has emerged from the long agrarian crisis and the underdevelopment as an ‘absence of options’ for the rural population, others have argued (Blakie et al., 1980). In Mid-Western Nepal we are observing a process of de-peasantization, as Khams and other peasants are becoming more dependent on non-agricultural labour and markets. While this suggests that the subsistence and non-agricultural economy co-exist in symbiosis; the reproduction of wage-labour through subsistence farming to support growing demand for wage labour, thus enlisting peasants into the process of semi-proletarianization (de Janvry, 1981; Sudgen, 2013), I argue that the lives of today’s peasants are much more ambiguous. In this section, I first navigate the complex economic landscape of Kham’s villages to show how households engage in peasant and non-peasant ways of living – and in the next section, I continue to explore the complexity of ‘uneven proletarianization’ through the lives of individuals in Rukum.

The Kham Magars’ livelihoods were mainly organised around transhumant pastoralism, a socio-economic practice that has rapidly declined in recent years. Kham shepherds use the communal highland pastures in the summer and migrate south towards the Mahabharat range in the winter to find grazeable land. Khams are well known for woollen weavings; their blankets have traditionally been sold on bazaars in the Terai and Kathmandu. Other items like woollen belts, sweaters and coats were produced and distributed locally. Sheep were also used to carry salt and other products bought in bazaar towns, thus generating income for the local shepherd-traders.

Khams’ semi-nomadic life, and the fact that their social history can be traced to the Tibetan plateau (linguistically and culturally), or more specifically to the Kham region of today’s central China, also indicates that sheep herding probably preceded and was more important than farming. Today in Kham villages, maize, potatoes, and barley are grown, and it is not uncommon to find cash crops, including cardamom and apples. However, due to the small amounts of arable land (around 10%), Khams still rely on animal husbandry, primarily cattle and sheep – while most villages have, for hygiene purposes, banned pig herding in recent years. Alongside herding, Khams make use of other subsistence techniques, such as horticulture and foraging.

Historically there has been little economic differentiation in Kham villages, as most households were engaged in either sheep herding or different forms of subsistence farming, giving them minimal opportunities for accumulating wealth. Most of the farmland still in use today was created during the early 19th century in order for the state to collect taxes under the new regime of *mukhiyas* (local tax collectors) (Regmi, 1976: 22). However, in the Kham villages where I have conducted fieldwork, there were no large landowners, and most of the land remained in the ownership of peasant families. The relatively equal distribution of land and property is still visible from today composition of the villages. It is evident that the wealthiest village peasants, *mukhiyas and pradhan panchas* (local tax collectors and village chiefs), have used their influence to appropriate more fertile and better-positioned land, but most villagers have access to arable land, which is used for subsistence purposes. Because the land was used for subsistence farming, the accumulation of profit from agriculture remained low.

The farming practices in Kham villages were based on horizontal solidarity and collective work. Although economic differentiation and commercial development have drastically changed the village's economic composition, as I note below, the kinship networks remain central to the economic life in the village today. During my fieldwork in Maikot, participation in solidarity networks became one of my fieldwork's central elements. Because the village economy permeates many aspects of social life in the village, my participation in my research participants' daily activities integrated me into several solidarity-based practices. Apart from ploughing and sheep herding, Khams use their complex kinship system (Oppitz, 1981) to establish solidarity networks to build houses. Traditionally made from stone, wood, and clay found locally, building a house is a substantial investment for most families. In order to gather construction materials, men from the family's extended kinship network are mobilised. The call for participation through kinship-based solidarity networks, used for both collective work and local resistance formation (a point I discuss later in the thesis), is not to be taken lightly and usually, everyone responds to the call. When Daya, a friend from Maikot's *Kanchabara* summoned me to join his wood gathering expedition (*dara katne*), he did not approach me directly. Instead, the word got to our *ghaarpatini* (landlady), Daya's sister in law, who had the duty to mobilise all men in our household for a three-day-long trip. Our task was

to go well beyond the village borders to the high hills that oversee the village from the north. While the V.D.C's forest committee charges a fee for cutting down trees in the village's vicinity, there is no fee to cut logs in the forest higher up the mountains. What seems impossible from the standpoint of the individual family becomes feasible with the practice of community labour solidarity. Daya successfully organised twenty men from the village, and together, we carried more than thirty wooden logs to the land he had recently acquired in the village.

The commons remain an essential resource for villages in Mid-Western Nepal. While peasants still use the commons and collective farming practices to sustain subsistence needs, these practices were much more important in the past. Due to other income sources, collective farming practices are being replaced by individual or household-based labour. While some households still farm together, the financialisation of peasant livelihoods and the subsumption of labour by capital have increased peasant dependence on markets. The peasant household underwent substantial changes; the most important was a decline in communal subsistence practices and a shift towards small-scale agricultural production and non-agricultural income forms (Panday, 1999). While in Rapti zone, this happened through the intervention of the developmental apparatus (Paudel, 2016), other factors of capitalist development played an equally important role. To analyse how the new economic rationality colonised the peasant household, a broader landscape of commercial chains, economic institutions, and different capital/labour relations should be seen as inter-related factors determining the contemporary peasant economic logic. In Rapti, non-agricultural income affected peasants' economic behaviour and changed households' economic composition that, in turn, generated a cash economy and a small consumer market that changed households' consumption patterns.

Food, clothes, medicine, tools, and fertilisers are now brought from Dang or Baglung and sold locally in several shops popping up in the villages. The expansion of commercial markets is related to road connectivity simply because the transportation costs drop significantly with the use of motorised vehicles instead of porters or mules. This created a network of hill bazaars, driven by the economic logic of small village traders and their efforts to bring the goods closer to the point of consumption. In Mid-Western Nepal, the commercial networks are quite visible when travelling by road higher up to more distant

places. In district centres such as Burtibang, Beni, Musikot, or Libang one would find big bazaars (*thulo bazaar*), a trading point that connects all the supply chains of the hills above it. *Thulo bazaars* are packed with construction materials, tools and electronics, and their supply nowadays does not differ significantly from the bigger cities. From these commercial centres, the commercial links extend to the villages in the hills, often creating one or more smaller hill bazaars, points where a smaller supply of products are stored to shorten the travel time from big bazaars. In this way, the commercial networks and road expansion projects move the goods from the valleys to the small consumer markets in the highland villages.

In Rukum, for example, Takasera is becoming a hill bazaar town. The road has reached the village in 2015, and in a matter of months, small shops have popped up mainly selling food, clothes, electronics and essential construction material. This has created a market that profits from sales within the village and from selling to villages higher up the route, like Maikot, Pelma and Khajarjang. The increased spending on consumer goods indicates that the village economies are more dependent on non-agricultural income and points to the ongoing transformation of peasant household reproduction patterns. The self-sufficiency of the hill villages has seen a significant decline. Previously clothes were made locally by the *damai* families (former tailor caste) from the hemp fibres that grow in the area in great abundance. Today most people buy the Chinese or Indian imports that make their way up to the village by road. The other visible change that comes with the market expansion is the change in construction material. Stone or wooden roofs become replaced by tin, and most local building materials and techniques are replaced by cement.

In Maikot and Takasera, most households today are involved in some kind of entrepreneurial activity, from selling *yarsa* and other medicinal herbs, running a small grocery shop or selling homemade alcohol. Migrant labour is the second most common income source, followed by farming, government, or private sector jobs. The absence of more substantial transformations in the agricultural sector and the increasing financialisation of peasant livelihoods created further dependence of peasant families on non-agricultural income. Although villages were mostly engaged in subsistence farming, here too, we should note an important shift. While most peasant families were occasionally selling farm produce, this did not present a substantial income yearly. In

recent years, the introduction of cash crops led the rich and middle peasants to turn their land into more profitable ventures and appropriate communal land to increase their profits. In Maikot, for example, influential families of the main Kham clans have been traditionally cultivating the land closer to the village while others cultivated land further away, up or down the hill. Such land distribution left little to no arable land in the village's vicinity for cash crop cultivation. Throughout the last decades, the village's economic composition drove the influential Khams further out of the village, where they appropriated communal land to plant apple orchards and other cash crops. Even today, it is not uncommon that some villagers cut down a part of the communal forest in the hills and use it for private agricultural ventures. While disputes have emerged, some Khams have maintained these plots of land to generate profit.

This indicates that while little economic differentiation occurred before the People's War, access to land and other local economic means have increased economic differentiation on the local level in recent years. Other factors, such as the expansion of the road network, and all sorts of economic opportunities, have reached the villages and play a crucial role in the economic landscape of Kham villages.

The Uneven Proletarianization of Peasants in Rukum

The life stories of Khams in Rukum and Rolpa effectively represent their precarious economic situation and the recent changes in peasant households' economic rationality. Although outward migration has been common in the past, the ongoing recruitment to the British Gurkha is perhaps the most well-known example, and migration occurred internally in Nepal, and to India, the narratives of the previous generation of Khams were still mostly bound to the region. The narratives of the generation that has lived through the People's War are more complex and reflect the multiplicity of new possible combinations with the world-historical processes. The subsumption of rural labour, the decline and commercialization of peasant livelihoods, and numerous accumulation strategies have increased economic differentiation in Kham villages and submerged the lives of peasants to a new economic logic. In other words, the lives of the Khams have long ago departed on the ambiguous journey from peasant subsistence farmers to becoming rural proletarians. This ongoing process has gradually dislocated peasants from the

village's economy and subordinated them to the imperatives of markets and the international labour economy. However, I do not wish to imply a linear transition from one class position to another, but I explore a much more uneven process through a complex articulation of roles in a representative narrative I found in Rukum. I draw on the narrative of Bharat, a man in his fifties from Pusar village. Bharat's narrative condenses some of these processes in his adult life span, most of which he had spent outside of Rukum.

Bharat was born in Pusar in 1964. The primary school in the village ran only up to the third grade, and to receive further education, Bharat would have had to go to Maikot or to Hukam, a decision his parents did not support. At the age of thirteen, in the middle of the third grade, disappointed by his parent's verdict on further schooling, Bharat stole 200 rupees and fled to Himachal Pradesh in India. There he found work as a wage labourer in apple orchards. It was not easy to sustain himself in India because the orchard job did not pay well, and Bharat soon decided to return home. For the next couple of years, he became a shepherd and spent most of the time in the highland pastures above Maikot, where the animals were kept. Taking turns with other shepherds from the village Bharat spend most of the time in *goths*, (small temporary sheds for animals and shepherds build on highland pastures). In 1982, his yearly income was 50,000 rupees (\$500), all of it coming from sheep herding. At that time, Bharat met a man from Dolpo who was interested in yarsagumba. "He suggested that I get into the yarsagumba business. I had never done the yarsa business. He gave me 900,000 rupees as capital to buy yarsagumba from pickers. That is how I first began trading yarsagumba", he recalls. From then on, Bharat was trading yarsagumba during the summer season and the rest of the year, he tended sheep. His yearly income drastically increased, and he recalls that at the time, he was making 10-12 *lakh* only from the yarsagumba business (around 1,200,000 rupees; more than 20 times the amount he earned in 1982).

"During the years before the Jana Yuddha [People's War] life was precarious. The small amounts of the *yarsa* trade were not sufficient to send my children to better schools", Bharat points out. When the killings in the area began, he decided to sell his animals and fled to Kathmandu, where he settled with his family for the time being. "In Kathmandu, I started a small grocery shop. I didn't make any money from that. Instead, I spent all my

savings to go to work abroad", Bharat remembers. After a couple of failed attempts that cost him dearly, he finally managed to get to Saudi Arabia. Bharat was one of the first people from north Rukum to become a migrant worker in the Middle East. He stayed there for eight and a half years, and according to his estimate, Bharat earned 30 *lakh* during that time (around \$30,000). "I used to water flowers and date trees that were planted on strips between highway lanes. I did that for the entirety of my stay there", he recalls. After spending eight years in Saudi Arabia, with only occasional visits to Nepal, Bharat returned to Kathmandu, but stayed for only for a short time: "When I came back on a break, the agent who had sent me there suggested I go to Singapore. He assured to get a work permit there and a job that paid 80,000 rupees a month. So I went to Singapore". After reaching Singapore, he realised he was a scam victim; the agent only provided him with a tourist visa. For the next two years, Bharat shifted between different kinds of illegal jobs but managed to sustain himself and send some money back to his family (earning an average of \$800 monthly).

Bharat's life changed in a second when he received a phone call from his relative saying that his wife had been having an affair.

"The relative told me that she had been neglecting our children, who were in boarding schools, and spending all the money I sent home on trips she took with her lover to Pokhara and other tourist destinations. I fainted hearing that. My co-workers had to pour water on my head to revive. I spiralled into depression. Fearing that I would die of mental illness, I returned to Nepal".

When the Maoists had already been holding talks with the government, Bharat decided to return to Kathmandu. His wife had hired goons to keep him out of her apartment in Kathmandu, so Bharat returned to Pular. He filed for a divorce and lawsuit against his wife, who cheated him of all of his earnings. Consequently, Bharat became a local Maoist supporter because he believed that the Maoists could help him bring the case to justice. Without any savings, he launched a new business that he still pursues today; growing apple trees. Bharat sold the apple trees to the District Agriculture Office during my fieldwork, which bought them in bulks and distributed them to farmers around the district. "The structure of life hasn't changed much: we're still mostly subsistence farmers", he argues. However, he observes the difference that has occurred between the two generations:

"When we were young, we were like the Rauté [an indigenous people who are still hunters and gatherers]. All we did was grow food and eat what we grew. We didn't earn any money whatsoever. What little money we made from our goats and sheep, we spent on clothes. Today, the young people of our village are going to Japan, Saudi Arabia, Europe and the U.S.. Almost every house has a member working abroad".

Bharat's narrative shows the complexity of the transition between subsistence farming and other forms of making a living. It shows the peasants' entanglements with the process of proletarianization and reveals the ambiguity of the term peasant, which evokes relations of production connected to family labour and access to land (Kearney, 1996). Bharat's narrative points out that in the last decades, peasants' narratives in Rukum have become a part of complex transformations that require empirical investigation that goes beyond merely describing the economic aspect of the de-peasantization process. Instead, I would like to point out a much more uneven process in rural Nepal. This unevenness can be observed in Bharat's narrative, which paints a picture of a non-linear transformation. From a subsistence farmer, Bharat did not become a wage labourer but has navigated between both processes throughout his life: peasantization and proletarianization, or to put it more accurately, de-peasantization and de-proletarianization.

Therefore, one way to explain the complexity of the definition of peasants in Rukum can be done by analysing the different roles individuals adopt during their lifetime to sustain themselves. This is the first step, as Roseberry has argued, "toward a deeper understanding of how peasants – as families and individuals – attempt to live in worlds they do not create" (Roseberry, 1983: 78). This aspect of analysis (role analysis) reveals the unevenness permeating this social formation; this concrete social reality is often left unexplained within the more homogenising conceptualisations of capitalism. What Roseberry proposes is not to abandon the concept of peasants but instead explain both forces; heterogeneity and homogeneity, or in other words, unevenness and combination. These narratives, some of which are also a part of my doctoral films, are what Roseberry called: "human results of uneven proletarianization" (ibid).

Such stories remind us that 'uneven proletarianization' as a lived reality is one of the consequences of the uneven development of capitalism. Subsistence farming, although it remains one of the peasant's life determining features, does not play its past role. It becomes only one of many possibilities for peasants to meet their subsistence needs.

Another important differentiation is emerging, as Narotzky observed: the distinction between peasant and farmer. The logic that defines the former is bound to the household's reproduction, while the latter expands its economic activity in entrepreneurial ways (Narotzky, 2016: 304). Again the distinction is not clear cut, and the peasant narratives often respond to both roles. However, while these contradictions and several other ambiguities that define the life of peasants today paint a very heterogeneous social group, Narotzky argues that these independent producers “are trapped in a continuous simple reproduction squeeze and pushed toward multi-occupational precarious livelihoods” (Narotzky, 2016: 311). ‘The multi-occupational’ journey exemplified in Bharat’s narrative represents the ongoing uneven proletarianization of peasants in Rukum. In the span of twenty years, Bharat has switched from being a subsistence farmer to working as a wage labourer in India, a small entrepreneur in Kathmandu, a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia and Singapore and finally become a village entrepreneur and cash crop farmer.

Chapter 7: The Maoist Diagnosis: Balancing the Social Movement Between the Struggle for Redistribution and Recognition

In the heart of Marx's thought, it is not only an idea to interpret the world; the task should be to change it as Marx has put it in *Theses on Feuerbach*⁴⁸. The history of Marxism is the foremost example of how ideas initiate social change, and it has indeed, as Marx had hoped, played a decisive role in the political struggles against capitalist domination. In turn, we can also observe how the world has affected and shaped Marxist ideas. Every Marxist praxis entails a process of forming political theory, an interpretation of the world, a description of 'what is to be done', that is paired with the application of these ideas in practice.

Slavoj Žižek, in his introduction to the works of Mao Zedong, has warned against the dangers of trying to locate "the fall" of Marxism in one of the various strands of Marxist thought. Instead of finding the culprit responsible for the deviation from what was once a more 'authentic' theory, he argues that we should instead fully endorse the 'displacements' of Marxist theory that occurred at least at two points: the passage from Marx to Lenin, and the passage from Lenin to Mao. Žižek adds: "In the same way as Christ needed Paul's 'betrayal' in order for Christianity to emerge as a universal Church [...] Marx needed Lenin's 'betrayal' in order to enact the first Marxist revolution" (Žižek, 2008: 2). In Mao's contribution, Žižek sees a violent but necessary act that expanded the idea of class struggle to include the invisible workers and peasants of the Third world. To commit such a betrayal, according to Žižek is to tear the original idea out of its context and put it into practice in a different historical situation. "Only in this way, universality is born" (ibid), he argues.

The history of communist ideas in Nepal and Nepal's Maoist project more concretely should be seen in the same light. It is, alongside Lenin's and Mao's contributions, a 'reincarnation' of Marxist political theory, which has in its way developed through the interaction of revolutionaries with the socio-political world around them. The task I set for this chapter is to understand this history as a unique body of revolutionary praxis in

⁴⁸ The famous last line of *Marx's Theses on Feuerbach* is: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." (Marx, 1888) <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>)

its own right. In other words, I argue that it is essential to ask the following question: how did the Maoists in Nepal differentiate their political theory from other 'branches' of Marxism and other experiences of communist collective action?

This chapter describes how Maoist praxis in Nepal attempted to connect class and non-class identity struggles throughout the social movement formation. First, I outline the history of Maoist praxis and identify the inclusion of class and non-class struggles as one of the central elements of the Maoist political project in Nepal. Then I make a slight detour by revisiting the question of Adivasi consciousness in India. With the help of Archana Prasad's work (2006), I relate to non-class and class Adivasi politics to show the importance of the 'structural alliance' between the two in the history of the formation of adivasi consciousness. I trace this framework to Nancy Fraser's (1995) redistribution-recognition dilemma, with which I rethink the balance between class and non-class politics in Maoist political theory in Nepal.

Class and non-Class Struggles and the History of Maoist Praxis

The CPN (M) was not the first party that developed a revolutionary path in Nepal's political history. Decades before, in the 1970s, a small group had initiated a series of rebellions that resulted in the killings of eight landlords. The so-called Jhapali group later gave up the Naxalite ideology and joined the multiparty system (Hachhethu, 2009: 46). The party renamed itself CPN (UML) and is today one of the country's leading parties. The transformation from a rebel group to a political party participating in the electoral system was thus not a novelty at the time when the CPN (M) was forming its revolutionary path.

However, the scale and intensity of the Maoist political praxis that spread through rural and urban Nepal were unprecedented in the country's history. It is a common feature of Maoist praxis to build broad alliances between classes and gradually progress through the several stages of the revolution. In constructing these alliances and building different kinds of resistances against the state (from rural insurgency to urban movements), the CPN (M) has played a double role. First, it has built an oppositional, anti-systemic movement, and second, through the ten-year-long insurgency, it has transformed this movement into a state ruling party and formed alliances with the political elite. In other

words, it has transformed itself from a small insurgency group into a nationwide modern political party. Caught between the two contradictory political approaches and often-incompatible political positions, the Maoists tried to navigate their political ideology between democratic politics, violent insurgency and cultural revolution.

In Nepal's Maoist movement, the two sides of Maoist political praxis, the theoretical analysis and military leadership, could not have been more distinctly embodied in their respective leaders. Baburam Bhattarai became known as the leading Maoist theoretician and ideologue, and on the other side, Pushpa Kamal Dahal was the movement's foremost military leader and strategist. The long history of communist ideas (see chapter 3) has shaped the political views of both leaders in a different way. As Aditya Adhikari has argued, this can be seen in the different ways they became the part of the communist movement:

“While Pushpa Kamal Dahal and the other budding Maoists learnt their doctrine through clandestinely distributed literature and training sessions in underground party cells, Bhattarai deepened his knowledge of Marxism during the long hours he spent reading history and politics in the university library while pursuing his architecture degree. [...] Bhattarai's Marxism, acquired as much through solitary study in universities as through activism, was of greater scope and flexibility than the doctrinaire variety propagated and debated in the underground communist circles of Nepal. His sympathies also extended to certain non-communist political forces struggling against the monarchy. Having been exposed to the intellectual and political circles of Chandigarh and Delhi, he was not, like other Mashal leaders, unremittingly hostile towards India” (Adhikari, 2014, non pag).

While Pushpa Kamal Dahal (also known as Prachanda, literally meaning ‘the fierce one’) was climbing the leadership ladder within the communist party and soon became the leader of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Centre), Bhattarai's path to become a Maoist leader was less straightforward. In the 1980s, he acquired his PhD from the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi entitled: *The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis* (2003a). When he moved back to Nepal in 1986, he joined Mohan Bikram Singh's Mashal party. Soon after that, Singh's party merged into the CPN (Unity Centre) under the leadership of Prachanda. While Prachanda became renowned for his charisma and military leadership, Bhattarai's work began to affect Maoist political theory profoundly. To understand their influence in the three decades of Maoist politics in Nepal, let me first briefly unpack the history of Maoist politics.

It would be insufficient to simply argue that we should consider only Prachanda's and Bhattarai's influence here; the Maoist political praxis did not emerge in a vacuum after all. Some ideas were inherited from a long history of the communist movement in the country and from abroad, from smaller communist parties, while some developed during the movement process, on party meetings, conventions and through revolutionary practice. Many activists, who were later involved in the People's War, became radicalized in the 1970s and 1980s. In Nepal, although parties were banned, communism at that time "inflamed the imagination of many future Maoist activists" (Adhikari, 2014: 4).

Marxist literature was gradually entering Nepal through several channels. Gellner and Karki write about the many Russian, Chinese and Korean influential imprints that were made available on the Kathmandu book market. According to them, there were three bookshops in Kathmandu where one could buy Marxists literature during the Panchayat regime: Mutual Book Centre, the bookshop of the founders of the Nepalese Communist Party, and Lalima Pustak Sadan. Maoist literature was also available at the Nepal-China Cultural Centre on New Road (in the old centre of Kathmandu) (Gellner and Karki, 2007: 383). The fascination with Maoism was also inherited from the previous generation of communists. Prachanda and other activists from the younger generation of the 1970s were building a political party on the already existing political praxis formed by the first generations of communist activists. The life story of the "father of communism" in Nepal is worth noting here, in short, to explain how individuals working from the 'underground' have influenced the younger generations of communists.

Mohan Bikram Singh (born in 1935) is perhaps the most important political personality in the history of the Nepali Left. He became interested in communism in the 1950s and founded the Communist party of Pyuthan⁴⁹ in 1953, where he set up a training centre, which provided ideological courses for more than a hundred people. The villagers complained that many of them were forced to leave their land. With his newly trained team of communists, Mohan restored the land to the farmers with negotiations and later by kidnapping the landlord and putting him to trial (Cailmail, 15-18). Soon after, the cult of personality of Mohan Bikram Singh began to grow. Apart from his politics, Mohan

⁴⁹ Pyuthan is a district in West Nepal.

became popular amongst young activists because he struggled against his father. As Mohan Baidya put it: “M.B. Singh’s aura came from the fact that he was from a feudal family, his father being the greatest feudal in the entire district. But because he broke away from his father and his family and embraced communism, the message he sent to the masses was tremendous. It allowed him to gain enormous prestige. The masses saw a miracle behind M.B. Singh’s actions” (Cailmail, 2009: 18). Mohan's personality and charisma were beneficial to the party, and he attracted many new sympathizers.

In the 1990s, Prachanda and Bhattarai were still members of the Fourth Convention (another name for the CPN(M) from 1974-1990) under the leadership of Mohan Bikram Singh. Political and ideological differences emerged and drove some of the party members away from Mohan’s sectarianism and dogmatism. The disagreements with Mohan’s political line, mainly connected with the parliamentary approach/armed revolution dilemma, eventually led to the formation of the Maoist project initiated by the CPN (M) (Cailmail, 2009: 30-32). However, Mohan’s personality and charisma were undoubtedly a source of inspiration and learning for the young emerging leaders such as Bhattarai and Prachanda. Soon, however, Prachanda’s political line began to build its political theory in opposition to Mohan’s party, and many of the activists that until then followed Mohan’s interpretation of Maoism joined the newly formed Prachanda’s faction. The gap between the two soon widened, and Prachanda developed his cult of personality that became full of contradictions like that of Mohan Bikram Singh⁵⁰.

Prachanda was born in the Kaski district and went to school in Chitwan. Although his family was of a high Brahmin caste, Prachanda came from a poor background. The first modernization wave that followed Nepal’s 1950s democratic experiment empowered exactly such people as Prachanda. Young men of that generation, especially native Nepali speakers from high-caste backgrounds, were able to continue their studies in Kathmandu and other big cities around the country (Adhikari, 2014, non pag). Soon after finishing his

⁵⁰ Cailmail notes that while Mohan Bikram Singh’s revolutionary career was devoted to communism and to an unrelenting struggle against the monarchy, it was also full of political disputes that led to splits within the party. Mohan dedicated his life to the party, but his personality and personal life began to interfere with his political work. The most notable dispute was regarding Mohan’s divorce with his wife and his love for another woman (Cailmail, 2009: 36). Similarly, it was the turn in the personal life of Prachanda after the war that has come into contradiction with his past role of the Maoist leader. The former guerrilla leader has since obtained substantial wealth and has build a house in one of Kathmandu’s wealthiest neighbourhoods.

studies in Chitwan, Prachanda, like many other future Maoist leaders, moved to Kathmandu to study at the Patan Multiple Campus. Adhikari notes that: “they belonged to the lower echelons of the class that the Panchayat elite sought to groom, which it did by employing them in the rapidly expanding bureaucracy and enlisting them in the modernization mission” (Adhikari, 2014: non pag). Before taking a job as a teacher, Prachanda worked on a USAID sponsored project. Soon after joining the party, Prachanda like many other activists, left his job to become a full-time revolutionary. After years of participating in the party’s underground activities, he began to position himself against Mohan Bikram Singh’s parliamentary politics and ascended the throne of the Mashal in 1989.

This event marks a significant turning point in Prachanda’s political career. His ideas put forward at the time and throughout the People’s War were synthesized as the leading ideology of the movement called *Prachanda Path*. It officially emerged as the leading Maoist thought on the Second National Conference of C.P.N. (Maoist). It was formed as the science behind the Nepali revolution, the revolutionary theory that Maoists have returned to in their speeches, rallies and party documents. In the founding document entitled: *The Great Leap Forward: An Inevitable Need of History* (2001), Prachanda writes down the foundations of his approach to revolution. On the ground of Nepal’s historical experience, this political line emphasized the need for Maoist politics as the only appropriate tool in the hands of the peasants. While diagnosing the systemic causes of oppression was derived from previous party documents (especially Bhattarai’s work), Prachanda Path became the main foundation of Maoist political praxis. It also brought a substantial change in political strategy. When the Maoist party realised that the strategy of protracted war in the countryside would not be sufficient to capture the state, Prachanda Path sought to incorporate “a Leninist-style insurrection into the strategy of protracted people’s war” (Adhikari, 2010: 232). As others have noted, it was: “a mix of the Chinese model of protracted war in the countryside and the Soviet model of armed insurrection in urban areas” (Hachhethu, 2009: 52).

Throughout the early stages of the movement, it was primarily due to Bhattarai’s and Prachanda’s influence that CPN(M) began to develop its approach to armed revolution and had split with a more parliamentary oriented Mashal. The process of starting a

people's revolution (*janabadi kranti*) entailed: creating a disciplined party with a strong army subordinated to the party's leadership and a broader alliance of organizations, groups and parties that would work under the control of the CPN(M) (Hachhethu, 2009: 45). Throughout this process, the communist movement in Nepal established its unique revolutionary character. In 2011, while he was still Prime Minister, Baburam Bhattarai was invited to give a talk at the New School in New York entitled: *What is the Relevance of Marxism in the 21st Century?* Bhattarai looked back at his long career as a scholar and revolutionary to explain what was, in his eyes, the main contribution of the Nepali communist experience. He stated:

“Apart from the class issue which traditional Marxism talks about - only the class factor cannot resolve the problem - we have to take into account the non-class issues also, like the gender issue, the caste issue, the nationalities issue. These need to be incorporated into Marxism, and then only you can mobilize the masses and make a revolution. That is what we tried in Nepal” (Bhattarai, 2010).

The ‘cultural’ and the ‘economic’ sides of political struggle have starkly manifested in Maoist political praxis. If we only look at the forty demands the Maoists addressed to the government just before the launch of the People's War on February 12, 1996, the theoretical division between the economic and cultural side of the Maoist oppositional project becomes very clear. Their demands were based on two main premises: (1) the democratic overthrow of the monarchy and the abolishment of feudalism, by default a redistributive agenda and (2) the establishment of a multi-ethnic federal socialist republic, addressing Nepal's long-standing problem of recognition of social groups living at the margins of the state, an issue of recognition. One of the central demands listed in this manifesto that would follow the abolishment of the monarchy was to hold democratic elections for a constitutional assembly and thus pave a path toward a new democratic constitution. Nationality and the right to self-determination became central to the Maoist struggle. Prachanda wrote in an article in 1995:

“There should be right to self-determination as theoretical foundation to end national oppression and discrimination. People of all nationalities get an opportunity to build their own future by themselves only under the right of self-determination.” (Dahal K.P., 1995: 104, quoted in Dhakal, 2016)

At least, in theory, Maoist politics seemed to have been equally divided between class and non-class politics, and the party had tried to balance them between, if we adopt Fraser's term, the politics of redistribution and recognition (Fraser, 1995). Later in the People's

War, however, the idea of the multi-nation state, the idea of ‘ethnic’ autonomy, became the central organizing principle for the Maoists. In the case of the Magars, although ethnic politics have been on the rise since the 1990s, this is indicated by the increased numbers of Magar ethnic journals, and ethnic activism soon became affiliated with Maoism (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2004: 113). By politicising the regional and ethnic identity, the Maoists have found a conceptual tool on which they could base Nepal’s federal structure. Lecomte-Tilouine has shown how the struggle for ethnic autonomy has been incorporated within the Maoist movement (see chapter 3).

Similarly, Sara Shneiderman has discussed how the idea of identity-based federalism became central to the Maoists’ claim to power (Shneiderman et al., 2015: 32-35). Ethnic politics began to play an increasingly important role in post-revolutionary Nepal and the constitution-making process, a topic that has been further addressed by several anthropologists (Gurung, 2012; Leve, 2011; Lawoti and Hangen 2007). However, I propose that in the narratives that focus only on the identity politics of the Maoist movement, other important building blocks of the social movement are lost⁵¹. In order to get a clearer picture of how Maoist praxis was constructed, I propose that it is worth revisiting Maoist political theory to see in how the Maoists theorized the relation between class and non-class struggles.

The emergence of Maoist politics of recognition and redistribution is perhaps best observed in Prachanda’s and Bhattarai’s analysis. The redistributive side of the Maoist political program was based on the political demands for abolishing the feudal monarchical state system. Central to this part of the Maoist political program was Bhattarai’s political-economic diagnosis of oppression that was based on two main premises: (1) the analysis of the feudal type of exploitation and the monarchical system, (2) the subordination of Nepal’s economy to the Indian and world economy. Bhattarai, drawing on the findings of key revolutionary figures, from Lenin to Mao, has described this as the semi-feudal and semi-colonial nature of the Nepali society. The main premises of this political program enabled the Maoists to later fully adopt strategies of armed

⁵¹ Another important point is that most anthropological literature focuses only on the ethnic and indigenous identities at the time of the conflict. Studies regarding gender and other oppressed identities (such as Dalits) have been largely absent from recent anthropological research of social life at the time of the People’s War.

struggle and protracted war and divide their politics across the spectrum of redistribution and recognition. Before I go deeper into exploring how the balance between the struggle of redistribution and recognition was interpreted in some key Maoist writings, I turn to the insights from the history of the formation of adivasi consciousness in India. I propose that Fraser's distinction between class and non-class identities within her broader framework of the redistribution-recognition dilemma is beneficial for a more critical evaluation of counterhegemonic projects.

Adivasi Consciousness in India and the Redistribution-Recognition Dilemma

By analysing the history of adivasi consciousness in India, Archana Prasad has put forward a productive description of the relationship between non-class and class identity in social movement building. She looks at the history of adivasi politics and distinguishes between three different types of adivasi political consciousness. The first type, which she dates to colonial India, is still primarily a non-class-based identity rooted in affirmative action and the internal differentiation of adivasis: this leads to the emergence of adivasi intelligentsia. The second form appeared as a class-based adivasi consciousness organized around a larger fight for land reforms. Although Prasad argues that the communist movement had its own process of resolving the conflicts between the class and non-class identities, this issue was never entirely resolved within the movement (Prasad, 2016: 315). She points out that the Naxalbari movement has insufficiently understood the conflict between the non-class and class parts of the adivasi consciousness:

“The Naxalbari struggles of the early post-independence period were examples which served as counter-points to state capitalism. But, in the process, they ignored the need to reproduce the adivasi consciousness in a manner that addressed the special sectional interests of adivasis. This in turn created the space for the mobilization of sectional interests on the basis of non-class adivasi politics” (Prasad, 2016: 333).

The third form of adivasi politics was based on both a multi-class alliance and non-class identities that took shape in non-exclusive and democratic adivasi consciousness. Prasad argues that this would be possible “through a dialectical relationship with and the embeddedness of this consciousness in mass organizations spearheading a broader class struggle” (Prasad, 2016: 333). Building on this argument, Prasad is well aware of the

power of producing plural identities that lies within the dynamics of capitalism’s cultural hegemony. The way she sees it, the political task for progressive social movements in India should then be to connect class differentiation to the inevitable and necessary process of reproducing adivasi consciousness (ibid). She proposes a structural alliance between class and non class identity formations, a form of ideological cohesion that would develop a greater potential for counterhegemonic projects.

Prasad’s thinking about adivasi consciousness is informed by Fraser’s redistribution-recognition dilemma that has conceptualized class and non-class formations outside of the binary matrix in which they seem to exclude each other. Instead, Fraser urges us to think about redistribution and recognition⁵² in ways that reinforce instead of undermining each other (Fraser, 1995: 69). In order to tackle this dilemma, she introduces a distinction between two types of remedies that can be applied to resolve either the redistribution or recognition side of the problem: affirmation and transformation⁵³. In this way, Fraser forms a four-celled matrix comprising of two kinds of ‘justice’ (recognition and redistribution) and two kinds of ‘remedies’ (affirmative and transformative) that can help resolve the binary logic of the class/identity dilemma. The matrix she presents is the following:

	Affirmation	Transformation
Redistribution	<i>the liberal welfare state</i> surface reallocations of existing goods to existing groups; supports group differentiation; can generate misrecognition	<i>socialism</i> deep restructuring of relations of production; blurs group differentiation; can help remedy some forms of misrecognition
Recognition	<i>mainstream multiculturalism</i> surface reallocations of respect to existing identities of existing groups; supports group differentiation	<i>deconstruction</i> deep restructuring of relations of recognition; blurs group differentiation

Figure 5: The redistribution-recognition dilemma (Fraser, 1995: 87)

⁵² Fraser’s analytical distinction is the following: when she is talking about ‘redistribution’, she is referring to practices of some form political-economic restructuring that try to solve economic injustices; when she is talking about ‘recognition’ she is referring to cultural/symbolic injustices that require cultural/symbolic change (Fraser, 1995: 73).

⁵³ It is worth quoting Fraser here in full: “By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework” (Fraser, 1995: 82)

Fraser tests her hypothesis by explaining how two injustices would function in a real-life situation: gender and race. She argues that people experiencing gender or race discrimination need both redistributive and recognition types of remedies to resolve the situation. However, if the remedies applied can be both affirmative and transformative, this creates a more complex situation. Affirmative redistribution in the case of gender injustice, for example, would argue for more jobs for women, but at the same time not address the structural problem of the number of those jobs. Affirmative recognition on the case of gender injustice, on the other hand, would put “the effort to assure women respect by revaluing femininity, while leaving unchanged the binary gender code that gives the latter its sense” (Fraser, 1995: 89). For example, to look at the remedy side, she places the socialist project in the second cell and states that the central dynamic is created by redistribution and transformation in such projects. Socialism, she argues, is usually aimed at economic restructuring, but it pays less attention to cultural recognition (Fraser, 1995: 86-87). For both gender and race, the best possible solution that can be proposed according to Fraser’s dilemma lies in the remedy that would entail socialism in the domain of the economy and deconstruction (that is, transformation and recognition) in the sphere of culture (Fraser, 1995: 91).

When brought into the arena of social movement studies, I argue that the recognition-redistribution dilemma can be helpful to construct a more systematic approach, further clarifying the dialectical entanglement between class and non-class identities in social movement building. Fraser’s conceptual matrix breaks down the logic of how different injustices brought by cultural or economic domination lead to different results through affirmative or transformative political action. This brings us to an optic that has been missing in the history of Nepal’s peasant and communist movements, where the cultural and economic domains have been particularly difficult to disentangle.

The Struggle for Redistribution

In his diagnosis of economic exploitation, Bhattarai has put forward two historical barriers that have prevented Nepal from industrialising and developing a capitalist economy; the transition as it occurred in the West. According to Bhattarai’s analysis, the first barrier is connected to economic coercion that has developed a semi-colonial relation

to India. This economic subordination has resulted in the ‘comprador’ nature of merchant and finance capital in Nepal. In Bhattarai's view, this dependency, created by the imperialist and ‘Indian expansionism’, is one of the reasons why Nepal did not develop a national capitalist economy (Bhattarai, 1998: non pag). By ‘Indian expansionism’, Bhattarai refers to a process of exploiting a weaker economy by a semi-imperialist larger economy. The Indian economy, in this case, can maintain dominance, but it cannot do so only by capitalist trade relations; therefore, it has to resort to other types of extra-economic coercion. Bhattarai contextualizes this in the case of Nepal – India relations:

“Indian expansionism has kept Nepal as its captive market, through a series of unequal treaties, force upon the weaker country at various times, taking advantage of the fact that Nepal is ‘India-locked’ from three sides, and that is largely through India that transportation, communication and trade connection with the rest of the world must take place” (Bhattarai, 2003b: 123).

The recent economic blockade in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquake can be seen as the most radical expression of India’s dominance over Nepal’s economic affairs. However, Bhattarai’s analysis does not rest solely on the power relations external to the national economy. He emphasizes the importance of understanding both the external ‘expansionist’ factor and the internal ‘reactionary’ class relations (Bhattarai, 2003b: 129).

The internal class relations are the remnants of feudalism, he argues. According to Bhattarai, Nepal is in the middle of the transition from feudalism to capitalism, and a large part of its economy is still haunted by its feudal past. This failed transition forms the central argument of Bhattarai’s semi-feudalism theory. According to his argument, the monarchical structure of the state and the underdevelopment of the productive forces are holding Nepal in a state of permanent transition to capitalism. What does this mean in the Nepali context? The main reasons Nepali society has not developed industrial capitalism and ‘self-reliant development’ lie in the fact that the economy is still largely dependent on pre-capitalist forms of exploitation. As argued above, the Maoists have determined that one reason behind this is the dependency on imperialist and Indian expansionist economic models (Bhattarai, 1998, non pag). Here Maoist theory wholeheartedly embraces the modernization thesis and develops an argument close to the articulation-of-modes-of-production approach (see chapter 5). The other reason lies in the internal relations of production, such as the unequal distribution of land and the

persistence of the landowner class, moneylending and the extraction of surplus through rent. Connecting the 'backward' relations of production in agriculture to other forms of capital in Nepal's economy, Bhattarai draws the following conclusion:

Historically, in Nepal, as the primitive accumulation of capital from agriculture and trade sector has been centralized in the hands of the big feudals of the ruling classes and an India based comprador bourgeoisie and because up until now they have maintained their hegemony over the economy, the development of a national industrial capitalist class has been inhibited (Bhattarai, 2003b: 144).

To end both the internal and external forms of economic exploitation, the Maoists proposed a politics of redistribution. However, the theoretical achievements of Bhattarai's economic analysis had very little discursive power outside the circles of radical and educated urban dwellers. A discursively more effective version of Maoist politics of redistribution emerged as one of the central features of the Prachanda Path. This political ideology has put forward an elaborated political program that reworked Bhattarai's political-economic analysis into political goals and strategies. Prachanda Path thus proposed the end of feudalism, nationalization of state resources, revolutionary land reform to end feudal land ownership (Hachhethu, 2009: 43). In the analysis of the Maoist movement, it is often neglected that it was the politics of redistribution that were especially attractive to the poor peasants in the areas of West Nepal. As one anthropologist observed the influence of Maoist politics of redistribution in rural Nepal: "People hear that communism is about the redistribution of wealth, and as most people in the area are extremely poor, this notion is very appealing, especially to disillusioned youth who turn to Maoism because it promises to better their living conditions" (Millard, 2002: 293). The Maoist party's land policies thus became an important resource for the mobilisation of poor peasants, especially in areas that previous land reforms have not reached⁵⁴. According to Prachanda Path, the Maoists have argued that "land should belong to 'tenants' [and] land under the control of the feudal system should be confiscated and distributed to the landless and homeless" (Thapa and Sijapati, 2004, 192).

⁵⁴ The Birta Elimination Act in the 1950s, and the Land Reform Act of 1964, had a great impact on land and relations of production, but these acts did not resolve the problem of landownership and mostly affected areas in central and east Nepal, but not in the West (Neupane: 2003: 292).

The Maoists ideas that followed this diagnosis of the situation radically differed from the strategies of other parties, which mostly relied on non-revolutionary politics that sought to reform the system from within existing state structures. The Maoists, on the other hand, proposed a revolutionary change in production relations. The more general redistribution agenda behind the Maoist idea of revolution was to end all forms of feudal oppression and transfer the power to a broad alliance of progressive forces (including the national bourgeoisie) to organize the mode of production in a less exploitative way. This would cause a transition into some form of state capitalism, which Bhattarai sees as a transitional stage in the progression to socialism (Bhattarai, 2003b: 155). According to the Maoist model, 'The New Democratic State' would not be capitalist or socialist; it would be a transition phase. In this phase, the proletariat's representatives would block the comprador nature of capital and simultaneously develop the country's productive forces. "When the productive base had been developed to an adequate level, steps would be taken to move towards socialism, and gradually communism" (Adhikari, 2010: 227).

The Struggle for Recognition

Unlike in India, where the Maoists have not paid enough attention to the indigenous question, in Nepal, national liberation was at the core of the Maoist project from the very start (Ismail and Shah, 2015). In February 1996, the CPN (M) published a document that outlined their strategy regarding the Janajati liberation struggle entitled: *Nationality Question in Nepal*. In this document, Baburam Bhattarai and Hisila Yami (also known as Parvati) outlined the historical background of the national question, and following Lenin, proposed the resolution of the long-standing oppression of Nepal's multiple nationalities. Even at the start of the insurgency, the Maoists have put the same level of importance to the struggles of national liberation and other non-class/identity struggles, which led them to a contradictory situation that Lenin warned against: "in addressing the National Question revolutionaries must avoid the extreme position of 'assigning absolute primacy to the National Question without a class perspective'" (Ismail and Shah, 2015: 119).

Yami and Bhattarai (1996, non pag) provide a political-historical analysis of socio-cultural forms of oppression and exploitation derived from Bhattarai's political theory. This puts the struggle for recognition in the light of the long-standing injustices that the authors

identify in the semi-colonial oppression of Nepal by Indian expansionism and British colonialism. The document describes the political history of state-formation that shows how this diverse, multi-ethnic and multicultural area was brought under the banner of one kingdom. Apart from these external factors, the instalment of the oppressive regime had an internal dimension. The formation of the state from the times of Prithvi Narayan Shah, throughout the Rana period and until today, has served chiefly the higher Hindu castes to establish a cultural hegemony over the indigenous population. The idea of Nepal, they argue, has been built on the dominance of the Khas nationality that has been able to dominate through enforcing their language and culture by making use of the patronage of the state, leaving little room for recognition of other minorities that were pushed on the margins of the state (ibid).

To solve the national question, Bhattarai and Yami propose what they called 'a strategy and tactics of a New Democratic Revolution', or in other words, a struggle for recognition that follows two premises. The first solution to resolving the national question is to solve the external problem, thus ending "all forms of imperialist and expansionist domination and exploitation" (Yami and Bhattarai, 1996: non pag). The second solution proposed by the party deals with the resolution of the nationality question within the country. The Maoist program at this point had envisioned an establishment of "a multinational and multi-lingual country and having accepted the principle of rights of nations to self-determination, proposed autonomy for different nationalities keeping in view the low level of development of the nationalities and other specificities of the country" (ibid). This idea later led to the Maoist backed political project of establishing a multi-ethnic federal republic that has been one of the main issues on the table in the post-war restructuring of the state.

While the Maoist movement has outlined the issues of ethnic discrimination at its beginnings and established a long-standing relationship with several ethnic organizations, it was the political ideology of Prachanda Path that capitalized on the post-1990 ethnic revival. Unlike previous political programs of the Maoists, where theoreticians such as Bhattarai have sought to balance class and non-class politics, Prachanda Path's ideology completely fused ethnic activism with Maoist revolutionary theory. In a very concrete sense, ethnic autonomy became one of the central demands of

the Maoists. Furthermore, Prachanda Path proposed the following politics of recognition as a part of the political program ‘Democracy in the 21st Century’: federalism based on ethnicity and region, and right to self-determination; end of all forms of patriarchal exploitation; abolition of untouchability; special rights for women and Dalits (Hachhethu, 2009: 43).

At the early stage of the movement, the struggles for recognition seemed to be balanced out by Maoist class politics. In this way, following Lenin, the Maoists have built a bridge between class struggle and other non-class struggles of the oppressed minorities. It was within the ideology of Prachanda Path that a more explicit identification with the non-class identity politics became a primary concern of the Maoist party. Instead of strengthening their struggle from below, the Maoists’ cultural politics undermined the struggle for redistribution. I argue that eventually, both the economic and the cultural sides of the struggle were pushed into the arena of recognition struggles and had since relied mostly on affirmative action. This created conditions that contradict the early Maoist agendas that sought to balance the structural alliance between class and non-class politics. By opening up the Pandora’s box of ethnic politics without a coordinated and theoretically grounded counterhegemonic project, the two sides began to work against each other.

Ismail and Shah have argued that it was the misinterpretation of the Leninist strategy that brought the Nepali Maoists to form separate organizational forms (such as NGOs and other ethnic organizations) along ethnic lines. By putting the non-class politics on the same level as class struggle, they have made their political project vulnerable to the politics of autonomy/identity that had gained a new dynamic in the neoliberal state. They conclude:

“Demands framed in terms of autonomy divide people, pitching them against each other, whereas unity in a broader class struggle has the potential to address both political demands related to the recognition of identity/indigeneity and economic demands related to access to resources and rights to redistribution, including, ultimately, control over production” (Ismail, and Shah, 2015:119)

By neglecting the dangers of ethnic politics, the Maoists have played into the neoliberal agenda of the ruling elites. The notions of indigeneity and identity politics have moved

away from the previous ethnic peasant movements, leading to the depoliticization of the struggle for recognition. This political project led by the Kathmandu elites has brought the identity project under the umbrella of the indigeneity and development discourses.

Dinesh Paudel has distinguished three distinct phases of ethnic politics. In the first phase, the sporadic ethnic peasant movements culminated in the Maoist revolution. In the second phase, the Maoists have failed to transform the demands of these movements and created a political project that would balance the economic and cultural side of the struggle. Paudel warns that in this phase:

“the Maoists’ engagement with the cultural aspect of peasantry was a new trend within leftist politics in Nepal. But the Maoists, however, failed to understand and mobilize ethnic discrimination and peasant exploitation toward generating transformative political change” (Paudel, 2016: 13).

The third phase is still going on today. After the 2006 peace agreement, ethnic politics dominated the politics of state restructuring. However, the decline of the Maoist’s political engagement in rural areas and counterrevolutionary power of the ethnic politics put forward by the elites consolidated the contradictory forces within Nepal’s identity politics (ibid). At least, in theory, the Maoist oppositional project sought to balance both the economic and cultural sides of the struggle. However, the political ideology of Prachanda Path had changed the Maoist stance on the issue and had increased the politicization of ethnic identity. The second phase of the Maoist movement has thus been marked by the politics of recognition that has deviated from the central tenets of socialist theory. As Fraser has argued, the socialist project should constitute of the economic side of the problem that should be addressed by the struggle for redistribution, and transformative action, while on the other side supporting the struggle for recognition in the cultural sphere. Although I argue that Maoist ideologues have correctly identified the relationship between the economic and cultural sides of their political struggle, the history of the Maoist movement has made a radical turn towards politics of recognition.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have revisited some of the key Maoist writings to paint a clearer picture of the Maoist diagnosis of Nepal's social and political situation. In particular, I have

identified the relationship between the class and non-class related struggles as the central features of the Maoist project in Nepal. This has been a long-standing topic within Marxist discussions, and as I point out, the Maoists themselves have referred to Lenin's ideas on how to resolve the 'national question'. However, I argue that the outcomes of Maoist praxis have failed to balance the politics of redistribution with the politics of recognition and created a political project that had worked against socialist politics.

By mapping the different threads and transformations in Maoist political praxis and expanding the model in which class and non-class identities are seen in real-life situations, I argue that Maoist politics have abandoned their initial commitment to politics of redistribution. I propose that considering Fraser's redistribution/recognition dilemma puts us in a better position to evaluate counterhegemonic movements critically. By incorporating transformative and affirmative types of political action to the two sides of politics (redistribution and recognition), I show that Fraser's matrix provides important insights into the ideological formation and political application of political ideas. Although Fraser's theory has been criticised precisely on the grounds of too clearly juxtaposing the politics of redistribution and recognition (Butler, 1997; Alcoff, 2007), I argue that this matrix presents a helpful way of thinking about how social movements connect class and other identity struggles in their political efforts.

With the help of this approach, I have shown how we can better understand key developments within the political praxis of the Maoist movement. However, class and non-class injustices are interconnected. While Fraser's matrix can help us dissect movement ideology in the abstract sense, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between recognition and redistribution in real-life situations on the micro-level. To analyse political praxis as lived experience, that is, to understand the contradictions of political consciousness, as a subjectivity that is always becoming, and as a potential praxis to change the historical conditions of existence, is the topic of the following chapters.

Chapter 8: Beyond Militant Particularisms: The Prehistory of the Maoist Movement in Maikot village

Introduction

The prehistory of Maikot village struggle became better known to the outside world through the memoir written by Surul Pun Magar, also known by his *nom de guerre* *Ajayashakti* (literary meaning: unconquerable power). In his memoir, entitled: *Andhisang Khelda* (Taking on the Storm, 2009), Surul takes us along on his journey through the People's War, from his youth spent in the village to his days in the PLA and to battles in several places around Nepal, that led him to become first a guerrilla fighter, and later a platoon commander. He writes in detail about his near martyrdom in the battle of Salieri and later treatment and exile in India. It is one of the more complete memoirs of revolutionary struggle written to date.

Marie Lecomte-Tilouine has based her article 'Martyrs and Living Martyrs of the People's War in Nepal' (2010) on Surul's testimonies of early village rebellions, incentives, and motivations to become a guerrilla fighter, and Surul's near martyrdom in Solu Kumbhu. Lecomte-Tilouine writes about the collective self-sacrificial culture of 'martyrs-to-be' and 'living martyrs', people like Surul who had survived the war and became living historical personalities (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2010). Summarizing parts of Surul's memoir, Lecomte-Tilouine depicts the early revolutionary experience of Maikot and its struggle against a brutal landlord called Uddhaman. This 'village class struggle' preceded the People's War, and escalated and reached the national level through the formation of resistance against local representations of the state and "probably helped to forge the idea that it was possible to fight the government with a small organization, by punishing and driving away its representatives" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2010: 10). Reading Lecomte-Tilouine's paper at the beginning of my fieldwork, I became interested in the local history of the struggle that evolved in the village of Maikot. To reconstruct a part of this history, I have conducted interviews with former Maoist activists and other villagers who lived through Maikot's Maoist transformation. However, Maikot's rebellious history goes further into the past. This story is told by the elderly villagers and tells more about the local history in the decades preceding the first democratic revolution of 1990 and the People's War. This local

history shows that village resistance before the People's War was not merely a spatially bounded particular struggle but points to a broader topography of subaltern politics that had already established political action networks. By looking at Maikot's history of struggle as a 'militant particularism', I show some of the limits of David Harvey's and Raymond Williams's concept. By opening the concept to a more relational understanding of subaltern politics, I aim to map the uneven landscape of revolutionary action in rural Nepal.

Maikot's Prehistory of the Maoist Revolutionary Action

Before the start of the People's War, Maikot was under the grip of a powerful feudal landlord from the neighbouring village of Hukam. His name was Bir Bahadur Gharti, known to everyone in the region by the pseudonym that still resonates today: Uddhaman. In the eyes of Maikotis, Uddhaman was a representative of the state, being the owner of the land, and one of the appointed tax collectors (*mukhiya*). In other words, Uddhaman owned executive and administrative power and was a leader of a large village community with ample resources. At different stages of his rule, he mobilised the police force to exert his rule and often acted outside of his area of jurisdiction. The people of the area knew from experience that he often misused power and brutally crushed any acts of defiance.

Maikotis and Hukamis had a long-standing border dispute northeast of Maikot, in a village called Pelma around 4-5 hours from Maikot's main village. Both villages claimed ownership of Pelma. There were several scuffles between the two already in the late 1960s, even before the time of Uddhaman, under the rule of his father Dev Gharti. The land dispute was inherited by Uddhaman, who acted even more violently than his predecessor. The conflict escalated when Uddhaman attacked and beat the *mukhiya* of Maikot (village chief) in 1971. After that, the long-drawn and ceaseless process of filing cases against each other began. However, Uddhaman continued to exert his ruthless power over his subordinates. The story goes that when he travelled to Baglung (then district headquarters) to attend court hearings in the case between Maikot and Hukam, he made every household in his own village work in his fields for the duration of the trip.

After a year of court proceedings, the then *Anchaladhis* (governor of the Baglung zone) decided to come to Pelma to settle the dispute. That was the time when the uprisings

against Uddhaman began. The reason for this was that shortly before the *Anchaladish's* visit, Uddhaman had for no apparent reason, chased a group of Maikoti herders and their goats out of the pastures in Dhorpatan, the common land that the villagers used for generations. Maikotis have decided that this has gone far enough and organized a group of people to beat Uddhaman in the presence of the *Anchaladish*.

When Uddhaman and the Hukamis came to meet with the *Anchaladish* in Maikot, the angry and organised Maikotis attacked them. After a fierce fight, Uddhaman managed to escape, although the Maikotis equipped with stones and sticks pursued him all the way to Hukam. That was the first blow to his authority. Before that incident, Uddhaman was confident that no one would dare to challenge his power. The day when Maikot stood up against Hukam for the first time changed the dynamic of this local dispute. It did not put Uddhaman down for long, but it had initiated a process of resistance that became later became linked to the Maoist organizing in the area. The struggles against oppressive landlords, as I show in this section, soon morphed into a more potent political force, and at this early stage, established networks for political action based on a shared experience of violence.

After this incident, Uddhaman's violent outbursts against the local population continued. I have collected several stories from Maikot and other places in Rukum that paint a similar picture of Hukam's *mukhiya*. People still remember today, how with the help of the local police force, he would beat up innocent people, confiscate local alcohol and steal chickens. In this showcase of power, young men fled to the forest to avoid the chance of being beaten up by Uddhaman's goons. Having to put up with this oppressive situation, the youth of Maikot decided to act back. They put forward their candidate for the position of Maikot's *mukhiya*, Chaya Bahadur Pun. Chaya was a young shepherd from an influential Magar family of the Pun clan that has always been at the centre of village affairs. In other words, he was someone whose family has been affected by the Uddhaman's abuse of power, but also a person who has also developed political awareness and the feeling for the injustice of the situation around him.

After Chaya, who was only 17 years of age, was unanimously elected as the new *mukhiya* of Maikot, he promised the villagers that he would act against Uddhaman and stop this

oppression that had been going on for decades. In 1984, Chaya and his supporters came up with a plan to go to Hukam and capture Uddhaman to bring him to Maikot for a public trial in which they would publicly denounce him as a landlord. The plan did not play out well, and Uddhaman again got away filing yet another case against the Maikotis, who managed only to ransack his house. After several successful attempts of collective action, in which people from Maikot had put forward all their grievances of theft, land misuse, and physical abuse, Uddhaman finally succumbed to the pressure. The violent landlord escaped to the district capital of Musikot, from where he could monitor all of his possessions and politically still influence village affairs. He entirely fled the village only when the Maoists took hold of the area. Chaya was hailed a hero and a leader with liberal views that were not rooted in the ‘old society’, which still worshipped discriminatory practices. From the local point of view, Maikot was considered to be a progressive village. “For the first time in history, we had opened up to the world”, Chaya reminisced on these events. In an interview I conducted with him in Maikot in 2017, Chaya has recalled these events by saying: “The Maoists claim to have started the People’s War. They can boast all they want about fighting for the people, but it was we who started a true class war by driving people like Uddhaman out of the villages”.

These events greatly impacted the political-ideological division in the area, some of which persist until today. The aftermath of this increasingly politicized dispute saw an emergence of two factions – Maikot on one side and Hukam on the other. After the People’s Movement (*Jana Andolan* of 1990), Uddhaman became a Nepali Congress supporter. It was then that he was able to establish a police post in his house in Hukam. In the light of these events, the people of Maikot started seeing themselves on the opposition's side and eventually began siding with the communists (commonly known as Janamorcha at that time). These events unfolded almost a decade before the official start of the People’s War and are today retrospectively considered the ‘real’ start of the insurgency from the local point of view. Surul Pun, who was participating in the struggle at the time, described the situation in the following way:

“After the election, different parties started voting campaigns. Mostly, our village was influenced by Communist ideology. They convinced villagers that Communism is for poor underprivileged communities like ours and all other aristocrats like Uddhaman belonged to Congress. Local communist members found an easy way to attract more voters; they simplified and said’ communism was for all common villagers and Congress was

Uddhaman's party'. That statement was enough to put villagers off the Congress party. However, in the parliamentary election held in 2048 B.S. (1991 AD), Congress won with majority. Once again, villagers felt defeated against Uddhaman, they started gossiping that Uddhaman's party won against our party. After that Uddhaman rose to power once again and suppressed the villagers, condemned local members and supporters of communist party".

The early politicization of the local conflict, the establishment of political action networks and the first successful resistances against Uddhaman created new political opportunities that reached beyond the arena of militant particularism. Dharma Pun, a villager who was also involved in the early village struggles, pointed out the importance of these events for further social movement building:

"Yes, that was a crucial event. I think that experience helped the Maoist Revolution gain momentum. People saw that if they united against an oppressor, they could defeat even the strongest of them. I would say the people taking the fight to Uddhaman and routing him, led more people to join the Maoists. They saw that victory was possible".

Even though, as we can see above, this narrative has been directly connected to the formation of the local Maoist movement, I argue that it is essential to consider the internal dynamics of political activity prior to the launch of the People's War. These early forms of resistance, the formation of militant groups, the election of new leaders like Chaya, and different forms of collective action against landlords point to a much more uneven landscape of revolutionary action. In the next chapter, I discuss in more detail how these histories and geographies of resistance became integrated into the Maoist movement. However, before I turn to that point, I would like to first argue for a more relational understanding of the concept of militant particularism (Featherstone, 2005).

Subaltern Resistance and Militant Particularisms

These uprisings that sprouted in several places in Mid-Western and other parts of Nepal show how peasant political consciousness was developing prior to the People's War. Similar uprisings that have emerged due to people contesting power in everyday life situations have been described with the concept of 'militant particularism' (Williams, 1989; Harvey, 2000) to show the specifics, temporality and scale (spatiality) of such collective action. Drawing on this conceptual basis, Cox and Nielsen (2014: 77) have put forward that these forms of struggle "emerge when a subaltern group deploys specific skills and knowledge in open confrontation with a dominant group in a particular place and at a particular time in a particular conflict over a particular issue". According to

Williams, militant particularism is based on the level of abstraction linked to a place, while more universal struggles can articulate their politics on another level of abstraction that goes beyond local experience (Harvey and Williams, 1995: 83). While it is true that later political action in Maikot developed through more complex organizational structures and different levels of abstraction, I argue that this does not mean that the struggle against Uddhaman did not already possess universal political demands. The local struggle against Uddhaman, as Maikotis describe today, became politicized through the election and other campaigns that have politicized the countryside. In this way, the Uddhaman supporters became members of the Nepali Congress, and this meant Maikotis began sympathizing with the opposition, the communists. Although this transformation brings significant developments into local politics and opens the door to further social movements building, I argue that the juxtaposition of particular/universal struggles present in Williams's conceptualisation does not pay sufficient attention to the complexity of the history of subaltern struggles.

The concept of militant particularism understood in this way implies that the political action of subaltern groups is limited in space and time, leading to a formation of political identities surrounding places and particular political issues. Featherstone (2005) has warned against such interpretations of subaltern struggles and argued that militant particularisms should not be understood merely as the 'building blocks of wider struggles', but as struggles that carry universal demands and create relational struggles and alternate geographies through their political activity. According to Featherstone, Williams's and Harvey's concept of militant particularism reinforces the global/local and universal/particular binaries. However, a closer look at subaltern struggles should not equate the local with the particular, and universalism as the political practice opposed to local struggles (Featherstone, 2005: 263). By analysing the 18th-century militant particularisms in London, Featherstone shows that these uprisings were a product of 'diverse routes and connections' that brought about more complex and relational political imaginaries that were ascribed to them (Featherstone, 2005). This reconsideration of the concept brings important insights into the political activities preceding Nepal's People's War. While the militant particularisms spread in geographically unconnected areas, the political mobilization that charged them most often came from a shared experience of

state violence. This formed a relationship between histories of subaltern resistance that articulated their demands against the state by opposing the politics of local actors. Although we cannot speak of a broader peasant social movement at the time, it was evident that these militant particularisms established complex political activity networks and addressed issues that reached beyond village affairs.

There is plenty of ethnographic evidence available to show that these were not isolated cases and that there were relational bonds of solidarity between struggles in different regions before the start of the People's War. Struggles such as the struggle against Uddhaman sprouted around Rukum and Rolpa districts in more or less politicized forms. On October 8, 1995, the local communist cadres performed revolutionary songs and dances in Gam VDC in Rolpa district. A clash between Maoists and Nepali Congress supporters followed, leaving 160 people injured. Following this event, Home Minister Khum Bahadur Khadka deployed 2200 police officers to Rolpa and Rukum to suppress these activities. Around 300 people were arrested, numerous were tortured, and over 6000 people fled into hiding (Adhikari, 2014: non pag).

Adding to this violent history of state formation, Sara Shneiderman (2009) has shown in the case of the Piskar village massacre that the increased violence of the state convinced the peasants to radicalize. The local histories of oppression and memories of violence were key factors that contributed to the formation of political consciousness in some places. Shneiderman thus argues that "the Maoist movement is deeply embedded in Nepal's violent history of state formation, and is a contemporary manifestation of the long-term interplay between politics and consciousness created by that history" (Shneiderman, 2009: 289). Both the Piskar village massacre and the case of Maikot, along with other such examples, show that the resistance was long in the making. However, the violent acts of the state would not have necessarily sparked acts of rebellion if peasants had not already developed their own critique of the state and established political networks that went beyond particularism. These struggles connected peasants to broader fields of power. Like Uddhaman in Rukum, other local power holders could mobilise the police force to achieve their goals. This helped forge an ideological opposition against the state, and the peasants began to recognize the position of power usually held by the Nepali Congress supported faction as the extension of Kathmandu's political regime.

However, in the shadow of the existing regime, the opposition was already forming. The Maoists (called Janamorcha or Mashal prior to the formation of the CPN(M)) that have been slowly forming their ranks in the countryside have recognised the efforts put forward by the peasants in Rukum and Rolpa and began building a social movement on the existing political networks and imaginaries. In 1995 the CPN (M), then a faction of the Unity Centre, decided to pursue the path of the protracted People's War based on the already existing struggles that the peasants themselves have put forward. They wrote:

“The class struggle launched by [politically] conscious peasants in the western hill districts, particularly in Rolpa and Rukum, represents a high level of anti-feudal and anti-imperialist revolutionary struggle. Despite severe reactionary repression and terror, the movement has not only managed to survive, but in taking a retaliatory form, has made a qualitative advance. This struggle has given birth to a new element in the Nepali communist movement and inspired us to become increasingly serious about undertaking armed struggle” (CPN(M) document, 1995: 11, quoted in Adhikari, 2014).

Soon, the preparation for the armed struggle began. In Mid-Western Nepal, the CPN (M) already had a significant number of supporters that they found among the dissatisfied and partially organized peasant population. The political legacy of the previous generation of communists that already existed in places like Thabang played an essential role in establishing the social base for the movement. The Maoists saw the hilly areas of Rolpa and Rukum as the appropriate places to launch the insurgency because of the already existing political tensions and the relative absence of the state. To their advantage and aligned to the Maoist theory, the region was populated mainly by poor peasants who were also oppressed minorities and had the greatest revolutionary potential in the eyes of the Maoist leaders. Before launching the People's War, the Maoists planned to consolidate the peasants' grievances and raise the level of political consciousness in the area by starting the *Sija* campaign⁵⁵. This was an attempt of the Maoists to get closer to the village population and start framing the movement by forming organizations through which the first cadres from the area became more active supporters of the struggle. In the next chapter, I discuss how the Maoist cadres mobilised the local population through the

⁵⁵ This party-led effort, that was aimed at heightening the revolutionary consciousness of peasants by integrating them into work units and organizations preparing for the People's War was named after two mountains that later became revolutionary symbols: Sisne and Jaljala.

different stages of movement-building, the lived experience of violence and other elements of village struggle. These bonds and the organization of resistance on the village and district level that followed convinced people to make a stronger commitment to Maoist organizations.

Conclusion

Maikot's early struggles were deeply rooted in the community's identity, and the political struggle at this early stage did not show a particular class character. However, the struggle against Uddhaman had reached beyond particular frames, from when the Maikotis attacked Uddhaman and the Anchaladish. In this way, the struggle was transformed from the struggle against a brutal landlord to a struggle against the state. However, it is not far-fetched to say that the 'repertoire of contention' described so far would not have led to such a wide-scale collective action that emerged through the Maoist project. It is imperative to make clear at this point that not every conflict emerging out of a shared experience of struggle is yet a class experience. Despite this fact, the shared histories of violence and the political character of local struggles against the state that reached beyond militant particularisms point to relational and connected histories of struggle, rather than just isolated cases focusing only on particular issues. To return to a previous point (see chapter 3), I argue that it is crucial to move beyond describing only the idiosyncrasy of revolutionary subjectivities. As Smith has pointed out by comparing the works of Eric Hobsbawm and Eric Wolf, the unevenness should not be connected only to the differentiation of peasant consciousness but to map the different variations of social relations emerging from the combination of the heterogenous peasant society 'within the overall social formation' (Smith, 2020: 129). The aim of the Maoist project, which has identified the existence of peasant resistance imaginary in rural Nepal, was to initiate a political process, a formation of class politics in an area where class structuration was fragmented and marginal. Without the attempts of the Maoists to create a wider oppositional front by bringing the long-standing grievances of the peasants under one umbrella of collective action against the state, these bonds of solidarity, political action networks that have been forming in rural Nepal could have worked against each other and failed to initiate a broader political movement.

With such an uneven development of social struggles in rural Nepal, it is worth considering how did the Maoist project manage to connect all the different scales of the peasant struggles? To fully understand the contribution of the Maoist project to the formation of political consciousness in rural Nepal, I further discuss how the movement process initiated by the Maoists unravelled a potential for wide-scale revolutionary action. How did the Maoists open up this potential for collective action in remote places like Maikot? How did they transform the small-scale peasant rebellions and related histories of resistance into a nationwide Maoist insurgency?

As I show in the next chapter, the outcome of this long process of formation of political consciousness was a qualitatively new understanding of the social world around them. The Maoists began connecting the relational histories of struggle and used the already existing political action networks to build the social movement below. In the following chapter, I take a look at this process with the help of the counterhegemonic framing approach. By looking at different frames constituting the early formation of peasants' critique of power and analysing the Maoist framing process, I unwrap the process of mobilization and social movement formation that led to the full-blown collective action against the state.

Chapter 9: Counterhegemonic Framing and the Uneven Development of Revolutionary Action

Common Sense, Good Sense, and the Counterhegemonic Framing Approach

In chapter 3, I discuss in some detail the formation of political consciousness in the case of the village of Thabang in Mid-western Nepal. Focusing specifically on the arguments put forward by Vinay Gidwani and Dinesh Paudel (2013), I argue that a Gramscian perspective on peasant uprisings reveals more long-term political processes which makes it useful for observing the complexity of the formation of revolutionary consciousness. Using Gramsci's lens, Gidwani and Paudel show how through the decades of the pre-history of the struggle the fragmented political positions, and complex relations between different groups on the local level became consolidated into a new common sense. For Gidwani and Paudel this means that there were political events and social processes that through different waves of political action carried these embryonic forms of political consciousness toward more developed critical consciousness (Paudel and Gidwani, 2013: 262). Gidwani and Paudel show how a pre-existing and fragmented common sense was made into more coherent demands and political action against ruling groups, through active engagement of activists and organic intellectuals (such as Barman Budha, Tul Kumari Budha and Samjhana Magar among others). The organic intellectuals were the ones, who within this heterogeneous and incoherent political world identified a 'good sense' that was later passed on through generations to a point where it culminated into a more coherent discourse of resistance (Gidwani, and Paudel, 2013: 260-264). Although, Gidwani and Paudel are referring to the longer period of uprisings, the results of a more fragmentary 'negative consciousness', it was in the 1980s and the early 1990s when the new common sense was consolidated into a more 'theoretical consciousness' that began to form broader alliances and discourses of resistance (Gidwani and Paudel, 2013: 268 – 269). While common sense remains the main concept for Gidwani and Paudel, they identify important developments on the local level that emerged as a 'critical consciousness of self', or what Gramsci would call 'good sense' (*senso buon*) (ibid).

Common sense, for Gramsci, is the conception of the world derived from the ruling ideology, “which is uncritically absorbed by the various social and cultural environments in which the moral individuality of the average man is developed” (SPN, 419). Gramsci calls it: ‘the folklore of philosophy, or the ‘philosophy of non-philosophers’. He continues to define it in the following way:

“Its most fundamental characteristic is that it is a conception which, even in the brain of one individual, is fragmentary, incoherent and inconsequential, in conformity with the social and cultural position of those masses whose philosophy it is. At those times in history when a homogeneous social group is brought into being, there comes into being also, in opposition to common sense, a homogeneous - in other words coherent and systematic philosophy” (SPN, 419).

Gramsci, thus understands good sense as a constitutive part of the common sense, that is brought forward and made clearer by a more homogenous political project from below. This ‘healthy nucleus’, a more unitary and coherent part within the fragmentary popular philosophy of the masses gives ‘a conscious direction to one’s activity’ (SPN, 328). In their contribution to the history of the People’s war, Gidwani and Paudel identify crucial events on the local and nation level that have made this part of the common sense into a more coherent whole. According to them this process was guided by organic intellectuals who were actively engaging in local peasant struggles and a variety of other political events that began to emerge in the region as political campaigns, boycotts of elections and programs of political and cultural groups. However, they also point out that the history of rebellions in Thabang, has a lot to do with the actions of ruling groups, who have continued to exploit the livelihoods of peasants in various ways. They show, in a Gramscian fashion, how the history of the subaltern is always intertwined with the history of the ruling groups, by discussing the role of the local tax collectors and their close ties to the Rana rulers. It is not a surprise then, that the first peasant uprising in the area, were directed against the local tax collectors (mukhiyas) and their “historically unprecedented tax demands, and because peasants chafed at the mukhiya’s autocratic reign’ (Gidwani and Paudel, 2013: 164).

Similarly, in Maikot and other places in Rukum, peasant rebellions against state preceded the Maoist movement. Although the intergenerational ties of the closely-knit Kham

villages contributed to the political consolidation of the Maoist ideology, the process of building the Maoist movement required interpretative work that has reframed the rebellious consciousness of the peasants. In other words, the key moment for the formation of the social movement was to identify a good sense, around which the Maoists were aiming to build a new culture of resistance. These efforts of the Maoist party were directed at building revolutionary associations and other movement organisations, enabling the peasants of Mid-Western Nepal to become a part of the movement process that began to incorporate different levels of abstraction and aligned the heterogenous peasant groups into a common political struggle.

In order to further elaborate, how local activists and Maoist cadres began to identify the good sense, I look at interpretative and other social movement building work at the micro-level of the movement formation. By adopting the counterhegemonic framing approach (CHFA) I look at how a more coherent Maoist counter-narrative was formed in the village of Maikot and broader. This theoretical fusion is informed both by a Marxist approach to social movements⁵⁶ and social movement theory. I borrow the concept of framing that helps me reflect more concretely on the interpretative work of Maoist politics on an ethnographically observable level. By drawing on my long-term fieldwork engagement in the village and extensive interviews with former Maoist cadres, I trace different moments of local organizing that enabled the Maoist party to initiate the framing process that drove people to action. I believe that bringing the interpretative framework of frame analysis into a Marxist approach to social movements can help us understand the complexity of micro-level political organizing and further inform us about the reasons for and progression of counterhegemonic projects.

By using the counterhegemonic approach, I do not wish to suggest that ‘contentious politics’ emerge without social interaction or any attachments to capitalism's broader

⁵⁶ Following C. Barker et al. (2013), I agree that social movement theory often loses the big picture and rather focuses on academic analytic categories rather than on actual social movement praxis. However, I also agree with the proposition that both sides (Marxism and social movement theory), have a lot to learn from each other. Therefore, I follow the attempt of Barker et al. in this chapter, to further advance the question: ‘How a Marxist approach to social movements might look like’ (Barker et al., 2013: 31). Moving from a more sociological understanding of the question, I try to contribute to these frameworks in the field of anthropology and ethnography, disciplines that have suffered from the ‘invisibility’ of social movements studies (Escobar, 1992: 396).

dynamics. On the contrary, I look at the struggle over meaning as one of the fundamental parts of the hegemonic process⁵⁷. Furthermore, we have to acknowledge that movements do not evolve out of thin air. Throughout the first part of the thesis, I have outlined some of the cultural/ideological, historical and economic trajectories that should be considered in Nepal's long state-formation process. I have shown that there are links between the socio-cultural history of the Nepalese peasantry, the uneven development of capitalism and the peasant political consciousness. This chapter aims to look at how a social movement at the margins has deliberately contested the social world around them and created a 'movement process' that I describe as the uneven development of revolutionary action.

The Counterhegemonic Framing Approach

In the period preceding the People's War, there was a phase of social movement building that could be referred to as the 'movement process'. This process consists of theorising collective action and different forms of political action such as interpretation of grievances, staging protesting activities and putting together other violent and non-violent elements of collective action (Cox and Nielsen, 2014: 72). Klandermans and other social movement scholars have described a similar process of forming collective action by borrowing the concept of 'framing' initially coined by Erving Goffman to describe how individuals describe reality⁵⁸. Klandermans brings it to use for social movements, arguing that it is "a process in which social actors, media and members of a society jointly interpret, define and redefine states of affairs" (Klandermans, 1997: 44). In this sense, I argue that framing can be used as a conceptual tool to help anthropologists understand oppositional interpretative practices that bind social movements together. Frames become master frames, counterhegemonic narratives, and discourses of resistance in

⁵⁷ As William Roseberry has proposed, we should not use the concept of hegemony to understand consent but more importantly to understand struggle. We should use the concept to analyze "the ways in which the words, images, symbols, forms, organizations, institutions, and movements used by subordinate populations to talk about, understand, confront, accommodate themselves to, or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself" (Roseberry, 1994: 360-61).

⁵⁸ In 'Frame Analysis' Goffman describes the process of using frames to describe how individual's social experience is organized. Although this concept, as Fredrick Jameson has pointed out, is full of contradictions, it does reveal "the reality of the collective beneath the appearance of individual experience, the disclosure of the individual subject as a field of multiple forces, not a substance but a locus, a nexus, of sheer relationships" (Jameson, 1973: 131).

their more comprehensive form⁵⁹ (Cox and Nielsen, 2014: 93). Snow and Benford have argued that the concept of framing does not try to move beyond the “description of movement ideology”⁶⁰, and in my view, this makes it a useful concept to help us investigate the formation of subaltern meanings on the micro-level. Borrowing the conceptual groundwork of framing and putting it to use within a Gramscian theoretical field, the counterhegemonic framing approach (CHFA) helps us address the uneven processes of social movement building, or in other words, the contradictions of social movement praxis, on an ethnographically observable level.

To put it in Gramscian terms, CHFA studies the interpretative work of movements that Gramsci understood as the conceptual difference by juxtaposing ‘common sense’, the rationale of the dominant groups, to the ‘good sense’ the practical ideology emerging out of everyday life experience of subaltern groups. The critical question here is how collective action is formed and framed, not in isolation, but in relation to the logic of the hegemonic projects of ruling groups. It should be understood, returning to Roseberry’s articulation of the same question, as the failure of the state to create a ‘common discursive framework’. Roseberry rephrases Gramsci’s question of how hegemonic rule is formed by asking how did a ‘new language of contention’ emerge within the ‘field of force’, a process of domination that shapes both ‘the state’ and ‘popular culture?’” (Roseberry, 1994: 366). Following Roseberry’s idea that subaltern resistance is never fully autonomous, CHFA should then provide a discursive map of the subaltern’s ‘language of contention’. In this sense, I do not use the framing approach to conceptualise the movement process as an autonomous process that has organized some kind of authentic revolutionary experience. On the contrary, I show how experiences are never authentic and always already constituted by language, culture or discourse.

⁵⁹ While frames refer to the lived social experience of social movement participants, it is usually only at the higher level of abstraction, at the level of the discourse of resistance, that the arguments for change and a formation of a different world are bind with a set of collective social movement practices (Cox and Nielsen, 2014: 93).

⁶⁰ To the critique that the concept of framing blurs the understanding of the more political concept of ideology. Snow has responded that the two are not mutually exclusive. Snow emphasized that the use of this concept was to move away from the tendency to “treat meanings or ideas as given, as if there is an isomorphic relationship between the nature of any particular set of conditions or events and the meanings attached to them’, to the analytical tasks of examining the “production of meaning” – in other words the “signifying work” we referred to as “framing” (Snow and Benford, 2005: 3).

The struggle for meaning is, therefore, two-fold. On the one hand, the meanings are generated by dominant groups and shape the world we are a part of, and on the other, subaltern groups are themselves the makers of meanings⁶¹. I argue here that framing introduces a new kind of dynamics to the ideological on the micro-level and is a powerful conceptual tool in analysing the processes of signification that social movements are concerned with. Instead of focusing only on subaltern agency, I look at the process of meaning construction on the grassroots level; in other words, the ‘politics of signification’ (Hall, 1997) of the Maoist movement. Following scholars that have integrated the framing approach within theories of hegemony (Carroll and Ratner 1996; Maney, Woehle and Coy 2005, Smith and Weist 2012; Hardnack, 2019), I explore how frames are constituted and situated within existing hegemonic relations. In this sense, what I am exploring here, is close to what Harvey called ‘loci of consciousness formation’ (Harvey quoted in Cox and Nielsen 2014: 92). Collective action frames, as all meanings, are contested processes and should not be conceptualized outside theories of hegemony. The strength of this conceptual fusion, as Hardnack proposes, is that “the framing perspective provides an entry point for an empirical analysis of how social movements engage in counterhegemony” (Hardnack, 2019: 209).

Building Trust and Reframing Local Political Struggles

In preparation for the People’s War, building political organizations in the villages of rural Nepal was the main priority of the Maoist party. The Maoist’s first attempt to consolidate the fragmented village struggles in Mid-Western Nepal was to launch the *Sija* campaign to prepare for the People’s War. Aditya Adhikari described the campaign in the following way:

“Party cadres from all over the country came to learn from the activities in those districts and emulate them when they went back to their own areas. They travelled to villages across Rolpa, Rukum and also to the district of Jajarkot, to build roads, toilets and water taps side by side with the locals. Mass meetings were held where party leaders explained that it was necessary to violently confront the ‘reactionary’ state power, and cultural troupes filled

⁶¹ It is worth returning to Voloshinov’s view from *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929), to understand how the struggle for meaning is going on at the level of a sign. The sign itself becomes an arena where social interests of groups are continuously contested, and thus the sign can be articulated with different ‘accents’. In other words, in Voloshinov’s theory of language the sign itself is a site of ‘class struggle’.

these political messages with emotive force through songs and dances.” (Adhikari, non pag.)

The Sija campaign aimed to bring the Maoists closer to the local population by showing solidarity with their ongoing struggle. However, it would be insufficient to say that villagers were simply convinced to join efforts with the Maoist party through this campaign. Campaigns like this should rather be seen as a process of negotiation and learning in which the local population, too, played an active role in widening the scope of collective action. Before I address the local formations of the Maoist movement, I would like to bring to light the issue of trust as the first step of the Maoist social movement building. In Maikot, as well as in other places, the issue of gaining trust was an essential step for outsiders that wished to enter the arena of village politics. Shneiderman, for example, addresses the importance of trust in Maoist social movement praxis by analysing the story of the political activist in the Piskar village named Bohara. She argues that Thangmi villagers saw the Maoist activists as “big people” from outside that were not as well integrated into the village affairs as the “big people” who have already been a part of the struggle in the village. Thus, the locals did not immediately entrust Bohara, mostly because he was not a Thangmi. Only when he proved himself with his actions, the villagers began to believe that he would not exploit their trust, Shneiderman argues (Shneiderman, 2009: 298).

A similar logic of building trust with the local population was taking place in Rukum. A former Maoist activist from Maikot disclosed that CPN(M) had been aware of the issue of gaining trust with the local population. Acknowledging the fact that the local population would trust cadres of their own ethnicity more likely than complete outsiders, Maoist cadres paid more attention to ethnic solidarity during early days of campaigning in villages:

“The strategy at the time was to send cadres of a particular ethnicity into areas where their ethnicity was in the majority. Gurung and Magars went to Gurung and Magar areas, and so on. I spent a year in those districts as a member of the Gorkha Jilla Samiti [District Committee] [...] The bonds were stronger between people of the same ethnicity, so it was easier to work for us if we were amongst our own ethnic people. Outsiders were not easily accepted by the communities. Locals didn’t want to form associations or listen to leaders who were from a different ethnic background. Our logic was that it would be easier to build on the solidarity being from the same ethnic group.

Following this strategy, the Maoist goal was to build trustworthy political alliances in the villages they visited in order to be able to employ other strategies of social movement building. After the trust was established, they held political meetings and trainings that built on the existing frames of injustice, integrated the local rebel leaders and organic intellectuals into the Maoist movement, and built Maoist organizations that would facilitate different parts of the heterogenous framing process. Among these strategies, the integration of local leaders into the Maoist organizations was the first and most crucial step in the early phases of movement-building. Thabang is the most eloquent example of the almost complete integration of a whole generation of village activists into the Maoist party (Gidwani and Paudel, 2013). Even before the launch of the People's War, local leaders became directly integrated into the Maoist party structures, and with their help, the local struggles were reframed for the Maoist counterhegemonic narrative. Influential villagers such as Santosh Buddha, the son of Barman Buddha, the rebel leader from the 1950s, became influential Maoist cadres on the local and national levels.

Although the *Sija* campaign reached all the way up north to Maikot, the continuation of the local struggle was less straightforward. The local organic intellectuals connected to the long history of village struggle against Uddhaman have been considered the 'big people' (*thulo mannche*) and have built the trust with the locals that saw them as leaders capable of managing the current political affairs. Chaya Bahadur Pun, for example, is still considered an 'enlightened' *Pradhan Pancha* (village chief), a leader of the old regime that has himself started to implement changes that have altered some processes of oppression. Like in Thabang, in Maikot, the Maoists' primary strategy was to integrate the local organic intellectuals into the local party structures and reframe the long history of struggle according to Maoist political theory. Chaya, who was already an established yarsagumba trader, was contacted by the local Maoist leaders, who tried to set up a meeting to recruit him into the party. However, for reasons unknown, the meeting never happened. Later Chaya found out that because of his reluctance to collaborate, he was labelled as a 'reactionary force' and was not seen anymore as a progressive leader, and for this reason, the Maoists have planned to assassinate him. It was not unusual that the Maoists labelled the leaders from the old regime as enemies to the Maoist cause. However peculiar to this case, although he was a part of the rural elite, Chaya was also a leader of

the peasant resistance. The Maoists planned to assassinate him out of the fear that he might be working for the state forces. The story goes that a Maoist leader found out about these plans and told the guerrillas: “What could you possibly achieve by killing someone like Chaya? If you kill him, Maikot will lose its identity and character.” This intervention saved his life, and Chaya remained in the village as an ordinary villager.

The Maoists then, in the case of Maikot, could not wholly rely on the collaboration of the “big people”, like in the case of Thabang. This meant that the Maoists initiated the framing process in Maikot without the participation of local political leaders that would have enabled a complete continuation of the political struggle that has preceded the Maoists. However, while some leaders (aligned to Chaya) have refused to collaborate, other influential villagers were eager to become a part of the Maoist party. Makar B. Gurung, one of the youth leaders in Maikot, recalled this period as ‘the time of forming organizations’. “I trained people to use weapons, make grenades and gunpowder, and guerrilla warfare tactics”, he explained. He continued:

In 1995, when the *Sija* campaign had started, I became the commander of Surakchya Dal (Protection Unit). In Bhadra of 2053 B.S. (August 1996) a training was held for the soldiers. Squads, platoons, divisions and companies were formed. I and two others – Ram Buda (Birata) and Om Prakash Shrestha – became squad commanders. After a while, I was called back from military duty to take over association building responsibilities. Thus, began a phase of giving speeches, forming associations and organizing gatherings.

In most villages in Rukum, the Maoist-led *Sija* campaign can be considered the *de facto* start of the Maoist framing process. Although in some villages, underground Maoist activities have been going on, and others (such as Thabang) had gone through a longer history of communist activism, it was the *Sija* campaign that for the first time brought the villagers and Maoist cadres together in larger numbers. In Maikot, for example, the first Maoist cadres came to the village in 1993. Two villagers from Hukam village, Om Prakash and Rakhéman, came to Maikot to recruit members for the Jana Morcha Party. A couple of villagers joined, and a local party cell was founded, but this had not yet been enough to facilitate a more coherent Maoist framing process. In the interviews I conducted in the villages in north Rukum (mostly in Maikot and the surrounding area), people often referred to the *Sija* campaign that reached the area two years later as their first real interaction with the Maoist political world.

The Framing Process in Maikot's Maoist Village Organizations

Even though not all rebel leaders began collaborating with the Maoists, the Maoists proceeded with their activities. In Maikot and other villages in Rukum, the goal of the Maoists was to form organizations that would enrol peasants into different forms of collective action based on their 'class' identity. However, class (*varga*) was treated quite differently on the village level compared to how it was described in Maoist political writings. In Maikot, for example, class was first defined by elaborating the opposition between *sashak varga* (ruling class) and *shramik varga* (working/labor class). Through this particular framing, Uddhman was considered a part of *sashak barga* and a *samanti* (feudal lords/feudal class). When forming village organizations (also called 'associations'), the Maoists further categorized social and economic categories according to a person's *varga*. There was little class differentiation in the social composition of Kham villages; this made it difficult to distinguish between poor peasants, middle peasants, and other class or sub-class categories of rural Nepal's. Instead, the Maoists broke down the mobilization process into units to initiate the framing process closer to one's position within the village society.

The formation of village and district level organizations sustained the interpretative work of the Maoist cadres. This process drew a line between the conceptual level of the socio-economic categories found in Maoist writings and their political application on the village level. Shortly after the *Sija* campaign, the local Maoist cadres, with the help of outsiders that stayed in the area, continued with the framing process in the newly established Maoist village organizations. In Maikot, like in other villages, the organizations formed were peasants, workers, women, and students' organisations. While these organizations began to mobilise villagers and facilitated the Maoist framing process, there were also early formations of the PLA. In Maikot, a small group was formed that ensured the protection of Maoist members from the police and planned the first attacks against feudal landlords. It was called *Surakchhya Dal* (Protection Party), and it operated secretly. Another organization that became radicalized quickly and later brought many recruits into the PLA was the Students Association. Makar B. Gurung described his experience with working for the Students Association in Maikot in the following way:

Between 1988-89, I was also a committee member of the Students Association, so I used to go to student gatherings and conferences to express support. We wanted to transform the exploiters and feudal figures of our society. If they did not change their ways, we were determined to chase them out of our villages. This was the goal of revolutionary student associations. You have fervour when you are young. The situation was such that the loan that a man had taken would not be repaid even though he, his son and his grandson had worked for the moneylender. We used to speak out against such practices, against untouchability. We said these things should not happen. We wanted the people to awaken and understand. We wanted untouchability to end. We wanted access to education for all. I used to teach adults together with my students at night, under the light of kerosene lamps.

Several former Maoist guerrillas began their journey in the Maoist ranks in this way. In the interviews, many ex-combatants reported that they joined the student association in secrecy and began studying revolutionary literature in the cover of the night, usually under the supervision of an older cadre. These activities constituted a village ‘underground’ political world that became very appealing for young Khams. While many went underground (*bhumigath bhayo*) in the night, the students also formed a group of cadres that would stay ‘above the ground’ (*suragi*) and inform the Maoists about police activities. Dharma, one of the groups’ cadres, reflected on some of the activities this group was in charge of:

“We informed the Party of the police’s plans. If we knew that the police was going to a certain place, we would warn the cadres not to go in that direction on that day. We had won the police’s trust. We knew about their timings and habits; what time they went on night patrols, and which nights they did not patrol at all. When we knew it was safe to hold meetings, we gathered members of the various associations and briefed them about events and happenings. We also advised them about when and where it would be safe to hold meetings. We also got circulars from the Party, based on which we mobilized the members of the women’s, student’s and farmer’s associations. We secretly collected food in the villages and supplied it to the PLA. We printed and disseminated posters and pamphlets for the Party. Because we never left the village, the police thought we possibly couldn’t be responsible for sticking posters and pamphlets on the walls.”

While ‘going underground’ (*bhumigath bhayo*) was usually used in the context of joining the PLA and becoming a full-time guerrilla fighter, in the context of the early Maoist activities in the village, it is worth considering that many village cadres that have joined the Maoist organizations readily shifted between the two types of activities: ‘underground’ and ‘above the ground’. Most former PLA combatants I interviewed in Maikot joined the Maoist ranks by first being a part of Maoist-led village associations. While they soon went underground to become ‘whole timers’ (an expression used to refer to a full-time Maoist cadre), there was usually a period of performing a combination of different activities.

These cadres, for example, made sure that the collaboration between different associations was taking place; they would distribute materials and news and act as informants.

Not all of the work of Maoist associations was of such political character, and some activities could be performed in broad daylight. There were around 16 or 17 farmer units in the village, each one comprising nine members. A unit worked together at a time producing food for the underground cadres. Apart from this, the farmers would also contribute by donating grain or money after a harvest. This was called *mausami chanda* (seasonal donation). The money and the grains were collected and stored in a separate place in the village to be later collected by the underground cadres. Although the food was produced during the day, it was picked up in secrecy and far away from the attention of the local police force. Dharma Pun that joined several Maoist associations in his youth, further described the activities of the farmers and women's association in the following way:

The women's association would spin thread from wild nettle, weave blankets and clothes from wool that sheep farmers contributed. They gave these items to the PLA and other Party cadres who had gone underground. The farmers took turns to work collectively in one another's fields. It was almost like a commune. The farmers collected 25 rupees per head from every farmer and donated the sum to the Party.

Among others, Surul Pun also joined the Young Communist League (YCL) in 1995. As a part of the *Sija* campaign, a Maoist cadre called Bijay Ghalé from Rukum District had come to Maikot to work on public service projects. During that time, Bijay's group gathered some of Maikot's youth and formed a YCL group in Maikot. Surul was one of its founding members, and he also became a member of an organization called *Sisné Sanskritik Samaj* (Sisné Cultural Society), which followed the establishment of the YCL, and quickly became very popular in Rukum at the time. Their members used to go from village to village, performing dances and singing songs on proletarian and progressive themes. "Like everyone, I was fascinated. I felt revolution was indeed the way to bring about progress and change", Surul pointed out. In an interview I conducted with Surul in 2018, he remembered the days before becoming a part of the PLA, when he travelled to villages around Rukum as a member of the *Sisné Sanskritik Samaj*:

In a way, I was a performing artist. That's what we were called anyway. We had fun performing in the villages. In Kartik of 2052 B.S. [October 1995], we fund-raised for the village school. We wanted to upgrade our school to the secondary level, but we didn't have the funds for it. So, we played Bhayeli [a tradition of the Tihar festival, in which groups go around a village or town singing songs that wish for prosperity and good luck for the owners of the house in whose premises they are performed]. In the same year, we also performed to raise funds for the Party. Gradually, as we listened to the speeches of our senior Party members and discussed politics, my interest in politics grew. We learned about revolutionary wars in countries like Peru, the Philippines and India's Andhra Pradesh, about communist rule in China and Cuba. We were told about the administrative systems of communist regimes, that that was the kind of governance the Maoist Party wanted to establish in Nepal. Under that system, there isn't a division between the rich and the poor; even a peasant can access political power, can be an equal citizen of the state. We were told that unlike in the past, we wouldn't need to look up to kings and rulers as if they were Krishna Bhagwan [a Hindu god]. And it was indeed true. Our forefathers had writhed under the weight of injustice and oppression of the old governance system. We decided we had to do something about it. Gradually, our political awareness increased.

The Maoist strategy was to divide the local cadres into three categories: the PLA, the village associations, and those who would work for the Party while living in the village. While most interpretative work was done in the associations preceding the People's War, all three types of local organizing played an essential role in the framing process. Collective action frames are not static but are a "dynamic, ongoing process" that "does not occur in a structural or cultural vacuum" (Snow and Benford, 628). The framing process is affected by the movement's internal dynamics, by the socio-cultural context in which it functions, and by other powerful actors that constantly contest and undermine the validity of social movement frames. By pointing this out, I wish to further elaborate on the internal dynamics of the framing process in Maikot. I argue that the Maoist-led organizations on the local level were creating a counter-hegemonic narrative and, in this way, gradually integrating the peasants into the political network of the Maoist party.

The Subaltern Counterpublics and Becoming a Maoist in Maikot

Becoming a Maoist was not a process that could be condensed into a single event. For most Khams, it was a long period usually spanning over several years that involved different modes of being, personal histories and experiences of collective action – a topic I further explore in the following chapters. However, a foundation for the movement's collective action frames began to emerge through the Maoist political culture that was brewed in the Maoist organizations. In Maikot, the new political culture introduced keywords that were the foundation of the collective action frames and became the

cornerstones of the discourse of resistance. However, in order for this new discourse of resistance to be formed, the Maoists had first to establish an alternative public sphere that was more democratic and less exposed to the hegemony of the Panchayat system. The cadres that had spent a great deal of time in the Maoist organizations, or simply studying revolutionary literature in the cover of the night, began to adopt the Maoist revolutionary discourse in an alternative public sphere that I call the ‘subaltern counterpublics’ (Fraser, 1990).

At the core of the new vocabulary was the word *cetana* (consciousness), the foundation of what became very commonly used phrases that expressed one’s affiliation to revolution: *rajnaitik cetana* (political consciousness) and *vargiya cetana* (class consciousness). Similarly, the word *fanshen*⁶² had been used in Maoist revolutionary villages in China to express that the person’s political awareness had been changed; *rajnaitik cetana* was used to convey the ‘raised’ consciousness that was the result of trainings that were held in Maoist-led organizations. In Maikot, a division occurred between people that had joined Maoist organizations and attended Maoist meetings and thus obtained a certain kind of *cetana*, and the people that had remained *murkha* (ignorant) or simply *punjiwadi* (capitalists). This stark division between the two sides (the ‘politically conscious’ and the ‘ignorant’) was the driving force of political divisions within the village in the early days of movement formation. This kind of discursive contestation between the members of Maoist organizations and other villagers created radically different senses of collectivity. Maoist organizations deliberately enhanced the subversive elements of social identities, which helped integrate many peasants into the emerging Maoist political culture. Later, during the conflict, however, this ideological division became less relevant due to increasingly violent state responses to Maoist activities. Many more people, not only those who participated in Maoist organizations, began to side with the rebels.

Retrospectively, most of the interviewees recognized the subversive elements of political consciousness that emerged from the Maoist movement and related it to the interpretative work at the different stages of movement building. Bharat, a former Maoist

⁶² William Hinton explains that “fanshen” literary meant 'to turn over' or 'to turn the body over, meaning that the person had joined the cause of revolution and changed his/her old ways of living (Hinton, 1966).

activist, attributed the change in political consciousness (*rajnaitik cetana*, often used just as *cetana*) to the People's War in the following way:

“Today, the people's political consciousness (*cetana*) has increased drastically. That is because of the People's War, because it taught people not to endure injustice and oppression. That message has been imprinted on people's minds. Today people are dissatisfied with and oppose even the slightest things. This might be because of that heightened political consciousness (*cetana*). People catch you even when you make the smallest mistakes. They now know what is wrong and what is right.”

This narrative proposes that the word and the concept of *cetana* should be seen as a direct result of Maoist discursive practice. It describes an important period in movement building that began to emerge due to the Maoist framing process. The peasants who joined the movement and became members of Maoist-led organizations participated in an alternative public sphere where collective action frames were negotiated and debated. This political experience was unique for many peasants that have never experienced such forms of political participation. The Maoist political organizations created a political sphere where the peasants could practice different modes of being, political speech and reasoning and other participatory political actions that did not occur in the more limited public and private spaces of village life. Surul and Jyotiram observed the importance of creating an alternative public space in the village of Maikot in the following way:

The People's War taught countless illiterates and peasants, including the two of us [Surul and Jyotiram], to reason, to debate with another person. In the past, the situation was such that people had to accept whatever individuals of certain social and political standing – *jimal*, *mukhiya*, chairperson or *pradhan pancha* – said, whether it was true or not. The People's War created an environment where people were permitted and able to put forth their opinions. Take my example. I am free to present my feelings and thoughts, to support or oppose an idea, to express my opinions. What helped me become this person? The People's War.

This stage of the movement process created an environment that drew large numbers of dissatisfied peasants into Maoist-led organizations. The difference between the public sphere that emerged in Maoist organizations and the public as it was experienced in the village was, as Surul pointed out, a qualitatively more open and democratic environment where peasants could put forward their feelings, thoughts and political opinions. According to these accounts, I propose understanding this form of the public as an emergent alternative public sphere. Nancy Fraser called this the subaltern

counterpublics, which she describes as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”. (Fraser, 1990: 67).

According to Fraser’s alternative theory to Habermas’s conceptualisation of the liberal bourgeois public sphere, the subaltern counterpublics emerge as alternatives to more exclusive hegemonic public spheres and discourses. The function of the counterpublics has a double character: (1) they function as spaces for withdrawal and regroupment, and (2) as bases and trainings grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics (Fraser, 1990: 68). In rural Nepal, this was expressed in two ways. First, the Maoist political process in the villages worked against the hegemonic public sphere, which was determined by the discourses of the Panchayat’s village elites. Second, it created a public sphere that has enabled some villagers (especially women) to retreat from the power relations of the peasant household and seek refuge from issues they have permeated the domestic private sphere (see also: Luna and Van der Haar, 2019). By organizing themselves into organizations that established a subaltern counterpublic, or in practice, ‘a variety of publics’ (Fraser, 1990: 68), the Maoists created spaces where democratic political participation was possible. This space was the basis for the Maoist political culture that worked against the rural elites’ limited and exclusionary public space. In this way, the Maoist counterpublic space provided the room for social movement-building, and more concretely, the framing process and other more hidden political practices of the movement.

Former Maoist recruiters in Maikot have pointed out that this was one of the main reasons that led the peasants to join the Maoist organizations. The idea of political participation in an organization that is promising systemic change was appealing to many, and consequently, the recruitment process was much smoother than the cadres had anticipated. Krishna, a former Maoist ‘whole timer’ who was in charge of recruiting in the area in the early days of the People’s War, remembered:

“If we merely entered a village, a handful of youths joined us without any selfish motives. Some joined the PLA; some became cadres, some artists. I remember one incident in 2053 B.S. [1996] when 42 young men and women joined us at once in a village. It was like you told somebody to join the People’s War, and they did. Everybody was willing to.”

By entering Maoist-led organizations, the local population found themselves at the centre of subaltern counterpublics shaping its discourse of resistance. To join the Maoists meant to become *krantikari* (revolutionary). As I have argued above, the mobilisation process was made heterogeneous as the Maoists broke it down to mobilize specific groups of people. As Zharkevich (2009) has pointed out, there were different modes of becoming a Maoist; each Maoist organization facilitated a well-tailored framing process for every specific group or organization. Makar B. Gurung, an activist from Maikot, described how this process unravelled on the village level:

“Everyone needed to fight for their rights: women for women’s right, students for students’ rights, workers for their rights, teachers for their rights, farmers for their rights. Everyone needed to unite and organize to change the constitution. [...] The associations that were formed brought people closer to understanding the root of the problem. By forming associations, the struggle of different classes was united.”

In this way, the Maoist village organizations facilitated a heterogeneous framing process that enabled the widest range of people to join. Although the political organizations broke down the framing process to individual groups and organized people from different social positions, I argue that a more coherent counterhegemonic narrative was formed in the Maoist counterpublic space by establishing master frames. In this way, the Maoist counterhegemonic narrative connected the different positions within the movement: being ‘underground’ (*bhumigath bhayo*), ‘above the ground’ (often referred to as informants: *suragi*), and people that remained ordinary villagers but had supported the Maoists. By analysing the master frames established by the Maoist organizations, I look closely at the processes that defined what it meant to be a Maoist. By looking at the grassroots political organizing on the village level, I further describe some of the details of the framing process that I believe has not been sufficiently addressed in the anthropology of Maoism in Nepal.

The interviews with Maoist ex-combatants have been an important resource for retrospectively understanding how the collective action frames developed throughout the political struggle in rural Nepal. In other words, as Snow and Benford had put it: “framing, in contrast to ideology, is a more readily empirically observable activity” (Snow and Benford, 2005: 11), and thus something as anthropologists we can observe during

fieldwork. I suggest that the role of violence and terror (*atas*)⁶³ that occurred throughout the movement process was too often emphasized to play a key role in the mobilization process and has obscured the complexity of the movement process in rural Nepal.

Master Frames and the Maoist Counterhegemonic Narrative

The participation in different levels of Maoist organization was not exclusive, and many of the local cadres made their way from one organization to the other, and quite often ended in different sections of the PLA. Within the network of these associations, I argued that the Maoists were forming a subaltern counterpublic, an alternative public sphere that facilitated the framing process and other elements of participatory political organisation. I further demonstrate how this was achieved by establishing master frames that formed a more coherent politics from below across heterogeneous political groups and organizations. As I showed in the previous section, some of the existing frames (such as the incorporation of grievances against local landlords into the Maoist counterhegemonic narrative) were reframed and linked the local experience of struggle to a more general Maoist discourse of resistance. In other cases, however, the Maoists had to rely on establishing master frames that were not immediately related to the local experience of struggle.

Collective action frames are sets of meanings and beliefs that initiate movements from below and help them interpret their political campaigns and activities. Together, they constitute master frames, which are more coherent interpretative schemes that integrate these interpretations into the core of the movement's discourse. This enables heterogeneous groups to be aligned around common political struggles and develop unified politics across different political spectres (Carroll and Ratner, 1996: 411). In rural Nepal, we can trace the results of establishing such master frames through the formation

⁶³ Marie Lecomte-Tilouine has described the escalation of violence between the state forces and the Maoists as two opposing sides that operated with the use of 'red terror' (the Maoists) and 'white terror' (the state forces). By looking at the Maoists writings and their use of 'red terror' as a form of political action, she argues that red terror was a useful political tool for the Maoists for identifying enemies and to speed up the mobilization process in the countryside. 'White terror' (*svet atamka*) on the other side, was referred to military terror that followed the state's proclamation of the Maoists as terrorist after September 11, 2001 (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, 384). While the experiences of violence on the local level varied, Lecomte-Tilouine argues that in some cases the red terror proved to be much more pervasive than white terror, and has fuelled the movement's mobilization process.

of Maoist political culture, specifically the Maoist culture of reading and writing. Zharkevich, although not explicitly referring to framing, writes about Maoist cultural groups that had widely promoted creativity and art. She argues that the culture of reading and writing was essential to the Maoist movement:

“The importance of reading and writing within the Maoist movement struck me when I heard from some interviewees that Maoist fighters were carrying books in their backpacks, that the Maoist leaders were procuring books for the fighters, and that the award given to one of my interviewees for a successful implementation of their first military task was the book *Mother* by Gorky (1954), which describes the revolutionary struggle in 19th century Russia” (Zharkevich, 2013: 115).

Zharkevich argues that in the early stages of the Maoist movement, apart from military training, the movement was an important source of information and learning. Specifically, in villages of Mid-Western Nepal, which had few educational institutions, the educational function that had rested on the village community fell on the Maoist associations. Zharkevich further argues that the function of schools, where they existed, did not provide a chance for upward social mobility. In her view, this was one of the reasons that many chose other paths of climbing the social ladder – the most attractive at the time was to join the Maoist movement (Zharkevich, 2013: 111–112).

To advance Zharkevich’s argument, I propose to look at Maoist organizations as crucial institutions of the Maoist subaltern public space. Their central role was to establish master frames through various political and cultural activities and distribute communist literature, Maoist political theory, political speeches, and trainings in Maoist village organizations. These organizations were able to enrol people from different social positions into a subaltern public space in which they adopted Maoist political culture and the discourse of resistance through a process of learning. This process is constituted by “a complex relation between experience, consciousness and knowledge”, a process that “through which reflexive self-activity engenders a distancing from the hegemonic elements of common sense and simultaneously a process through which ‘good sense’ is rendered ‘more unitary and coherent” (Cox and Nielsen, 2014: 88). While Cox and Nielsen refer to Gramsci’s good sense, in order to provide a Marxist understanding of this signification process, I argue that the process of counterhegemonic framing equally unwraps these tiny changes in consciousness that begin as frames and continue to develop into master frames, narratives, and counter-hegemonic discourses.

To address the main pillars of this process, in essence, a reconciliation between the social experience of reality and revolutionary political theory, I look at how the Maoists began to establish master frames as part of their counterhegemonic narrative. This section puts forward three examples of master framing strategies and shows how they consolidated the Maoist movement process.

1. Exploitation, Injustice and Oppression

I encountered several cases in the village of Maikot that echo the importance of the role of Maoist culture of reading and writing in social movement building. Through the Maoist culture of reading and writing, more abstract master frames of injustice, exploitation, and oppression were formed. Surul remembers how his journey to understand Maoist political theory began; by first learning how to read:

“I never got to go to school. Karma Jan [a Maoist cadre at the time] taught adult literacy classes in our locality. He taught us for an hour each morning and evening for three months. I studied under him for a month and a half. I became literate. Later, during the People’s War, the Party confiscated sheep belonging to Krishna Poon of Mahat Village. This was a year after we had gone underground. Karma Jan and I herded those sheep for about a month. I couldn’t read at the time, so Karma Jan read me ‘Thank You Mr. Glad’ [by Anil Barve]. It’s a novel about the Naxalite rebels in India. It’s a very interesting book on war and love. I would be so happy that he read it to me. He also taught me the alphabet during the mornings and evenings. When he could, he read newspapers and books to me.”

For Surul, as for many other participants in the Maoist-led organizations, the opportunity to learn how to read and write presented a gateway to learning more about Maoist politics. By learning about similar political struggles in other parts of the world, the Maoists established master frames of exploitation, injustice, and oppression that reframed the local experiences of political action. The Maoist cadres often used the Chinese revolution as an example of a successful transformation from an agrarian economy into a developed industrialized nation under the banner of socialism. This particular kind of framing enabled the Maoists to make a discursive step that went from building utopias to showing concrete examples of how revolutionary masses have toppled similar oppressive regimes. The Chinese case was of particular importance because there the People’s War, as a political instrument in the hands of the people, was successful in ending feudalism. Like

in China, the Maoists believed that Nepali peasants, too, could lead the revolution to success by employing and developing guerrilla warfare, building strongholds, and establishing deep connections with the people in the villages through ‘above the ground’ and ‘underground’ activities. Another such case that was often employed by the Maoist cadres to help them frame revolutionary experience was that of Naxalites in India. However, Cuba, Vietnam, and Peru were also often used as examples of successful revolutionary struggle, although perhaps less convincing than experiences from neighbouring India and China. While reading account of revolutionary struggles from other parts of the Global South was common, other examples of what was being studied in Maoist organizations varied. In the Central Schooling Department in Rolpa, for example, the subjects that were studied by the local population included: “dialectic, historical materialism, and Prachandapath, negation of the self and frugality, in order to show that pro-people practices are linked to military priorities and that these priorities require self-sacrifice and renouncement” (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2010: 6).

In the interviews I have conducted in Maikot, several such frames were discussed. The former Maoist cadres argued that the master frames inherited from peasant struggles in other countries were particularly convincing at an early stage of the movement process. However, this was not the only attempt of the Maoists to translate the local experience of struggle to more general political topics. The Maoists also referred to more contemporary examples and issues of local and national importance. A former Maoist cadre reflected upon his recruitment process in the following way:

“Even four or five days after the Maoists had taken me with them, I wasn’t sure about joining the People’s War full-time. Gradually, I learned more about Marxism. I realized that a revolution was needed for the proletariat that we needed to fight the injustice that was rife in our country. The country’s rivers had been sold, yet we in the remote hilly areas had no peace. We worked hard, yet barely had enough to eat. I thought that if this People’s War would bring some change, I ought to join.”

In the above passage from the interview I conducted in 2017, we can notice how the Maoist framing process influenced this individual’s interpretation of the situation. The Maoist cadres were transforming the political consciousness connected to the localized experiences of exploitation and oppression by incorporating wider injustice frames. In the example stated above, the exploitation and oppression had been directly linked to state

violence and the state ‘selling out the rivers’, a typical example the Maoists used to express the comprador and corruptive behaviour of the national elite. By connecting such issues into networks of injustice frames, the Maoists’ interpretative process created a more coherent counterhegemonic narrative.

An extract from an interview with a former Maoist leader in Maikot paints a similar picture:

“The Maoists took root in Nepal’s rural areas because they created an atmosphere in which people believed that the idea of a People’s War will solve all their problems. That it would be just like in China. The Maoists went around organizing mass gatherings in which they denounced the bourgeoisie’s education system and said that a revolution would erase the differences – of class, caste, ethnicity – that had plagued our society. It was not surprising, given the poverty of this region, that people were quickly convinced. They formed associations in villages, and many joined their gatherings to develop strategies against those that they saw as resisters of the revolution.”

According to reports from Maoist cadres, the framing strategy that brought to light broader issues of injustice, oppression and exploitation was a constitutive part of the interpretative process in all Maoist organizations. Within the Maoist counterpublic space, this particular master frame helped to address the injustices related to individuals’ personal experience of village social life. It was, in other words, the main interpretative work done by the local cadres that interpreted the Maoist frames through concrete social and political situations on the ground. I have pointed out (in chapter 8) that these injustices could be primarily addressed by two broad categories in Maoist political theory: the politics of redistribution and recognition. When translated to the micro-level of movement building, it is difficult to distinguish which master frames of injustice, exploitation, and oppression were the most convincing overall. It had more to do with the political sensibilities of local cadres that, through interpretative work in Maoist organizations, connected them to individual movement participants social experience. For example, in the interviews, we have discussed different forms of economic exploitation, such as unjust moneylending practices, persisting personal debts, land disputes, tax issues, and bonded labour, as well as forms of oppression, such as unjust court procedures, landlord abuse and violence, racial and ethnic conflicts, marriage practices, and caste taboos. Maoist cadres used these grievances in different instances of movement building to building more effective framing strategies. Later in the People’s

War, Surul, as a battalion commander, often found himself in a position of a frame articulator. He described the details of this process in the following way:

“I was involved in the PLA, so my concern was with all things military. We concerned foremost about a person’s military abilities. How he motivated his fellow-soldiers, how he handled dissatisfied soldiers. Perhaps there was a soldier requesting a transfer or some were contemplating quitting. It was tough. You were trying to change someone thinking, getting him to focus on the fight. you couldn’t possibly do that if you didn’t have the necessary skills. ...We were trying to find answers to questions like: Why we were oppressed? Who were the oppressors and why was it that only a handful of the ruling elite held all the power? Why can’t a common person become a politician? People here were oppressed, be it on the basis of ethnicity, region, culture or class. When we explained the difference between the path laid down by the then governance system and the economic and cultural system of a republic, the majority of the cadres committed to the goal. [...] I was a commander then, so I spoke plainly. I never forced anyone to go into battle. That could be disastrous. It could happen that a person forced into battle would turn against his own commander or commissar and shoot them. What I told people was that we were fighting to change the governance system, that unless we replaced it the injustice, oppression and exploitation wouldn’t end”.

So far, I demonstrated that through performing functions and responsibilities in the state's domain, such as cultural and educational activities, the Maoist organizations, constituted mostly by local cadres, gained credibility as frame articulators. The master frames of exploitation, injustice and oppression became the core of building the counter-hegemonic narrative prior to and during the People’s War. I have learned from my fieldwork in Maikot that the villagers who participated in ‘militant particularisms’ prior to the Maoist arrival saw the Maoist-led political campaigns as the logical continuation of their struggle. In Maikot, all of my informants have pointed out that it was necessary to initiate the process of movement building in order to counteract against the variety of brutal injustices from above. In order to take a closer look at this, I explore the personal histories of ex-Maoist combatants in more detail in the next chapter.

2. Development and Modernity

Political consciousness (*cetana*) became a word that drew a line between modernity and tradition, between the ‘dark ages’ and *kranti* (revolution). However, encounters between local Maoist cadres and other ‘unconvinced’ villagers varied. The Maoists were often successful in gaining support from the locals, building on the already existing injustice frames. However, the efforts of local Maoist cadres often did not result in the formation

of *cetana*, and have even stumbled upon the ‘guardians of tradition’ that were not so easily convinced. Anne de Sales narrates a story from those times of such an encounter. I quote it here in full:

“The scene took place on a veranda, at the end of a night-long shamanic séance, as everybody was served beer, a privileged moment for debates. A villager, specifically an ex-mayor of the Panchayat times, came along with his cassette player, the forbidden songs at full blast. He was wearing a pair of shorts rather than the traditional woven hemp *lungi* [skirt], and brand-new training shoes, his general allure strongly reminiscent of the city and slightly odd for this man in his fifties in a remote village. In a vindictive and perhaps slightly intoxicated mood he accused the guests of remaining powerless in a dark age, still believing in superstitions, observing old customs and *jhankris*’ [shaman’s] prescriptions of blood sacrifices, rather than standing up and fighting for hospitals. The shaman faced this avalanche of criticisms with good humour, granting that hospitals were no doubt necessary, and that he had too many patients anyway. He added with modest confidence that his healing powers were given to him by spirits and he had to comply with them whether he liked it or not, and this kind of power the doctors did not have. The others discussed the need for a road to modernise the local economy, the question of its itinerary through certain villages and not others obviously being a hot issue. Nobody paid attention to the songs that gradually died in a gurgle as the batteries failed. After he left, some people mocked the ex-mayor’s political convictions as well as his outfit: perhaps he wanted to look young” (de Sales, 2003: 5).

This story brings to light another vital element of the discourse of resistance: the issue of modernity. The Maoist movement had been crucial in initiating a new modernity discourse that attracted the Nepali village youth to position themselves against the ‘old’ society. This discourse enabled the young actors to assert themselves as protagonists of modernity in an environment where people felt that they had been excluded from such developments. However, the emergence of Maoist modernity discourse appeared to have differed from the one already present in urban parts of Nepal. Judith Pettigrew (2013) argues that the Maoists successfully constructed an alternative discourse of modernity that would not only replace the ‘old’, but also challenge the existing (consumerist) modernity of the cities. The membership in the Maoist party was a ticket to becoming a part of this ideological battle.

Although the modernity drive created conflicts with some more traditional parts of village life, as argued by de Sales, it also opened up a potential for mobilization. Building on a similar argument, Zharkevich (2009) proposes that the Maoist modernity project in the countryside gave birth to specific youth culture. By joining the Maoist party, the youth did not only get the chance to venture beyond the narrow geographical and cultural

boundaries of their village but also “to fulfil a quest for identity making and creation of an alternative way of being young in Nepal, radically different from the experience of youth in the world of tradition” (Zharkevich, 2009: 69). Zharkevich shows that the village youth had to go through several stages before they became Maoists, and those who became a part of the social movement were not all in the same position. Some became fighters; others were a part of cultural groups, medical brigades etc. There was “a wide range of modes of existence and different ways of being a Maoist”, Zharkevich points out (Zharkevich, 2009: 71).

In Maikot, the Maoist battle against the local customs and traditions began when the Maoist party discontinued the *Bhoomi Puja* (a form of land worship) that used to be observed by the local population on *Chaitra 20* (beginning of April) each year. The ritual had significant social and political implications for the Kham Magars and has traditionally legitimised the village’s ruling order. Important decisions were made on that day, and rules and codes of conduct for the ensuing year were drawn up. The Maoist party banned the ritual in 1996, and it remained prohibited in the village for a decade. The Maoists interpreted the festival as a remnant of the old society that helped legitimise the village's feudal exploitation. As the most critical ritual event in the year for most Kham villages, and especially in Maikot, it was the first to be banned in a more comprehensive Maoist campaign against old traditions. Campaigns against other religious rituals and celebrations followed. The Maoist cadres stopped *Sauné Sakranti*, a local festival of arrow shooting on *Maghe Sakranti* (the first day of the tenth month of the Nepali calendar). The Maoists in Maikot also condemned shamanic rituals. As a result of this prohibition, there is no shaman in Maikot today, and villagers travel as far as Pelma or Takasera to participate in this healing practice.

As the above example shows, establishing the Maoist master frames of development and modernity was connected to identifying cultural elements related to Kham Magar’s tribal past. In order to transform these old traditions, Zharkevich has argued that the Maoists “aimed to transform the habitus, associated in their eyes with being ‘primitive’ and narrow-minded (*simit*)” (Zharkevich, 2019: 153). However, if I put the question of transformation to the side for now, we can observe the framing process that intimately related to the people’s religious and livelihood practices. Another example from my

fieldwork illustrates how this juxtaposition between the ideology of the old society and the Maoist vision of modernity continues to occur. During the mobile cinema project, one of the films we screened was the *Shamans of the Blind Country* (1981), a film that closely observes the shamanic rituals of the Kham Magars. Today, in most villages, as a part of the regional ethnic revival narrative, these traditions are seen in a much more positive light than during the People's War. However, after the film screening in Thabang, a group of young Maoist cadres approached us to express their views on the film. According to their interpretation, the film portrays the Khams as a backward tribe that still upholds 'primitive' practices. They requested us not to screen the film further because it is historically inaccurate and does not acknowledge the rapid modernisation and cultural transformation of Kham villages throughout the People's War. According to them, these practices were merely remnants of the past and should not be any more publicly represented because people might see them as a part of today's village life.

During this project, it became very evident that views on the matter differ from locality to locality. For example, in Takasera, a village that has formed a strong ethnic revival narrative (a topic I explore in the film *Takasera* (2015)), a group of people made a contrasting case. They argued that it is in the public interest to bring back the lost traditions. Their viewing of the film raised questions about local ethnic identity that these images expressed more than any other. Interestingly, the division between the advocates for a Maoist interpretation of modernity and the guardians of old traditions is not as clear cut as they were during the war. In Maikot, even former Maoist combatants today point out that the development and the modernity drive had left a negative impact on the local environment:

“Development not only changes geography but also destroys culture. Modernity destroys traditional practices. We haven't initiated anything officially to save our culture, but we are mindful about not forgetting our culture, traditional dresses and language. These faded into the background for a decade during the People's War. We feel the need to revive those traditions. They are our identity. We want to pass them on to the next generation and keep them alive. We also wish to showcase our culture and traditions to tourists, both domestic and foreign. We can't just let our customs die out.”

The former Maoist combatants have referred to modernity and development as the central themes of the local Maoist struggle. As exemplified in the narratives presented above, today, this position has taken a slightly different turn. However, I argue that at the

beginning of the People's War, modernity and development master frames were essential building blocks in the Maoist counterhegemonic narrative that attracted the village youth into joining the Maoist organizations. Sandesh, a former guerrilla fighter, observed the importance of framing the issues through the master frame of modernity in the following way:

We were striving for development to reach this remote country. It is true that there hasn't been as much development as there ought to have been. That is because this is a remote corner. Development – amenities like road, education and health – isn't something that can be airdropped. These things improve slowly. But there have been significant changes. Our fathers carried salt up from the Indian border to Maikot. Today, the road is a three to four-hour walk from Maikot. The pace of development is slow, but it is happening. This is definitely not enough. Our circumstances necessitate more development. There is immense potential for development and economic growth here.

In rural Nepal, the master frames of development and modernity, perhaps more than any other discursive element, show the influence of hegemonic discursive fields. Although modernity and development were central frames in the Maoist counterhegemonic narratives, anthropologists have shown how peasant and later Maoist leaders became empowered through hegemonic development discourses. Dinesh Paudel has argued, for example, that peasants' political consciousness was transformed through a process where they "enrolled themselves as development subjects in the 1980s and emerged as a revolutionary force in the 1990s" (Paudel, 2016: 1030). I explored this topic in more detail in chapter 6.

Even though in Maikot, there was no development project prior to the People's War, the development and modernity frame became important in Maoist mobilisation strategies. While the Maoists condemned local religious practices and other practices they connected to the Khams tribal culture, they also often referred to positive examples where development has significantly changed the existing social structure. Russia and China were often portrayed as countries where such development was successful. Surul elaborated the importance of this particular kind of framing in the following way:

In those days I was interested about countries where development had happened at a rapid pace. When I read about health and education, economic growth, industries in those countries, I thought that that indeed was development. That is what we were striving for. But one individual couldn't do it; it was possible only through combined effort. Even today if a couple of people unite and establish a cooperative, they can do exemplary work. But

Nepal hasn't been able to develop the system for that. In my understanding, revolution is change and transformation. [...]

However, to contextualize Surul's and other narratives of development and modernity that have emerged in rural Nepal, Fujikura has proposed to look at the role of development and revolution in the collective imagination of the People's War (Fujikura, 2003). The development projects created a transformation "that reshaped the field of political possibilities. The collective imagination of the People's War has emerged and gained its force within this field of reshaped possibilities (Fujikura, 2003: 28). In a similar vein as Fujikura, I have argued that the Maoists translated parts of the hegemonic development discourse into their collective imagination; this created the frames of development and modernity that became powerful master frames in the Maoist counter-hegemonic discourse.

3. State Violence, the Escalation of Conflict, and the Framing from Above

This section shows that the movement's political activities in rural Nepal were not inflamed only by framing as a discursive practice from below. In its early stages, the movement process was interrupted by the state's intervention that made significant efforts of its own to counteract against the collective action from below. In order to describe the counteractions of powerful actors that contest the collective action frames constructed by movements from below, the social movement scholars proposed to use the concept of counterframing strategies (Benford and Snow, 2000). I look at the counterframing strategies employed by the state, mainly the use of violence and military campaigns that extended deep into the countryside, to show how the state's counterframing strategies in turn established master frames that drew large numbers of Khams into the Maoist movement.

In social movement literature, the concept of counterframing has been described as a process that identifies "attempts to rebut, or neutralize a person's or group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretive work" (Benford and Snow, 2000: 626). In short, counterframing is a conceptual tool that tries to understand the strategies through which its opponents contest the signifying work of social movements from below. Social

movement scholars have identified several such fields where contestation happens; one of the more researched fields, according to Snow and Benford, has been media framing (Snow and Benford, 2000; 626). However, to identify the actors behind the framing process, I think it is necessary further to discuss the concept of the social movement from above. When such contestation occurred in rural Nepal, it did not occur outside of hegemonic relations, and most importantly, it did not occur without violence. The social movements from above were able to adapt and transform their strategies quickly and use the state apparatus's power and military capabilities.

In their attempt to demystify social structures, Cox and Nielsen have emphasized the importance of social movements from above to understand dominant groups' historical dynamics of collective action⁶⁴. To understand the dynamics of social movements from above, Cox and Nielsen propose that we rethink “structure as collective agency” (Cox and Nielsen, 2014: 63). Their argument follows the idea that the hegemony of the dominant groups is not bound to the state as the legal and administrative apparatus. The social movements from above are formed across and operated in civil and political society and are therefore politically dominant in what Gramsci called the ‘integral State’. As it was coined in Gramsci’s writings, the concept of integral State is best understood as a “dialectical unity of the moments of civil society and political society” (Thomas, 2009: 137). In other words, this means that dominant groups organize themselves around various forms of hegemonic practices (economic, political, and cultural) that penetrate different fields of social life. Within the different fields of force, social movements from above deploy a wide range of offensive and defensive strategies. As Cox and Nielsen have put it, defensive strategies are often acts of repression and violent counterattacks to the collective action coming from below (2014: 69). However, ruling groups do not need always to install repressive strategies and regimes to maintain their dominance. On the other side of this argument is the Gramscian concept of ‘passive revolution’, a political

⁶⁴ They propose the following definition of social movements from above: “A social movement from above can be defined as the collective agency of dominant groups, which is centred on the organisation of multiple forms of skilled activity around a rationality that aims to maintain or modify a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities in ways that either reproduce or extend the power of these groups, and their hegemonic position within a given social formation” (Cox and Nielsen, 2014: 59, 60).

process in which the dominant groups maintain power through negotiation, compromise and without excessive use of violence (Thomas, 2009: 14).

Both the concept of defensive strategies of ruling groups and passive revolution can be applied to the situation unravelling in Nepal during the 1990s. The political projects of the elites that swept with the Panchayat regime after the *Jana Andolan* in 1990 can be interpreted as a social movement from above. This movement has used the political system and the development apparatus to assert itself as the dominant political force, establishing hegemonic discourses that are still taken for granted today (such as the development (*bikash*) discourse: see chapter 6). Although this resulted in installing a different process of political legitimation, such as the first democratic elections, the implementation of a multi-party system and the promulgation of the constitution, it did not substantially shift positions of power within the state. The failure to do so resulted in further marginalization of ethnic, caste and indigenous nationalities (Lawoti, 2005: 19-20). With the dissent in the countryside on the rise, the ruling groups often resorted to violent defensive strategies, most often through the deployment of the police force. After the start of the People's War, the state's sovereignty over the deployment of violent force was clearly extended, as it has been documented by several NGOs and humanitarian organizations (Basnet, 2010). As this conflict between the ruling groups and the peasant population escalated, the social movement from above began to use various counterframing strategies to undermine the spirit of resistance that had already spread throughout the Mid-Western hills. By deploying large numbers of the police force and army personnel to the countryside, the state used different tactics to counteract the Maoist's political actions and win the opinion of the peasant masses. The consequences of repressive/defensive strategies of the state created master frames that helped the Maoists consolidate their movement further. I trace this development through the state's large-scale anti-Maoist operations and the local political situation as it unravelled in Maikot.

The repression inflicted by state forces before and during the Maoist insurgency has mainly remained unreported. The statistics on violence are unreliable and often under-reported incidents that have occurred at the height of the conflict. According to post-conflict reports on the scale and background of disappearances, more than 1300 persons

were reported missing, and 15,000 were reported dead (INSEC, 2007). It is clear from these reports that some of the victims have been disappeared by the CPN-M; however, a large majority of the disappearances fall in the responsibility of the state forces. The main perpetrator of disappearances that occurred at the beginning of the conflict was the police force. The involvement of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) in the People's War in 2001 substantially increased the number of deaths, disappearances and other human rights violations (Robbins, 2011: 81). The reason for the RNA's violent stance against the Maoist threat was rooted in its traditional role as the guardian of Nepali nationalism, lack of democratisation and alignment with the monarchical structure, as it remained under the king's political control and outside the country's democratization and modernization efforts that have tackled some other state institutions (Chalmers, 2012: 60-61). One of the significant challenges of the peace process that remains unresolved until today is the transitional justice process that would address "the disappearances during the insurgency, identify perpetrators and recommend reparations to victims" (Robins, 2011: 95). While the government has proposed forming a 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission' and a 'Commission of Inquiry into Disappearances', little progress has been made in this area. Robins argues that the process was hindered by the reluctance of key political actors to allow any further investigation into the political structures on either side (PLA, RNA or within party structures: CPN-M or Nepali Congress). He points out that "this is particularly true of senior Nepali Congress figures in power during the time of greatest violations and perceived to be close to the army" (Robins, 2011: 95).

These violent political acts of the state go back to the start of the People's War. The brutal state's response came from the motivation to suppress the Maoist activity in the countryside. During the first five years of the insurgency, the anti-Maoist counterinsurgency forces mainly consisted of Nepal's police force, and additionally, a more specialized counterinsurgency unit called Armed Police Force (APF) was formed (Einseidel et al. 2012: 19). The Nepali Congress politicians (most notably: the prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and the home minister Khum Bahadur Khadka) directed an armed defensive action aimed at eliminating the Maoist threat. Many counterinsurgency actions followed; some were more violent than others. In May 1998, they launched the so-called Kilo Sierra II operation, which the people of Mid-Western

Nepal remember as the most violent attack on the rebels (and civilians) until date. The government deployed the police force in thousands to more than twenty districts around the country, significantly damaging the Maoist underground networks and killed at least 200 people (Adhikari, 2014: non pag).

In Rukum and Rolpa, the effect was the opposite of the government's intentions. Instead of decreasing the number of Maoist recruits and bridging the gap between the state and the local population, these actions increased mobilization and militarization in the countryside. "For six months", Adhikari argues, "Maoist activists dispersed to other districts hiding wherever they could, and lost all contact with the party. Over time, however, it became clear that government repression increased people's sympathy towards the Maoists, helping to turn the fledgling armed revolt into a raging insurgency" (Adhikari, 2014, non pag). The increased solidarity with the Maoist cause resulting from the state's brutal anti-Maoist campaign affected everyone. As Zharkevich has argued, this was especially important in bringing the youth closer to the Maoist cause.

"Arrest and torture by the police, especially at the beginning of the conflict when many non-Maoist youth were convicted of being Maoists simply because they came from Rolpa, was more likely to turn one into a full-blown revolutionary than hours of Maoist 'indoctrination sessions. [...] The power of torture and pain to 'mobilize' youth into the Maoist movement lay in its capacity to render previously abstract tenets of the Maoist ideology into an experience-near concept, something that young people started relating to personally. The repressive nature of the state was experienced through the embodied experience of pain and suffering" (Zharkevich, 2019: 110-111).

According to Zharkevich, becoming a Maoist can be best understood as a 'cult of affliction': a revolutionary identity formed based on a shared experience of violence and exclusion (Zharkevich, 2019: 111). This process, described in the case of Thabang is also valid for other villages in the area. However, in my view, this constituted only a part of the framing process and was often not the main reason why people had joined the Maoists. Despite this fact, in Maikot and other places that I have visited during my fieldwork, many have stated that the violence of the state forces convinced them to flee the village and join the Maoist guerrillas deep in the forest. "We were left with no other choice", one former guerrilla fighter observed, "if we stayed in the village, the police would have killed us".

The violent actions of the state forces in the countryside were also accompanied by persuasion techniques, police investigation and interrogations. Much like the Maoists, the

police, too was trying to get villagers on their side. The counterframing, or what we could also call the ‘framing from above’, was mainly concerned with portraying the Maoists as terrorists, as violent insurgents disrupting the peaceful and usual order of things. The main reason behind this was to justify the excessive use of force that followed when police and military actions were launched to suppress Maoist activities in the countryside. This was followed by the efforts of the police to influence the non-aligned villagers to provide them with information about Maoist activities. However, in order for these counterframes to affect the areas under Maoist control, the framing process from above had to be channelled through local actors. In Rukum and other places where the police were seen as the extension of the far-off repressive state apparatus, the counterframing strategies were not particularly successful. Too often, these activities by the state forces were merely violent acts against individual villagers or whole villages⁶⁵ and completely failed to understand the ongoing political process in the countryside that the Maoists have used so well to their advantage. Where persuasion, interrogation, torture and imprisonment of key suspected local actors did not suffice, the police’s excessive use of violence resulted in extra-judicial killings.

These responses of the state to the Maoist political activities in the countryside repeatedly continued, and the injustices from above that the previous generation of Maikotis had experienced during the rule of Uddhaman were now becoming a lived reality for many more. In Maikot, at the start of the People’s War, a police post with a permanent force of 150 police officers was established in the village. It was in these early years of the war that the people of Maikot suffered the most. The movement from above had only started, and to Maikotis it seemed that there would be no end to the violence inflicted by the state forces. During my stay in the village, I encountered several accounts of violent abuse of power, torture, rape and slaughter of cattle, which have never been reported or investigated. The cruelty of the state forces appeared to be limitless. Similar stories throughout the district have made this a shared experience of the Kham Magars that goes beyond village boundaries. These experiences of violence had made the Maoists cause

⁶⁵ The best known is the case of Thabang where the whole village was attacked by a military helicopter.

much more convincing and constituted one of the main master frames of the Maoist counterhegemonic discourse.

A former Maoist guerrilla in Maikot observed the situation in the following way:

“The police made it impossible for us to live in the village. They couldn’t stand you. They beat me twice. So, I had no choice but to join the PLA. [...] . Those beatings by the police made me think: I have to fight these people who beat innocent people. There was a lot of pain here because so many people were killed or maimed in Maikot”.

As the police began to tighten their grip over the area, the Maoists became increasingly active in mobilizing the villagers. Although the Maoist underground activities offered some protection to the villagers, they were not always successful in preventing police brutalities. In Maikot’s collective memory, a particular case of the defensive strategy from above resonates the most. Very soon after the start of the People’s War, rumours spread across the region about the killings that were occurring. Sombaré Magar from Maikot described how the rumours reached the village: “People said five people were killed near the Tikuli River. Some swam across the river and fled to Ranma. The five that were killed had kids. It was all sinful. Another person was killed on that hill [north]. Four people were killed in Dulé”. He continued: “Sanak Poon was killed in a forest south of Maikot. There are many incidents like that. Another four people were killed in Pupal. In Hukam, three brothers were killed. Of these, three were from one family--two brothers and the wife of one of them. Then there was Amrit Dhan Poon’s wife and a girl from Hukam”.

As a trusted villager, Sombaré was often tipped off by the police about the killings in the area. The first such event occurred in 1995 during the Kilo Sera II operation. The police killed five alleged Maoists from the surrounding villages. They were young Maoist supporters but nothing more than a part of their youth cultural group. All of them were in their teens. The police ambushed them in the forest and executed them on the spot. The bodies were thrown into a cavern in the forest above the village. The villagers suspected that something had happened, but no one knew anything about the killings. After a while, the police took Sombaré and another person to see the bodies:

“The police brought me here forcibly [this interview took place at the grave site]. When we arrived, we saw blood and excreta on the ground. The police then issued threats and told me to remove the stone that blocked the cavern’s opening and pull out the bodies. I pulled them out. Chayaras Gharti’s body was at the top of the pile. Below him were the bodies of

three women. At the bottom of the pile was Boliram Gharti's body. The bodies had been shoved into the cavern head-first. The entrance had been sealed by big rocks. The police were telling me to hurry; it was getting dark. When the bodies were pulled out, the police began writing up reports. After they finished writing the reports, they again told me to put the bodies back in. A policeman and I put the bodies back into the cavern. We sealed the opening with rocks once again. It was dark by then. We walked back by flashlight."

The police had instructed Sombaré to inform the families of the deceased. Soon after, a group of people, mostly consisting of the deceased's relatives, came from Maikot, took the bodies out of the grave, and moved them further up the hill to give them a proper burial. Many villagers came on that day. One of them remembered the event in the following way:

"What was shocking about this event is that the five assassinated were not Maoist guerrillas, but young village youth that was only a part of the Maoist cultural group on their way to perform dances and songs in the neighbouring village. The police had no right to kill them".

What followed such police actions were efforts to build counterframes that would support their story. They portrayed their casualties as violent Maoists, often denying that they were abusing or even killing young Maoist supporters, often nothing more than older, slightly politicized school children. These frames from above were passed down to influential villagers who aligned their views with the social movement from above. Although Maikot has had a long history of such counterframe building in the past, from the times of Uddhaman, the police were unsuccessful in convincing villagers that these were acts against Maoist guerrillas. The Maoists, in turn, were able to build these histories of violence into their counterhegemonic narrative.

In this section, I have argued that the history of social movements in remote areas such as Rukum and Rolpa districts should be analysed through Maoist and peasant politics from below and through the intensification of violent politics from above. The escalation of the conflict between the two sides that occurred throughout the People's War led to framing strategies from below and above that involved the mobilization of powerful actors that became frame articulators. The state's response in the form of anti-Maoist operations used counterframing and defence strategies that resulted in excessive violence. Alongside this, the state extended the framing process from above to the local level by empowering middle peasants and rural elites. On the contrary side, this has deepened the Maoist counterpublic space and made the Maoist narrative more convincing. In Maikot, most

former guerrillas have confirmed that the master frames, established by the Maoists based on unjust, violent actions of the state, led them to join Maoist associations and gave more validity to the overall Maoist narrative.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have addressed building elements of the Maoist movement process in Rukum, paying specific attention to the village of Maikot, where I have conducted extensive fieldwork. Most of my observations are based on in-depth interviews with ex-Maoist combatants and other movement participants, which helped me to understand the different ways people in rural Nepal became Maoists. To describe this heterogeneous social movement formation, I have proposed to look at it with the help of the counterhegemonic framing approach (CHFA), a conceptual tool that has aided me in dissecting the Maoist movement process into smaller units. First, I argued that the Maoist political activity, most evidently, the building of Maoist organizations in the villages of Rukum has created a Maoist subaltern counterpublic sphere, which facilitated the most important parts of their counterhegemonic narrative. In this space, established through various activities, some of them performed ‘underground’, and others ‘above the ground’, a heterogenous framing process that was able to mobilize people from different social positions began to flourish. This signification process, I argue, is mainly responsible that the local peasant struggles and militant particularisms overgrew its initial discursive field and became connected, over space and time, under the umbrella of Maoist counterhegemonic struggle.

I attribute these changes to the Maoist culture of reading and writing (Zharkevich, 2013) that helped inflame the master frames of injustice, exploitation and oppression. The situation was marked by the absence of state institutions, most notably educational facilities in rural Nepal, that enabled the Maoists to become frame articulators and gain the trust of the local population. I show how this master frame was formed using literature, connecting local struggles to similar interpretations of injustice and oppression to peasant struggles in countries such as China, India, Cuba, and Peru. By establishing the master frame of development and modernity, I show how the Maoists have turned one of the main elements of the hegemonic discourse into a potent counterhegemonic

force. In Maikot, where there were no development projects prior to the People's War, the Maoists initiated campaigns that banned 'malicious' practices of the Kham's tribal past. At the same time, they referred to positive examples of development, where the broader social and economic transformation of society has entered states into a new kind of modernity. While these two master frames constituted a big part of the Maoist counterhegemonic discourse, a vital master frame emerged due to the state's counterframing actions and defence strategies. Anthropologists have argued (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009) that the Maoists mobilisation process was largely successful because of the use of violence ('red terror'). By breaking down the movement process into the respective master frames, I argue that this argument blurs the complexity of the movement process. However, despite this fact, I show how the states' counterframing strategies and excessive use of violence became an important part of the Maoist framing process and made the Maoist cause very convincing for peasants.

By looking at the movements' master frames, I show how we can explain the ways in which the Maoist counterhegemonic strategies were able to link the heterogeneous political groups and organizations through an array of political scenarios and different socio-spatial scales. The participation of peasants in the subaltern counterpublic space also shows us that these individuals were not merely passive participants in the insurgency but were actively involved in what Barker et al. called 'practical generalization' that makes everyone a philosopher: "It is not only Marxists who move between 'levels of analysis' in order to understand and act on the world (Barker, et al., 2013: 15). Similarly, Gamson (1992: 385) has argued that framing occurs at three different levels of abstraction: framing particular events, framing particular issues, and framing more significant issues that transcend previous levels of abstraction. I believe that the Maoist framing process engaged peasants in interpretative work that connected these different levels of abstraction. Although peasants joined Maoist-led organizations based on their *varga* or other identity formations, these heterogeneous peasant positions became connected into a broader political struggle with the help of the framing process that brought them to a level of abstraction that could support a nation-wide movement.

By introducing master frames, the Maoists transformed the framing of histories of resistances that had occurred in villages even prior to Maoist's arrival into a more unified

discourse of resistance. This does not mean that militant particularisms in rural Nepal have not yet articulated universal demands. The difference between the pre-Maoist and Maoist-led framing process is simply that the Maoist interpretative work has reached the level of abstraction that has made the critical consciousness in places like Maikot a part of a broader counterhegemonic project. While, in this chapter, I have not been able to sufficiently connect these discourses with the outcomes of Maoist collective action, I believe I have shown that frames are not self-contained categories and that they emerge from the movement's interaction with the social world. I believe that this picture brings forward in more detail the uneven development of revolutionary action in rural Nepal, which is often obscured by the topic of violence.

I continue in the following chapters to further elaborate on the outcomes of the movement by paying specific attention to histories of collective action and personal accounts of Maoist ex-combatants. At the height of the conflict, when the RNA became involved in the conflict in 2001, the Maoist's counterhegemonic framing had gained new momentum. In order to get rid of the narratives of the state and create a safe space for their increasing number of guerrillas, the Maoists established their base zone. The movement process described in this section did not cease to take place. It entered a new stage in which the Maoist framing strategies alongside organization building expanded to create a non-state space that brought a new type of political organization to the villages of Mid-Western Nepal.

Chapter 10: Gramsci's 'Common Sense' and the Formation of the Maoist Base Area

Introduction

So far, I have discussed the movement process in the early stages of the People's War. With the help of the counterhegemonic framing approach, I showed how the heterogenous peasant movements in Rukum became incorporated under the umbrella of a more unified Maoist counterhegemonic struggle. In Maikot and elsewhere, the Maoist movement created a subaltern counterpublic sphere, a space of 'underground' and 'above the ground' activities in Maoist-led organizations that challenged the limited public spaces of the Panchayat regime. These political-ideological institutions became the backbone of the Maoist counterhegemonic project and, as I show in this chapter, significantly contributed to the formation of the Maoist base area (*Adhar Kshetra Ilaka*).

In this regard, it is worth drawing parallels with the revolutionary struggle initiated by Mao's guerrillas in China. During the Long March and the later Yan'an period, Mao established a movement process consisting of educational, ideological and military institutions that greatly influenced the development of Chinese communism. The Yan'an period is particularly important because it was then that the Maoist base area was established. It attracted many young revolutionaries who participated in re-education programmes and other ideological trainings that constituted the foundation of Maoist revolutionary practice. In this way, Yan'an was turned into what Yinghong Cheng called a "community of discourse", a "thoroughgoing thought reform and character-rebuilding campaign" that permeated every aspect of social life (Cheng, 2009: 60). I have already discussed that the Maoist party in Nepal drew inspiration from the political strategies of Maoism in China. The similarities are plentiful: from the mountainous and remote areas of Yan'an that resemble the remoteness of Rukum and Rolpa districts to Maoist organization building and the establishment of the PLA, cultural groups and influential leaders with a mysterious cult of personality like Mao's own. In both cases, these eloquent examples show how local peasant struggles have been reframed through revolutionary politics that began to organize the struggle on different social scales.

The small-scale Maoist organizing and the Maoist framing process in villages of Mid-Western Nepal established a fertile political-ideological foundation for the continuation of the counterhegemonic movement. Building on Mao's strategies of protracted war, the CPN (M) aimed to create a space where their troops could return after attacks on important targets, regroup, and move freely to get ready for the next military operation. In addition to PLA activities, in the Party's eyes, this closed revolutionary space without state presence was necessary to establish Maoist forms of local governance. The network of village and district level governance regimes was put in place to connect the local and national levels of Maoist politics. In 2001, the building of *Jan Sarkars* (people's governments) started to unfold in places where the Party had successfully mobilized the local population in the early years of the revolution. Sara Shneiderman observed this taking place in the district of Dolakha, where the Maoists had established their eastern base (Shneiderman and Turin, 2004). She argues that from the local point of view, the Maoists were seen very positively. They empowered rural communities that were "not passive spectators watching from the political sidelines" and saw the Maoist movement as a "natural conclusion of, and development from, the earlier democratic movement" (Shneiderman and Turin, 2004, 88).

In the west side of the country, where this process had already been in full swing, the Maoists slowly turned the whole region into their base area. Kiyoko Ogura described the formation of Maoist local governance regimes in her seminal article '*Maoists, People, and the State as Seen from Rolpa and Rukum*', the only journalistic account on these developments in the region. While she writes about Thabang in Rolpa, she also mentions political developments in Rukum district:

"In Rukum, in all VDC's except Khalanga, the seat of the district headquarters, the Maoists have formed their own people's governments. Representatives of thirty-seven village people's governments, who had been elected through voting in their own village 3 months before, attended this third council meeting. They elected twenty-five district council members, including a chairman, a vice-chairman, and the representatives from twelve areas and from various fronts, those of peasants, students, women, Dalits, intellectuals, cultural groups, industrialists (most of whom are shop-keepers), Magars, and the People's Liberation Army. Sarun Batha Magar, a thirty-eight-year-old ex-high school teacher was unanimously elected as chairman for the second time" (Ogura, 2007: 440-441).

The establishment of the Maoist base area was a project of the CPN(M) that aimed to create a party-controlled district and a political-economic unit that would serve as an organizational model for the future. The key idea was to create a parallel state in the political-economic sense and increase the region's ethnic autonomy. The concept of the Maoist base area was thus intertwined with the idea of *Magarant (Swayatta Magarat Pradesh)*, an ethnic autonomous region established under Magars' rule, which became realized in 2004 (de Sales, 2009). It became a political experiment of the Maoists, where they could apply their vision of the world and start the process that some have compared to the Cultural Revolution (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2010, and Zharkevich, 2019). Similarly, as Yan'an in China, this area became central to Maoist politics:

"The base region was the pride of the revolutionaries. Maoist journalists recounted their wonderful feeling when travelling to these villages full of war heroes and of peasants thought to be fully lacking in any selfishness. This is also where foreign journalists were led, accompanied by Maoist activists, on a guided tour to witness the great achievements of the People's War" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2010: 2).

The process of establishing the Maoist base area consisted of several stages. In the political-economic sense, it comprised a network of *Jan Sarkars* and the establishment of the 'guerrilla economy' that further supported the Maoist army. I first look at the smallest unit of this political process that grew out of local-level organizing in the village of Maikot. Based on Maikot's narrative, I discuss the political culture introduced by the *Gaon Jana Sarkar*. I explore the organizational aspects of the Maoist local governance and the policies put forward by the people's government during the People's War. I also look at the Maoist 'guerrilla economy', a system of donations and taxation that was in Maikot specifically connected to harvesting the medicinal fungus yarsagumba. I argue that the PLA and the *Gaon Jana Sarkar* in Maikot created an economic system that began to represent one of the primary sources of funding that enabled the Maoists to increase their guerrilla operations. In the concluding section, I discuss some of the key premises on the question of social transformation in rural Nepal. I propose that a conceptual move from Bourdieu's habitus to Gramsci's common sense is a useful step to understand better the aftermath of the 'revolution of everyday life' (Zharkevich, 2019) in Mid-Western Nepal.

Throughout this chapter, I describe the phase in which Maoist organizing reached its highest level since the start of the People's War. The village organizations ceased to be the only site for collective-action-framing but have evolved into more complex political systems. Most notably, the *Jan Sarkars* in Mid-Western Nepal became areas, as Lecomte-Tilouine has put it: "where the Party undertook activities of creation, not just of destruction as in the rest of the country" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2010: 1). Thabang became the centre of the Maoist base area and the so-called 'village of resistance' (Gidwani and Paudel, 2012), often depicted in Maoist pamphlets and other media. According to the Fourth Plan of the CPN(M), other *Jan Sarkars* followed in order to connect the area of today's Rukum and Rolpa, also known as the 'red hills' (de Sales, 2009: 366), into a Maoist controlled parallel state. In this way, the activities previously held in Maoist organizations came under the control of village governments that legitimized 'underground' activities and brought the experience of Maoist political culture to the broader village population. By this time, the Maoists were well integrated into village affairs, and as Dharma Pun observed in the case of Maikot: "In this time, there was not a single Maikoti that would not have contributed to the Maoist cause!".

'Jan Sarkar': The History of Maoist Rule in Maikot

In this section, I look at the political process the Maoists had introduced in the village of Maikot and some of the reasons for its demise. The subaltern counterpublic space that in the early stages of the People's War existed in 'underground' Maoist organizations (in Rukum until around 1998) was expanded and formed new village institutions. In this way, the *Gaon Jana Sarkars* became the *de facto* extension of the Party's centralized political system that developed into a parallel state called *Bishesh Jilla* (special district). In coordination with district-level *Jan Sarkars*, the village people's governments introduced political and economic policies, legal and moral codes, and other elements of governance.

Further political schoolings were held, the mobilization and the training of guerrilla units continued, and the taxation system for the supply of the PLA started to collect *mausami chanda* (seasonal donations). In Maikot, the political organization that emerged became closely connected to the guerrilla economy (*yarsagumba*) that supported the prolonged fight against state forces (explored in more detail in chapter 13). The Maoist regime ruled

the village for more than five years. Considering the processes of political and social transformation that were initiated by the Maoists and permeated almost every aspect of social life, I propose to ask the following question: how did the Maoists establish their base area in Maikot, and what were the reasons for the decline of Maoist praxis in Mid-Western Nepal?

The people's government was headed by the *Satta Pramukh* (the regime head), the chief of the Jana Satta (people's regime), a nine-member committee that possessed the administrative and executive power in the village. In Maikot, there were four village people's government chiefs during the People's War: Nandajit Pun, Dana Pun, Krishna Pun, all local Maoist cadres, and Laxmi Prasad Pun, the former Pradhan Panch, who had returned to Maikot from Korea just before the end of the war. In order to appoint the first village government, there were no elections; the district level command of the Maoist party nominated the officeholders on the village and ward levels (Maikot was constituted by nine wards, including the adjoining villages Pusar and Pelma). In order to appoint later village governments, political gatherings were held in the village, and to confirm the Party's candidates, a voting system was put in place. Although the Maoists were trying to introduce some elements of democratic participation into village politics, most directives still came from the district-level party leadership. Within this hierarchical structure, the network of village people's governments represented the smallest units of the centralized Maoist political apparatus.

Apart from the village people's government that looked over the village affairs, other villagers began to rise in the Maoist ranks. As already mentioned Surul Pun, joined the PLA and became a platoon commander. Harka Bahadur Kami and Makar Singh Gurung became important political figures in the local and regional Maoist organizations. The PLA appointed Makar Singh to be in charge of organizing the local guerrilla troops. At the same time, Harka Bahadur was the representative of the Dalit community appointed as the local party leader to balance out the otherwise unequal representation of Dalits in the CPN(M). The leadership of influential local cadres helped to consolidate Maoist ideology and the political structure of the *Bishesh Jilla*; to create a governance system that would support Maoist projects of all scales. In this phase of social movement organizing, whole village communities in the *Bishesh Jilla* became integrated into the Maoist regime,

supporting the PLA with village resources and labour-power while continuing the mobilization process into the different Maoist organizations.

During Maoist rule in Maikot, the *Gaon Jana Sarkar* initiated several projects that supported large-scale Maoist operations. First, with the financial help of the Party, the village leadership set up a health post. This post was of great assistance in the later guerrilla operations that were launched from the village. After the Dunai and Beni attacks, two of the most significant attacks the Maoists ever attempted, the PLA returned to Maikot, where the guerrillas were fed and treated. For the PLA, Maikot and the mountains around it presented safe territory, where they could hide from the state forces and did not have to worry about the locals betraying them. Dharma's narrative depicts the details of Maikot's role in these key developments of the People's War:

"We were preparing for the Beni attack for a long time, but for two months, we were really preparing seriously. I was involved in the management for the support of the PLA: like where to keep the wounded PLA's, and managing the people if they would come back defeated – we had plans like that. After the two months of preparations, finally, Beni was attacked, and we were victorious. Arrangements were already done, so all the places were fixed; where to bring the wounded soldiers and where to give them treatment. They were placed all around the village. Government forces had helicopters to carry the wounded, but we had only stretchers, so we had to carry them by foot from Beni to Maikot. We had our doctors in the team, and they treated the people, but seriously wounded soldiers were taken to India, many of them. After that time, the government forces came to the village, and they slept in my house and stayed here for many days, but because there were so many wounded PLA soldiers near the village, they did not attack. The PLA was near the village, but nothing happened."

In such cases, Maikot's geographical position proved to be of great strategic use. It is situated in the northernmost part of Rukum, with access to Dhorpatan and Magydi to the east and Dolpa district to the north. This gave the PLA good options to scout the area, plan and prepare the attacks, yet have the chance to return to the haven of the village community. The work of Maoist organizations established in the village at the start of the People's War continued. The farmers and women's organizations provided the PLA with woollen blankets, cooked meals and agricultural produce. Other such efforts from organizations and individuals followed by providing resources and labour. For example, in 1998, the locals began to expand the network of paths leading to the village and higher up to the picking site of yarsagumba. This enabled more effortless movement of Maoist troops and other Maoist organizations that were often moving between villages. The paths

also made it easier for villagers to take the supplies up the mountains and further into the forest to the PLA when they were in hiding. Nandajit Pun, the former *Satta Pramukh* in Maikot, commented on women's role in these supply chains:

"It was tough, but our network was very efficient. They supplied whatever we needed under the cover of night. Women were especially active in those covert acts. They cooked food and snacks and brought it for the PLA and other people involved in the revolution [...] The state forces left the women alone. They could conceal letters better than men on their persons. For these reasons, we mobilized women more".

These were usually the efforts of young Maoist cadres recruited at the start of the revolution. However, throughout different periods of the People's War, the village community assisted the Maoist projects and ensured that the preparations for large-scale operations ran smoothly. The households of Maikot provided labour-power to help prepare for the battles against state forces, cook food or work in the fields, carry supplies or help build paths, rest stops and outlook posts. Karmadaya, a young woman at the time, who was a member of the women's association, pointed out the scale of the work that had to be done during the visits of the PLA:

"At that time, rice was impossible to find because all the ways were blocked. So, we were cooking only by using the locally produced crops. Eventually, we ate everything we had. Feeding 1500 PLA soldiers for 15 days was not a joke. All Maikot was doing that".

By engaging with the Party in this way, the distinction between Maoist cadres and ordinary villagers blurred. In this way, many more began to participate in the Maoist network. Maikot, like some other villages in the base area (namely Thabang, Uwa and Mahat), became a place where the Maoists secured a firm position in the village (de Sales, 2009: 367). Dharma Pun and Laxmi Pun both pointed out the importance of the people's participation in the People's War:

"It was the people who fought the People's War. That is why we survived. The people saved us, fed us, warned us of the presence and movements of the enemy, contributed labour by cooking and carrying stuff".

"People from here, everyone was involved in the war. Some with guns, who went to the battlefield, some prepared food for the cadres, and some people just gave shelter. And some gave blood, and some gave sweat and worked very hard. That is how we were involved in the war".

Although many have willingly contributed to the Maoist cause, the burden of Maoist activities on the village community also came at a cost. In Maikot and the nearby village

of Pusar, the Maoist labour and resource extraction policies had driven some people out of the villages to pursue a different life with their relatives in Dang or Kathmandu. Jun Pun, a young woman in her twenties, fled Maikot with her son and joined her uncle's family in Kathmandu, where she helped them run a 'momo' shop. For Jun, working for the Maoists, and providing them with *mausami chanda*, presented too heavy of a burden alongside other household work. Three young men from Pusar, have put forward a similar story. Due to consistent demands from the Maoists to provide free labour, they decided to resettle in Kathmandu and tried to find work abroad. They were recruited by employment agencies to work in Dubai and Malaysia and returned to Nepal only when the People's War had finished. Zharkevich has reported on similar cases in the village of Thabang. These people, she argues, were not expressing anti-Maoist sentiments, but it was due to the organization of their households or due to their economic situation that the Maoist labour and taxation policies presented a heavy burden on them. While large numbers of villagers were transformed into committed revolutionaries, these examples show that even at the centre of the Maoist base area not everyone could be completely integrated into the Maoist world. Although these examples show that there has been room for disagreement with Maoist village-level policies, I cannot entirely agree with Zharkevich's conclusion that "compliance and accommodation, not agency and resistance, are the categories that more accurately describe the villagers' participation in the People's War" (Zharkevich, 2019: 102). In contrast to Zharkevich, Shneiderman and Turin, who were conducting fieldwork during the formation of the *Jan Sarkar* in Dolakha, have also argued for a more nuanced understanding of people's participation in the Maoist movement: "In our understanding, many of those who joined the Maoists in Dolakha did so out of an active desire to be involved in a struggle they saw as their own, rather than out of a passive willingness to be dragged into a struggle that originated externally" (Shneiderman and Turin, 2004: 89).

Apart from the village-level political organization for the support of the PLA, the Maoists, under the leadership of the people's village government, also initiated further local economic reforms. In the year 2000, a village cooperative was established in Maikot, with the aim of better organizing the village economy. The members contributed the money that was later loaned out to the people at very low interest rates on different schemes. The

cooperative also collected *mausami chanda* (seasonal donations), usually in the form of agricultural produce. For instance, corn in fall and wheat in spring. This was a way for the Party to replenish their supplies when needed. In Maikot, this functioned voluntarily; however, when the conflict intensified, the villagers were asked to supply the PLA with monetary donations (usually 5-10 rupees per household). At different points of the People's War, the cooperative was in charge of the yarsagumba harvest, which was sold on the black market, and the profit was sent to the Party. The village people's government also allowed some business activities (like selling medicinal herbs and wild honey); however, the businessmen had to pay tax to the Party. Chaya Bahadur, who was already a yarsagumba trader at the time, remembered that he had to pay 15000 NPR (\$150) to the village cooperative in order to continue trading.

Another aspect of the Maoist regime in the villages was to uphold moral and legal codes against 'malignant' practices. The *Jan Sarkars* were in charge of settling disputes between villagers and maintaining the ban on gambling, polygamy, religious practices, festivals, and alcohol production. In Maikot, these were not considered to be serious crimes, and the usual penalty took the form of donation or forced labour on communal land. However, each case was considered individually, and the *Satta Pramukh* consulted the village government members before the decision was made. According to Maikotis and former government chiefs that I interviewed, the crimes during the People's regime mainly were minor. There were cases of polygamy and disputes between neighbours; however, the most persistent were the cases of gambling and alcohol drinking. According to Nandajit Pun, one of the local Maoist leaders, the most severe crime committed during the people's regime was murder. He remembered:

"The guilty would still contribute labour as a form of punishment. The Party would take him into custody and take him wherever they went. He would work in the camps. I remember a case where a man had killed his wife and then turned himself into the Party. He was sentenced to seven years of labour."

It is evident that some economic and cultural politics of the Maoists were centralized and entered village life through hierarchical organizations. However, these organizations and political institutions were also sites of contestation where there was room for dialogue between party cadres and the locals. In other words, the Maoist cadres were aware that

the organizations should pay attention to the local experiences of subordination and tried to incorporate people's demands into the vast array of politics of the *Jan Sarkar*. In the previous chapter, I have shown how a long history of rebellion and consolidation of a resistance discourse was achieved by building the movement in village-level Maoist organizations. These narratives have emerged with the help of the local population that continued to participate in the Maoist political world. While anthropologists have pointed out that the Maoists have ruled with the use of terror (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009) and created a 'moral community of reluctant rebels' (Zharkevich: 2019: 102), I argue that such approaches understand the Maoist ideology only as an outside force, and do not acknowledge how the subaltern experience of villages in Mid-Western Nepal has been brought into the thickly interwoven world of the Maoist movement.

The local histories of rebellion, organization building, framing and the establishment of the *Bishesh Jilla* all point to a formation of a counter-hegemonic movement that was able to organize subaltern existence beyond kinship ties and village solidarity bonds. Although it is true that the Maoist's efforts during the People's War became more concentrated on military operations against the state forces rather than further building and organizing their parallel state, the villagers have pointed out that there was still room for agency and dialogue within the people's regime. Nandajit Pun articulated how this relationship developed further into the People's War:

"There were disagreements sometimes, both amongst the People's Government officials and our Party's senior leaders. Directives and policies came from the top, but sometimes they didn't fit into the contexts here. We had to talk to the people and adjust those policies. We, too, were held accountable by the people and by the Party if they thought we had been incompetent or unfair. The directive was always to keep the people's welfare in mind while ruling."

The Party gained the highest support at the peak of the conflict, and it was through the experience of violence and the success of Maoist military operations that even non-aligned villagers came closer to the Maoist movement. At the time, the Maoist narrative, building on previous framing strategies, permeated every aspect of social life in the village. For a short time, Maikot became the centre of the *Bishesh Jilla* and served as the jumping point for the PLA in two major battles: the Dunai and Beni attacks. Surul, already a PLA commander at the time, remembered the Dunai attack in the following way:

"The commanders and other comrades went back to their divisions while I was left in the village to arrange food and shelter. All the area party members and all the villagers from Maikot and Hukam were engaged in the management of the armies. Rice was brought from Burtibnag of Baglung and Dorbang of Myagdi district on mules. All other necessary basic needs required for the people's army were organized."

The attack on Dunai (September 24, 2001) was the first Maoist attack on a district headquarters. A thousand guerrillas marched from Maikot to Dunai, over the high mountain passes of the eastern Dhaulagiri range. The Maoists killed fourteen police officers in the attack and took over the police station and the local government office. "They forced the manager of the Nepal Bank branch to open its vaults, and removed Rs 50 million [EUR 300.000] in cash and gold and silver deposits" (Adhikari, 2014: non pag). For the people of Maikot this was a major success. It was a turning point in the People's War because the Maoists successfully completed an attack on a district headquarters and because they managed to prove to the local population that their efforts were not in vain. What also significantly contributed to the Maoists' popularity after the Dunai attack was distributing the money and gold they had looted from the Dunai bank among the local population. The Robin Hood-like approach had further strengthened the legitimacy of the local Maoist regime.

In my view, this represents the highest point of the Maoist counter-hegemonic project on the local level. The fragmented narratives from the beginning of the People's War, what Gramsci would call 'common sense', had been made more coherent through the Maoist movement process. Communal solidarity, social bonds and kinship ties and other building blocks of the peasant 'common sense' became integrated into the new political structures of the base area. The Maoists plan was to create a wider collectivity, a political and administrative unit that would break the patronage politics and disarm the rural elite of the Panchayat era. Although this period is perhaps too short to address the central questions of social transformation in the area, I argue that in places like Maikot, during the People's War, the Maoist governance regime formed a counter-hegemonic force that completely transformed local political life. What is often seen by outsiders as a political process imposed by the Maoists was a longer movement process that incorporated village communities into a wider arena of revolutionary practice.

Even though the Maoist regime was initially successful in gaining the support of the local population in certain places of the base area, the period that followed is particularly marked by a substantial gap between Maoist theory and practice. The Maoist theory, initially coined by party cadres on the national level and the practical ideology created throughout the Maoist movement process, corresponded to different phases and scales of movement formation. In the early years of the rebellion, the Maoist project was successful in the countryside because it built revolutionary action on the already existing frames of injustice. In other words, Maoist theory and practical ideology were set in dialectical motion in local Maoist organizations that contributed to the constitution of the subaltern counterpublic. When the movement process overgrew the initial phase of organization building, the Maoists established a base area, transforming the socio-political life in the village. As Zharkevich has pointed out, this change did not occur only as a discursive element (as the discourse of resistance), but it was, as every social transformation needs to be, embodied in practice in order for it to become a part of the new way of life (Zharkevich, 2019). In order to achieve this, the Maoists introduced political, economic and cultural policies that transformed everyday life in the *Bishesh Jilla*.

I have shown that in Maikot, this relationship was established through a long history of collaboration between the local population and the Maoist cadres, and it was not merely mechanically introduced from the outside. While this organic cohesion was maintained throughout the first half of the People's War, more significant gaps between theoretical and practical ideology began to emerge on other scales of social movement organizing. In other words, the dialectical motion between theory and practice is not only a movement going in one direction. While on the village level, the Maoist governance system and the network of organizations provided a space where theory and practice were set in dialectical motion, this connection was not established on all scales of the movement. Maoist theory reached the smallest units of political practice, but it was much less the case that the reality of the subaltern experience would be transmitted to the level of Maoist theory. To simplify, the ideas of Maoist revolutionary action that originated in the

symbiosis between theory and practice⁶⁶ were not maintained throughout the People's War. If this does not occur, Banaji argued that:

"[...] this general and abstract definition of the role of revolutionary theory implies quite exactly that a theory that does not conceive of its own development as a practical process, as an expression, experimental, critical, rational and so on, of the real life-process and activity of the class, or a theory that does not conceive of its own development as a function of that "reality striving towards thought", remains a mere theory, something merely "abstract", specialist, utopian, something "contemplative" in its own way, permeated and infected by the "finitude" of all cognition or of all purely cognitive reason" (Banaji, 1977, non pag).

In this sense, the Maoists were aware that the old revolutionary strategies of other communist movements could not be directly applied to the Nepali case – the Maoist praxis had to be developed from the ground up. In Prachanda's view, further development of the 'imperialist' world, such as globalization and the advanced military strategy using electronics and information technology, had to be considered. Prachanda was thus developing the 'People's War for the 21st century' (Giri, 2006: 2152). Armed rebellion and the establishment of the *Bishesh Jilla* were very effective strategies to establish a strong and unified revolutionary body in diverse, politically disconnected areas. However, scholars have warned against the national-local divide that began to emerge in Maoist politics. The alternative organs of power were not able to consolidate the revolutionary power on both levels and remained functioning in separate domains:

"The gaping vacuum of a dialectic, which would provide the foil for local revolutionary power to flower into something higher, as the new form of proletarian state power, is perhaps what is goading the Maoists to adopt their present line of reforming the present state through an elected constituent assembly and a republic." (Giri, 2006: 2153-5).

The disconnection between Maoist theory and practice meant that success in the countryside was short-lived. The Maoists failed to transform the success of the first phase of the movement process into larger revolutionary political structures. The political success of the *Bishesh Jilla*, which paved the way to creating a strong counter-hegemonic

⁶⁶ The most relevant to mention here is Mao's essay 'On Practice', where he discusses the movement of knowledge between theory and practice: "If we have a correct theory but merely prate about it, pigeonhole it and do not put it into practice, then that theory, however good, is of no significance. Knowledge begins with practice, and theoretical knowledge is acquired through practice and must then return to practice. [...] Start from perceptual knowledge and actively develop it into rational knowledge; then start from rational knowledge and actively guide revolutionary practice to change both the subjective and the objective world. Practice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge" (Mao, 1937: non pag).

force, mainly relied on the local governance system. Once the Maoists entered politics on the national scale, the dialectical flow between theory and practice became even more disjointed. The local organs of power were left without the support of the Party, and consequently, the Maoist organizations on the village level struggled to incorporate the experience of subaltern resistance into higher scales of the struggle. Makar B. Gurung, the Maoist leader in Maikot, pointed out the reasons for such overwhelming support the Maoists received in Maikot and the changes that drove the Maoists away from people's politics:

"Circumstances shape perspective. If you stand on the summit of a mountain, your perspective is shaped by the situation at that summit. If we stand in this village, the village's environment will influence our perspective. Similarly, when we were outside the political mainstream, the things that influenced us were different. The people's perspective towards us was positive. But when we entered the political mainstream, we had to work within the framework designed by the bureaucracy. When you insert a goat into a flock of a hundred sheep, people say that the goat is a sheep. Similarly, in the political mainstream, there are people from different political parties. When the Maoists mixed with them, they began to resemble them. Moreover, it's human nature for people who have been lived in the margins for a long time to be drawn to the pleasures that society offers. So, some of our Party members went overboard in terms of drinking, feasting, entertainment and business. Things were done with total disregard for the law. The state wanted one thing; the Maoist Party wanted something else when the peace process began. There was friction because of this. And that impacted the people. People began to wonder if the Maoists would become like the other parties. If there had been a complete change of the old system, those negative elements wouldn't have crept into the Party. But our Party merged into the system: each influences the other. The people grew suspicious because of this merger and compromise. They thought: "Oh, the Maoists are stuck in the Parliamentary swamp". That is how the Party lost the people's trust."

In the interviews I have conducted on this topic, several Maikotis have pointed out the shift in Maoist political strategy towards the end of the People's War. The Maoist cadres that became involved in Maoist politics organically by joining the grassroots organizations have now moved on to participate in regional and national politics. In other words, by moving up the ladder within the party structures, they moved away from their previous area of interest and social structures that had offered them political support. Their upward social mobility and the Party's integration into mainstream politics were unintended outcomes of revolutionary action. In turn, the Maoist village organizations were left without any support from the Party and were isolated from the large-scale political restructuring that took over the country. Aitaman Pun, an activist from Maikot, referred to this period in the following way:

"After the Peace Agreement, the country went through a transitional period. Unfortunately, the country didn't find a way forward during that phase. The political parties squabbled with one another. The country couldn't gather momentum to move forward. Being a part of the country, Maikot, too, went into a limbo. With reference to Maikot's political and economic state during that period, factions began to appear within the Maoist Party during that time. That is why today, some of them are UML; others are Congress. Ever since this splitting into various parties, Maikot is not what it used to be. Maikot used to be cited as an example of unity in this region. Any external enemy was an enemy of the entire Maikot. Today, the Maoists, UML and Congress have their own separate enemies. If a tyrant like Uddhman were to arise today, you couldn't unite all of Maikot against him".

After the Maoist party had entered the peace process and moved toward parliamentary politics, the *Bishesh Jilla* and the local organizations were dismantled. The large body of the movement, consisting of guerrillas, activists, cultural troops, and other movement participants, was left behind. The Party became a much smaller organization, led mainly by political leaders in the cities, with only a few local representatives in the villages. The former guerrillas who had been closely entangled with the Maoist movement have been left without any support on the local level. Not being able to sustain a living without the movement's support, many were left without any other option but to return to their former households. In the face of the political and social transformations of the People's War, I believe anthropologists should further inquire into the everyday lives of people in the former base area. How did the former guerrillas integrate back into village life after spending almost a decade 'underground'? What happens to social movement participants after the movement that has aimed to transform the very nature of the village community withers away? How do people proceed with village political affairs, secure their livelihoods, and imagine the future?

I explore this topic in more detail in the following two chapters. First, I look at the 'narratives of disappointment' of former guerrillas' in Maikot. This helps me to dig deeper into the post-revolutionary common sense and the social and political consequences of the movement process on the local level. Although the Maoist party had ceased to play such an important role in rural Nepal, the experiences of collective action had continued to significantly affect the lives of individuals in the aftermath of revolutionary action. In the final chapter, I draw on my ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Maikot and at the yarsagumba picking site in Pupal. I analyze the post-war economic restructuring of the village around this precious mushroom and describe the uneven ways Kham villages of

Mid-Western Nepal became linked to the global economy. Before we embark on this journey, I would like to discuss some conceptual considerations on the topic of social and political transformation in the former base area. As some anthropologists have proposed, the 'revolution of everyday life' is best understood as "a struggle against a distinct habitus" (Zharkevich, 2019: 265). I propose that a conceptual move from 'habitus' to Gramsci's 'common sense' offers anthropologists a better tool to understand the complex socio-cultural agglomerate of beliefs, practices and understandings that undergird the post-revolutionary everyday life.

The Question of Transformation: From Habitus to Common Sense

The collective structures that were put in place in the base area villages varied from one village to another. In some places, the Maoists initiated a collectivization process, and the reorganization of the village territory followed. In other places, the families of martyred PLA fighters were reorganized into communes (the most well known is the case of the Martyr's commune in Thabang village). However, what is typical between these different examples is that the Maoist rule tried to change the feudal character of village communities. As pointed out above, these changes came as economic and political policies and prohibitions that would help install a new village culture without 'malicious' practices of the past. In Maoist villages during the People's War, the following policies were put in place: prohibition of alcohol consumption and production, breaking the taboo of eating beef, prohibition of religious practices and festivals (*bhume puja*), and the prohibition of gambling and polygamy. Although the Maoist cultural politics have received quite some attention from anthropologists (see chapter 3), the issue of social transformation in the former base area has remained largely unexplored.

One such recent study comes from Ina Zharkevich, who has analyzed the social change in the former centre of the base area, the village of Thabang. Using Bourdieu's concept of embodiment, Zharkevich argues that social transformation in the base areas is best understood through the process of 'embodied change'. The social transformation observed by Zharkevich occurred in the base area in less than a decade through a reconfiguring of the everyday habits and routines. Through the installation of new practices and disputing the old ones, the Maoists were able to bring social change that

challenged some of the deeply rooted habits and beliefs. As Zharkevich argues, this happened through the process of habituation: "Habituation or acquisition of new habits not only foregrounds a new practice in the daily routine of people but also causes a change in people's cognitive structures: when previously self-conscious conduct is turned into a habitual action, such transformation is often accompanied by change in people's values" (Zharkevich, 2019: 33).

Zharkevich is, of course, right; the embodied practices she writes about could not be acquired only through discursive elaboration. The social change that she observes through the everyday practices of the Kham Magars occurred as the 'revolution of everyday life', and in this way, the Maoist People's War developed a new 'structure of feeling' (Zharkevich, 2019: 262 -263). She further argues that:

"[...] the legacy of the war and the Maoist movement lies in the fact that they de-naturalized the hierarchies and oppressive structures that were taken for granted by many people in Nepal. Despite the history of early modernization efforts by the Nepali state, it was not until the arrival of the People's War and the Maoists' highly symbolic actions aimed at unmasking discriminatory social structures that people in rural Nepal started interiorizing new ideas about caste, gender and generational relations (Zharkevich, 2019: 263).

What Zharkevich is proposing is to understand the process of change that occurred during the 'exceptional times' of war. "[P]eople in the base area", she argues, "showed an enviable capacity for change actualized when people regarded change as necessary for the well-being of their kin and community, that is, when it made practical, not just ideological sense" (Zharkevich, 2019: 272). Zharkevich argues that by observing everyday practices, we can determine how these micro-processes of norm remaking transformed the basis of people's everyday lives. The question is whether the analysis of the changes in the set of dispositions in the 'traditional' habitus, versus the 'new' habitus, as Zharkevich would have put it, provides us with the most adequate method to analyze the social change in rural Nepal?

Zharkevich's framework, at the centre of which is Bourdieu's concept of habitus, brings her to a very detailed understanding of social change in the former base area. However, her analysis of everyday life during the People's War is not unproblematic. Social change in Zharkevich's eyes is juxtaposed between the 'old' habitus and the habitus that began to emerge as a result of the Maoist cultural politics in the base area. This brings Zharkevich

to conclusions that originate in conceptions of social change as a process brought to the area by an external force. Despite trying to connect structure with individual agency, Zharkevich seems to be falling back on some form of structural determinism. In her analysis, social and political transformations did not originate in the already existing habitus of the Kham Magars but were introduced by the Maoist regime that entered the area from the outside. Instead of explaining how the local population had internalized the Maoist ideology through a heterogeneous movement process, and in turn admitting that the Maoist project successfully represented at least parts of the subaltern experience of resistance, Zharkevich claims that the transformation occurred through the imposition of an ideology by an external force, adopted locally through "routinized practices and mundane events to which people gave little attention" (Zharkevich, 2019: 273).

The problem goes back to Zharkevich's conceptualization of subalternity. I have argued (see chapter 3) that Zharkevich does not pay sufficient attention to hegemony as a process and understands it simply as domination. A similar disjunction occurs in her analysis of the process of habituation. Kate Crehan has argued that in Bourdieu's conceptualization of habitus, there lies the danger of seeing culture as a bounded and systematized whole. If this is the case, social change can happen only by a 'new' habitus breaking the logic of another, which means that social change is ultimately possible only through external events (Crehan, 2011: 281). Zharkevich follows Bourdieu's argument and ethnographically discusses important elements of social change on the micro-level. However, by putting the concept of habitus and embodied change at the centre of her approach, she often juxtaposes the 'new' and 'old' habitus as structured and bounded wholes that do not contain the potential for transformation. For this reason, Zharkevich fails to see other contradictions and changes that arose through the movement process and became central to the subaltern experience during the 'exceptional times of war' and after.

"[H]abitus", as Crehan understands it, is like a "particular language which, while allows its speakers to come up with an infinite number of different utterances, maintains an essentially unchanging grammatical structure" (Crehan, 2011: 280). In other words, it is a concept that is perhaps better put to use to explain symbolic domination rather than the processes of social transformation. In an attempt to find a concept that would explain

culture as a dialectical movement of constantly changing elements, some of which are, nonetheless, as language grammar, staying the same, Crehan has proposed to look at Gramsci's concept of common sense. With common sense, Crehan refers to the unsystematic, 'messy conglomerate' (Crehan, 2011: 283) that is through a process of building a counter-hegemonic movement brought from a spontaneous philosophy of the masses to a more coherent discourse of resistance. Crehan argues:

"Gramsci's concept of common sense, by contrast, insists that while there may be systematic elements within the confusion of common sense, such systematic elements can only be discovered through careful empirical analysis; they cannot be assumed to exist a priori. And this radically open way of approaching quotidian, lived reality, it seems to me, provides anthropologists with a useful model" (Crehan, 2011: 282).

In the previous chapter, with the help of the counterhegemonic framing approach, I have shown how the Maoist framing process created a more coherent discourse of resistance through movement building. This led the Maoists to establish their base area, a counter-hegemonic space, where oppositional narratives were transformed into the economic and cultural politics of the new Maoist regime. The formation of the base area can be interpreted as creating what Gramsci would call a new political bloc (Susser, 2017). It is a process similar to what Susser (2017) is describing in the emergence of squares movements (in New York, Barcelona and Paris) that the Maoist movement in Nepal has created an occupied place, 'out of space and time', where a shared discourse of resistance and the Maoist local governance regime overcame the fragmenting conditional elements of class that have crippled the previous peasant movements. Although the Maoist regime mainly concentrated on extensive military operations against state forces, I argue that the dialogue between activists and the village community was maintained in the first part of the regime. The Maoist organizations in the base area included local organic intellectuals that had a good understanding of the subaltern world, and through practices of learning, political training, and reorganization of village affairs, created a locally grounded counterhegemonic movement. In this way, the movement process transformed the 'messy conglomerate' of common sense into a system of local governance, a parallel state that had installed a Maoist vision of village life⁶⁷.

⁶⁷ Ida Susser (2017, non pag) further emphasizes the importance of the fight for the commons. She argues that: "commoning pulls in many different groups to generate a shared cultural discourse and broader

Other anthropologists have suggested (de Sales, 2009, Zharkevich, 2019) that the processes of social transformation have reached the area from the outside. By using Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Zharkevich has described the cultural world of the 'village of resistance' in Rolpa in detail but has bounded the experience of the subaltern to the dynamics of external events. While the concept of habitus can be a powerful tool to help anthropologists describe the processes of social domination, I have argued that it is less valuable to study the processes of social transformation. Following Crehan (2011: 281), I have proposed a conceptual move from Bourdieu's habitus, to Gramsci's common sense, as a more appropriate tool to help us understand the revolutionary change in rural Nepal.

mobilization. This movement of inclusion provides a platform for further possibilities that, nevertheless, depended on another set of contingencies". I have shown in a similar way, how the establishment of the base area, has temporarily restructured space and time in rural Nepal to create a network of associations, and other Maoist organization that have used strategies of commoning to support their movement process (see also chapter 13).

Chapter 11: The Narratives of Disappointment and the Post-Revolutionary Common Sense

“We are in the middle, and going back is impossible. We were heading to the point that we dreamt of, but this failed for many reasons and because time also didn’t favour us. Now people know that Maoists are not the only party that can take us toward that beautiful dream; other parties can also do that. At the same time, many people also don’t see any force that could really do that. We are now like a crow in the cloud, puzzled. They are not leading the way, and they are not letting us reach there on our own. They are not taking us there: not the Maoist party and not other parties” (Lajim Pun, Maikot, 2017).

Introduction

When the People’s War ended, the *Gaon Jana Sarkar* in Maikot became the stage for the power struggle between old rural elites and the Maoists. The ‘progressive’ leaders from Panchayat times and the ‘new’ Maoist cadres became rivals, a dispute which has not been wholly resolved until today. Although the Maoist regime seemed to be producing a relatively unified political structure, different political factions began to emerge towards the end of the war. Today, the different factions of the Maoist party still enjoy substantial support in the Rukum district; however, like Maikotis, peasants elsewhere in Rukum like to point out that the counter-hegemonic project of the Maoists is only an echo from the past. In the context of the failure of Maoist politics in the countryside, the former guerrillas and other political subjects talk about what I call the ‘narratives of disappointment’; narratives that project a frustrating relationship with the utopian politics of the past and are filled with contradictory experiences of revolutionary action. I develop the argument further to show that it is essential to understand disappointment as a critical aspect of post-revolutionary politics that helps us map the coordinates of the politics of the present (Gould 2009; Greenberg 2014).

In the previous two chapters, I have pointed out how a discourse of resistance was formed in the former Maoist base area through a heterogeneous movement process that facilitated different modes of becoming and being a Maoist. I have argued that by establishing their Western base area (*Bishesh Jilla*), the Maoists have created a counterhegemonic space based on a regime of local governance that supported the movement process on different scales. In this chapter, I turn to the level of activist experience in post-revolutionary Nepal to ask what the activist experience was like and

how it continues to shape the social experience after the war? However, while I draw on personal histories of former Maoist combatants, I do not present them only as narratives of resistance; following Greenberg's study of revolution and the politics of disappointment in Serbia (2014), I interpret them as 'narratives of disappointment'. Greenberg points out, revolution is "a messy social process that nonetheless generates powerful expectations" (Greenberg, 2014: 185). In her study of the Serbian post-socialist democratic movements, she looks at the disappointment that emerged from the gap between the revolutionary praxis that generated utopian visions of the future, and the death of the post-socialist democratic project in the wake of the failure of other grand narratives of the past. She argues that in this new political context, the unfulfilled expectations and visions that in the past generated transformative political action had caught up with the activists who struggled to create a politics of the present (Greenberg, 2014: 181). In a similar way that activists in post-socialist Serbia were posing the question: "Why is there no resistance" (Greenberg, 2014: 180), the peasants in Rukum are now describing the state of 'being in the middle', lost like 'a crow in the cloud', between the Maoist vision of change, and the political reality of post-revolutionary Nepal.

The ethnographic investigation into these narratives helps me portray the lived reality of people who formed the social movement's backbone but were pushed aside when the Maoist party entered the peace process and the new era of state restructuring that followed. Following these people's lives helps me map the rough coordinates of the post-revolutionary common sense in Rukum. These narratives unfold a complex interplay between past expectations and current disappointments and resonate with the power of the Maoist utopian project. However, these are not only disappointments emerging from the failure of the Maoist base area and other narratives of the revolution. More broadly, these narratives can be seen as multiple unfulfilled alternative visions based as much on past political narratives as they are also based on personal struggles, expectations, and dreams. These personal narratives of activists and guerrilla fighters tell us about the people that have carried some of the most severe consequences of the struggle. It could be argued that this is a very common characteristic of revolutionary struggles in general, namely that the burden of revolutionary action is rather disproportionately distributed, with the most oppressed stratum of society fulfilling the more significant part of the most

challenging tasks. Throughout the People's War in Nepal, the guerillas were put in a situation that was "amidst class struggle and inner struggle" (Lecomte-Tilouine quoted in Zharkevich, 2019: 82).

The three personal accounts of former guerrillas that I have interviewed in Maikot cut across frameworks of previous chapters that have focused on village communities, social movements, and base areas. I aim to incorporate the experiences of former guerrillas into the broader analysis of the social movement and show how social change has been experienced by some of the most central protagonists of the revolution. By interrogating the different threads of their lived reality, this approach aims to map the complexity of the subaltern experience and identify the beliefs and opinions that form the new, post-revolutionary common sense. Following Gramsci, Kate Crehan has called this approach 'ethnographic Marxism', an investigation of subaltern empirical realities that "discover, as would an anthropologist, how particular groups in particular places understand their world" (Crehan, 2018: 146). With this approach in mind, I turn to three examples of personal narratives that lead me into the lived reality of the Maoist political praxis and the world after its demise. The narratives help me understand how livelihoods were affected and transformed by the revolution and how, in the aftermath of the revolution, the former guerillas see a new reality and imagine a new politics of the present.

Surul Poon Magar: 'Mero Jibaan Kahaa Pugtyo' (Where has my life reached?)?

Surul grew up in the village of Maikot. His sister's family now occupies his maternal house in Kaldung that I often passed by. His parents escaped police violence in the village and moved further out of the village. Their house is now located close to the forest path leading up to Dhule, a small assemblage of hotels and lodges where the thousands of yarsagumba pickers make their first stop before reaching the Pupal camp. Throughout my doctoral fieldwork, I spent quite some time with Surul and his family in Maikot and in his new home in Dang, where he moved to after the conflict ended. His story has become central to my understanding of the People's War and the post-revolutionary changes in Maikot. Alongside his experience of collective action, the stories of military trainings and battles that Surul has talked about at length, I was also interested in more subtle changes in Surul's engagement in the broader social world. Through the interviews I conducted with

Surul, a worldview, a narrative beyond his personal experience, emerged. In this section, I would like to capture a small part of this worldview that we could call a common sense, a political consciousness that is not representative only of Surul but can be seen as representative of the political consciousness of other former participants in Maoist collective action.

Surul's story is informative as a first-hand account of a militant guerrilla. As a young Magar who entered the Maoist forces at his own will before the start of the People's War and has spent more than a decade in various positions, acquiring the rank of platoon commander, and finally exiting the formal party structures to resettle back in Maikot village, Surul does not lack activist experiences. He leads us through the stories of political action in detail and reflects on the recent political history he was a part of with a kind of political commentary. Alienation from the political action in the years that have passed has given him more room to discuss the politics of the past. I recognized this in Surul as a self-defensive mechanism with the help of which he has been able to detach his emotional involvement from the Maoist political world that was a big part of his life. In other words, Surul is not a politician, for which the same self-defensive mechanism is the basis of survival in politics. In a more intimate environment after a long discussion about politics, he tears up as his voice picks up on the emotional tone of the story. His attitude towards the narratives of revolution clearly shows that for a large part of his life, he was fully invested in the liberation struggle, and as he today admits with both remorse and pride, this part of his life also stayed there, without any chance for him to get it back. Surul's story is a story of a poor peasant joining the ranks of the liberation army in support of broader social changes, a part of his life he today describes as a sacrifice for the greater good.

Surul attended the village public school as a young boy, but his parents often prioritized work over his education. He remembers going to the first grade, but soon after, the farm work and his activist engagement began to take over his young life. As Surul remembers it today, he was a "young lad brimming with energy", and when the People's War began, he had already been a "rebel by nature". As mentioned previously, in the years before the start of the People's War, Surul became a part of the 'village class struggle' against the oppressive landlord Uddhaman. Surul could not easily tolerate oppression, and his nature

was to fight back, especially in the cases where injustices were affecting the people around him. Following these strong feelings to install justice where needed, he soon became a part of the *Jana Morcha* (the political party that preceded the Maoist Party). This formed the oppositional force to the ruling Congress party, where most rural elites, like Uddhaman, had concentrated their power. From this point on, Surul, like many of his friends, began slowly integrated into the village Maoist associations. An organization called *Sisné Sanskritik Samaj* (Sisné Cultural Society) attracted the eyes of many. This society used to go from village to village, performing dances and singing songs on proletarian and progressive themes. Surul, only sixteen at that time, was fascinated by the fact that revolution could be the way to bring about progress and change.

At the start of the war, Surul was a village-based activist and a Maoist cultural cadre. He performed in the cultural group and collected the *mausami chanda* (seasonal donations). Apart from collecting the crops of the different seasons, the youth cadres also performed to collect funds for the party's expansion. It was on such occasions that the youth cadres first came in touch with party politics. Surul recalls the speeches of the senior party members and political discussions as his interest in politics grew. He learned about revolutionary tactics from wars in countries like Peru, the Philippines and India's Andhra Pradesh, and communist rule in China. Inspiration for Nepal's revolution was drawn from these historical examples and contained important implications for the liberation of the peasant population. What was particularly important was the idea that peasants could access political power and become equal citizens of the state: "We were told that unlike in the past, we wouldn't need to look up to kings and rulers as if they were they were Krishna Bhagwan", Surul reminisced.

As Surul's political awareness grew, what especially influenced him was his first contact with the guerrilla fighters. The person that left the strongest impression was Kazi, the chairman of the youth organization. During the military training that Surul began to attend, Kazi portrayed the guerrilla fighters as people with superhuman powers who could fly from one mountaintop to another and hide in crevices and under leaves. Surul's desire to become a guerrilla grew, and when he was promised that his tasks would be to carry food to the PLA camps and update them about happenings in the villages, he decided to join their ranks. Before he knew it, he was on the state's wanted list, and at the age of

nineteen, there was no going back. Even being suspected to be a Maoist sympathizer, one could quickly get jailed or even killed. Without having the chance to go back to the village, Surul became more and more integrated into the guerrilla community.

What made things easier was that he was not alone. From the start, he had been fighting alongside his uncle Jyotiram Gharti Magar. Their first combat experience happened near Takasera village in the Rukum district. Being inexperienced with handling weapons and explosives, the first attacks presented a considerable challenge to the young guerrillas. The party's regional and central command formed the *Gram Surakchhya Dal* (the Village Protection Unit) and the *Ladakoo Dal* (the Fighters Unit) to set up ambushes against the state forces. Jyotiram and Surul were experimenting with explosives for three months. They were still struggling with the technique of how to detonate a bomb at the right time.

The first technique they used was to fill empty coconut oil tin containers with gunpowder. They hurled it with all their strength, and if it landed on rocks, it exploded, but if it landed on soil, it did not go off. It was not working as they had hoped. So they switched to using pressure cookers. They turned this harmless kitchen utensil into an explosive by inserting a thread through the whistle on its lid and connecting it inside to a detonator. When tested, it proved to be more effective. The 1997 ambush near Takasera achieved its goal. The team ambushed and attacked a police team approaching the village. Two policemen were killed, and the team managed to capture a rifle in the attack. It was a historical event. For the first time in the People's War, the Maoist fighters had gotten hold of the state forces' weapons. Overnight, Jyotiram and Surul became a topic of conversation within the party. The early, almost comical, attempts to ambush the state forces followed. At the time, the guerrillas only had muzzle-loaders. After they had fired one, they had run to safety and reload, then run back to fire again.

After this early stage of ambushing the rural police posts, the party launched the *Shakti Kendrikaran Abhiyan* (the Power Centralization Campaign). Its goal was to turn the entire Mahabharat Range into a battlefield. Surul and others in his company were sent to west Nepal. Marching several days through high mountain passes without food, the fighters had to face the harsh guerrilla life for the first time. In the villages, they confiscated *tamsook* (documents recording loans, written on copper plates) from feudal

landlords and burned them and robbed agricultural banks. With the presence of the police in the area, it was not possible to move about in groups. They went in pairs from village to village to mobilize the locals into associations, explaining to the intellectuals, teachers and students why the People's War was important.

In the coming years, both Surul and Jyotiram became brigadier and platoon commanders and recruited hundreds of soldiers. Surul's platoon became a sort of a special force deployed in the east district of Solukhumbu. In this combat action, where the Maoists wanted to capture the district headquarters, Surul was heavily injured. A younger soldier named Surush got caught on a mine. When the mine exploded, Surul standing close to Surush got hit by 36 pellets, disabling his left leg and piercing his lungs. Left behind by his comrades, who thought he had died, Surul survived for days on his own before being taken into a monastery by a local lama, where he was nursed for a month. After this traumatic event, Surul had made it to Patna in India for further treatment. After his return to Nepal, the army arrested him, and Surul spent three months in military custody, where he was tortured three times a day. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison and released when the Maoist and state forces sat down for negotiations. After his return from the dead, he was hailed a hero in the Maikot. A big party was thrown upon his return, and Surul was paraded on a horse around the village.

In Surul's eyes, all of the suffering he has been through was not for nothing. There have been substantial changes, he points out. He sees improvement in democratic practices and equality among genders and ethnicities. In his view, although Nepal has failed to build a more egalitarian society, an important foundation has been laid down by the revolution. This foundation, "like a building under construction, now awaits painting and finishing touches", Surul illustrates the recent political changes. However, he agrees that today this is a different game. The party has become a part of the state, and he sees great importance in the battle the party is fighting on the state level. This fundamental change to democracy and the present governance system is what people like Surul were fighting for. Surul points out that there are more pages to be turned in this story. There has not been as much development as there ought to have been. In other words, there has been some political change, but it is the social and economic change that is, in Surul's view, lagging behind. The most significant change on the local level, Surul observes, was that

the People's War had taught countless illiterates and peasants to reason and debate with another person. In the past, the situation they had to face was not to their advantage. Peasants had to accept whatever individuals of certain social and political standing, whether it held any ground or not. Today, according to Surul, the environment is different. People are permitted and able to put forth their opinions.

After the war, Surul has entered a new period of his life. After being a part of the movement for many years, he had to face everyday life situations by himself. In the process of integrating the PLA within the Nepal Army, Surul was not able to provide sufficient academic and practical experience to be recruited. As he observes today, the process was manipulated so that illiterate people without evidence of education were deemed ineligible. The only way out was voluntary retirement. Ex-guerrillas like Surul received compensation of five lakhs (1 lakh is approximately \$1000). Surul used the money to repay the loans accumulated throughout the war to restart his life in the village. The only option, as he describes, was to go back to wearing the old rags and eating *dhindo* (corn flour batter cooked in water).

Surul had taken up the yarsagumba business, and after suffering more financial losses, opted out and planted a big apple orchard. It was there, in the hills above Maikot village, that Surul has shared his life story for the first time with me. As visitors, we were served a portion of the local *dhindo* and some complimentary spicy chillies that made everyone cough, as Jyotiram and Surul continued to talk about their plans in the local agricultural production. Having faced immense obstacles in their lives, with injuries from the war that still make their lives difficult, they do not even think of asking the state or the village community for help. In the wake of the revolutionary change, they have learned that they have to work together as comrades. Coming back to the village life, they feel no relief. Cultivating land in this harsh mountainous terrain is as hard as starting a revolution, they point out. It is up here that they often reminisce about past events, Surul points out:

“We talk about how we offered the promising years of our lives to the revolution and the country. That makes us cry. But though we are disabled and our family life descended into a tumult, the state or society doesn't need to care for us because we gave and served willingly. Now we have nothing more to give, but we also have no grievances. But we still can't help crying sometimes. That is because if the circumstances hadn't been what they were in those days, our lives would have got to a certain level. We would have raised goats or run a business. We wouldn't have had to lose our loved ones. Our family life wouldn't have gone haywire. We wouldn't have spent half our lives in an area between life and death

if there hadn't been a war. But at other times, we are filled with pride and joy. We changed this country. The current generation of Nepalis might not grasp it, but perhaps fifty years from now, people will realize that their forefathers endured great pain and suffering to win back democracy from the oppressive regime. They will see that we won for their freedom. Our nation has stepped on the path of prosperity. We will only be satisfied if it strides forward on that path. Sometimes we also reminisce about our joyful and humorous memories from the campaigns."

Looking at the past, Surul asks himself the following question: "Where has my life reached?" (*Mero Jibaan Kahaa Pugtyo?*). Although he puts forward several important changes the Maoist struggle brought to the area, his optimism dissolves into disappointment about the present: "We are in a corner. We are like we were before. Our living standards were never great. But in the past, we could at least work year-round and grow enough to feed ourselves. Fifteen years of fighting the People's War had a disastrous effect on our social and economic lives", he argues. In Surul's narrative there is a constant battle between disappointment and hope. It seems that, while he has not given up on the main promises of the Maoist project, his current living situation has made him evaluate his past struggles against the revolutionary achievements. For Surul, his personal losses do not always outweigh the revolutionary outcomes, and as the culture of Maoist politics continues to degrade in recent years, Surul's disappointment has increased. He mentions that the politics and the morals of influential leaders have failed the revolution's aims and prospects. "We can't renounce the Party. The Party is our life: as long as there is the Party there is life. But people who live in palaces now, whether good or bad, have devoured and looted the Party", he points out. By bridging the past and the present, his narrative navigates between achievements, expectations and disappointments. After the unsuccessful integration into the PLA, Surul and Jyotiram are trying to find alternative livelihood options in the village. By sticking together, as comrades, who have spent a decade in the PLA, they feel like they are again up against a higher force:

"Now we are left with no option but to live our lives wearing rags and eating dhindo [corn flour batter cooked in water] with whatever we can grow. We have spent our lifetimes together. Now we have decided to do something together once again. We believe if we work together, we can still impact our society in our own small way. If we can increase agricultural produce, we can raise the living standards in the region. That is our plan. You have seen our apple orchard. We hope this venture of ours will bring returns in the next four to five years".

[An interview with Surul is also a part of the ethnographic film 'Taking on the Storm' (2021)]

Malti Pun Magar: “After all, war is like this, you get dust in your eyes when you sweep your home”

I vividly remember my first meeting with Malti. In her house at the centre of the village, she greeted us quietly with her hands full. In one hand, she was holding her two-year-old child while she had already started to prepare tea for us with the other. It went on like that throughout our conversation, and it seemed that she never stopped working. She was knitting, breastfeeding her youngest, keeping one eye on her other three young children running around us, and taking care of her guests while the conversation touched upon her Maobadi experience.

As a child, Malti did not go to school. This was common in Maikot; boys were sent to school, while girls spent most of their time herding goats. Malti used to spend days in their *goth* (a camp where animals are kept) to look after cows and goats. She narrates her childhood through stories of encounters with other villagers in the hills above the village. However, there is one event she describes even more vividly. In 1993, Malti became a member of the ‘All Nepal Revolutionary Women’s Association’. There she received her first education. What stayed with her the most were the teachings that subordinated groups like women needed to join the People’s War to gain their rights as citizens. “We learned that you don’t get rights just by asking; you have to fight for them. That is why I joined the People’s War”, she added.

When the People’s War began, the police made it very difficult for the Maoist affiliated people to stay in the village. However, Malti points out; the situation was much worse than that. “Their belief went something like: in Maikot village even the stones and soil are Maoists. So no one – elderly people, children – should be spared”. It was then and there that it became apparent to Malti that she, like other young people of Maikot, had no other option but to join the People’s Liberation Army and go deep into the forest to receive further training.

After performing various ‘underground and ‘above the ground’ activities for the Maoists, on February 13, 1998, Malti went ‘underground’ full-time. She started to work for the Young Communist League (YCL) and later for the *Gram Surakchya Dal* (Village Security

Unit), a local militia unit. At first, their job was to collect bullets, gun powder and *kukuris* (the machete-like, long knife commonly found in villages in Nepal) and supply them to the fighters. Later, Malti's membership at YCL was upgraded to the PLA, as they marched to the no. 2 area in the southern part of the country. Malti's job on the way was to collect the seasonal and other donations, but she also became part of the ambush missions. There were enemies on the way, so the squad had to sometimes quietly move out of the village and plan to ambush the police at the right moment. With Surul and Jyotiram, she was a part of an ambush for the first time when they managed to obtain the first rifles from the police. Malti recalls being happy to finally hit a blow to the police, who beat them and their friends back at the village.

Malti was only 15 at the time. Today, she argues that she was not afraid because of her age and admits that she sometimes enjoyed the battles. However, being a part of the movement was not easy. In Malti's eyes, joining the Maoists was crucial to get away from the household chores and an early arranged marriage, which was common in the village. She points out that by joining the party, she was fighting for gender equality and against economic injustice. It is not surprising that her family supported her decision because, at the time, Malti was safer in the PLA than she would have been in the village.

Malti became a full-time Maoist guerrilla for twenty-one months. She went on to be a part of several ambushes and battles, and her political motivations grew. One reason for this was the many atrocities the police committed in the villages like Maikot. She remembers seeing two girls no older than thirteen. The girls had come to meet their brothers who were in the underground movement. Malti saw the five of them being arrested by the police. They could have been interrogated and then made to renounce the revolution but were instead, without any justification, thrown into a deep pit and buried alive. While telling me this frightening story, tears made way down her cheeks, falling on the hat she was knitting for her baby.

However, there were also other sides to the war; she lightened up. Besides fighting, Malti learned how to read: "We were at that time illiterate, we didn't know anything, but they taught us so that we were able to even read newspapers". There were 'elders' in the movement who took care of the younger ones, but as she recalls, there was no gender-

based discrimination. “The men’s attitude and behaviour toward us women combatants was really wonderful. Looking down on women or mistreating them, forming male cliques or harassing women, practices that were the norm in the villages, were non-existent in the PLA”, she tells us. “If it were not for the PLA”, she continues, “I would have gotten married much sooner”. Malti like many other girls in the village would have been married according to the Khams cross-cousin marriage system. Instead, she got married in the PLA. “It was a sort of an arranged marriage, anyway”, she laughs, “instead of my parents it was arranged by the party. I didn’t even know who I am going to marry; this is how a Maoist marriage looked like”. Malti was twenty-three when she got married together with two other couples joining in on the ceremony at the same time. Her husband was a squad commander. Soon they had a child, and Malti moved from being a soldier to working in political organizing. “I worked with my daughter on my back”, pointing to the oldest daughter, “only in case of danger we would run away”. Through this work, Malti became distanced from the party because she discovered that it was “a mess on the top level”. She decided to rather stay at home and not get too involved in political work anymore. Today she recalls that she was ‘addicted’ to working with people and political organizing but has now for long felt disconnected from that kind of life.

It is hardly surprising that Malti is not engaged in politics anymore with five children to take care of. She is, however, very much a part of the yarsagumba season. She attends all the meetings and discussions in the village about the ‘yarsa’ harvest. “It is my only source of income”, she points out. Besides yarsa, Malti and her peers form a women’s association to provide training to develop craftsmanship skills. With the help of such an organization, working for the advancement of women, they want to establish training centres and shelters for women, creating links to markets for the products that only women would produce. For the moment, they do not have their building yet, so the trainings are currently held in one of the rooms of the health post. “I want to give women, who have suffered like me, a chance to earn a living”, she lifts her knitting hands, making it clear that knitting is one of such skills they aim to develop.

Looking back over the last two decades, Malti emphasizes the changes women have won for themselves. She points out how important it was to stay and fight in the PLA, to show that women are equal to men, even physically. They could carry anything and still manage

to keep up with the troops: five-kilogram rifles, ten-kilogram mines, food and clothes. That is how she earned her equality, she claims, and eventually, if a man said derogatory things about a woman, he was punished. “We had to go a long way to achieve this, and carry the burden that war brings, but I think it was worth it”, she says before wrapping it up with an old proverb: “After all, war is like this, you get dust in your eyes when you sweep your home”.

Despite these changes, Malti feels that the party has abandoned its goals and left them behind. The post-war development that made the party shift its focus away from the village is the primary source of disappointment for Malti. “We did such incredible things in those days, sacrificed so much. But nobody pays us any attention. Nobody cares about our plight today. Nobody notices that we need help”, she points out. After the war, Malti has been trying to make a decent living in the village. Through the daily experience of village life after the war, Malti experiences the absence of politics. “The Maoists haven’t kept their promises”, she argues, while at the same time pointing out how in the past, local political projects were able to mobilise people and ‘get things done’. Similarly to Surul’s narrative, Malti also navigates between past and present expectations, achievements and disappointments. However, at times, Malti’s narrative reaches a point of nostalgia, looking back at the People’s War as the ‘time of change’. “We went from illiterates to being able to write our names and read newspapers, from being clueless about politics to the role we can play in political change. That is a wonderful aspect of having been a part of the revolution”, she argues. For Malti, revolutionary fervour is missing in today’s village life. What has been done in the name of the revolution could continue in other forms to help develop people’s livelihoods:

“I would get women to join women’s associations and provide trainings to develop skills. I would, with the help of organizations working for the advancement of women, establish training centres and shelters for women, establishing links to markets for the products that women can make. Women could learn to knit and weave. Some of the proceeds from such businesses would be spent for the welfare of the parents and children of martyrs”.

Malti has been particularly active in developing small projects that would help the most marginalised families and the relatives of martyrs. In her view, the village community should take more active steps and continue to build grassroots organizations that would

fill the gap in the afterlife of the People's War. Despite being occupied by other work, Malti is still one of the politically more active women in the village.

Abhinam Nepali (Sandesh)

Sandesh does not hesitate to point out that Dalits were excluded from the village political life in the past. A member of the Dalit community himself, he felt that this was not the place for him either. Before the People's War, the caste discrimination was everywhere. Amid other turmoil, school life was entangled with caste prejudice to which not even teachers were immune. While talking about caste, Sandesh takes us back to his school days: "I used to take cucumbers from our garden to eat them during the lunch break. When we all sat down to eat my Magar classmates hesitated to eat it because when a cucumber was sliced, water would trickle out of it".

In Magar villages, the Kamis and the Damais were considered the lowest castes and lived in a secluded and narrow social sphere. Historically, the two Dalit sub-castes have settled in this hilly area as the subordinated physical and low-skilled labour for the Magar clans. The Kamis are thus still known as the blacksmith caste and the Damais as the tailor-musician caste. However, both communities live close together in a settlement adjacent to the centre of the village, which has long been the Pun clan's residence. Bound to their areas of village life, the Dalits had little say in village politics, which was an exclusively Kham affair. Many were afraid that they might suffer a beating if they dared to debate a public matter with higher caste members. However, it was not only the politics; all social life was permeated with caste prejudice. Sandesh points out a vivid example of this life in fear: "If a Dalit walked on a path higher than the one on which a Magar was walking, the Dalit was verbally abused, sometimes even beaten". It is not surprising that Dalits were not allowed to step on porches of Magar houses, let alone be allowed to step in the kitchen. They carried all kinds of social taboos, the use of water being the most commonplace example. If a Dalit had drawn water from the village well immediately before a Magar, the latter tossed in a blade of grass to "cleanse" the water (the practice is called: *duwa pati*). Such practices gradually waned after some of the teachers that had come to the village from the outside began to discourage them. However, Sandesh points out that caste-based discrimination has not entirely diminished until today.

When the war between the Maoists and the state forces was at its fiercest level, Sandesh studied in the Shree Putha Himalaya Secondary School in Maikot. He had already been a part of the Maoist Party's students' association, but he only performed a minor role. He used to take old clothes, shoes and snacks from the village to the PLA soldiers. Sandesh was studying for his sixth-grade exams when the Maoists detonated a bomb near his house. The bomb had been left near the path as an ambush for the police but failed to achieve its goal. The police soon arrived and started to interrogate the people about the event. Sandesh and a dozen other people were arrested that night and tormented by the police for several days. After being released, Sandesh was summoned by the Maoist cadres with whom they talked about the increasingly difficult situation in the villages. It was then that Sandesh realised that he would not be able to stand the cruelty of the police any longer. However, the dangerous guerrilla life did not appeal to him, and he hesitated to join the Maoist ranks. He was finally persuaded to join the *Sisné People's Cultural Family*, Rukum district's cultural troupe. Only when the Maoists were engaged in warfare with the army Sandesh was prompted to join the guerrilla forces. In the war's later years, he was a part of the squads that attacked Beni and Tansen towns.

The cultural groups, Sandesh recalls, were organized as committees, with seven to nine members in one unit. The members were selected based on their skills, and Sandesh, an excellent singer, soon came to stand out. The units used to travel around the region and perform their cultural programmes in the villages. The themes, Sandesh points out, were about 'destruction and creation'. Namely, destroying the 'old' village habits and putting society on a new path. The other themes often incorporated in the songs were the PLA's battles and injustices they tackled during their campaigns. It was not uncommon that songs described the atrocities committed by state forces at great lengths. Such songs often glorified the martyrs that lost their lives as innocent civilians or fellow guerrilla fighters. It was a way to convey the story to the martyr's parents, Sandesh adds.

After the People's War, Sandesh, like many others, did not try to pursue a military career. Instead, he was encouraged by many to start a career as a performer. He could sing well and play the harmonium, and his experience as a singer during the war could help him launch a career in the performing arts. Sandesh tried to pursue a career in the army's musical unit but decided to abandon his dreams after being deemed ineligible. Being

freshly married, with a child on the way, he was not up for the unstable life of a musician. This led him back to the village life he had been used to before. Settling back in Maikot, he became a farmer and, in the following years, a *yarsagumba* picker.

Looking back, he acknowledges his experience of the People's War as a type of education. Not only has he been a part of a cultural training program that the party had administered, but it was also the political education inscribed in that cultural program which he values the most. Sandesh points out that the revolutionary songs effectively disseminated knowledge about history and current political events. In this way, he and many others had a chance to 'learn through songs': "about people that died in a particular battle; how a village was united; how the class struggle progressed. Revolutionary songs touched people's hearts and minds. That is why this was a type of education, "a lesson on the People's War", he points out. On the other hand, the cultural troupes had an important role in mobilizing activists to join the PLA. Sandesh illustrates how by travelling from one village to another, the cultural group helped to create the 'revolutionary spirit', a culture of revolutionary resistance that 'awakened' the people. In Sandesh's view, this was the most important function of their work. "It worked in some villages, but not others, but usually the children remembered the lyrics everywhere", he points out.

Although Sandesh sees the People's War as a fight for the rights of all the marginalised groups, he interprets his experience in the broader struggle of the Dalit communities' against caste discrimination. "Although the state has portrayed us [Maoists] as violent and blood-thirsty, we had a personal connection with the people; we were more like them", he adds. In his opinion, the shared experience of struggle connected the people in the villages; in such cases, caste or other differences did not matter anymore. "Because the entire society was in the grip of the revolution, discriminatory practices gradually disappeared", Sandesh argues, but he quickly adds that "despite this experience, many still hold such views". Returning to the village life, Sandesh has learned to distinguish between people who were changed by the revolution and those that persist in the 'old ways'. This is a survival strategy that he had started to apply when getting accustomed to post-revolutionary life.

Seeing the party change, Sandesh at first stayed a loyal member. He acknowledged that the situation had changed and that the guerrillas “could not fight forever”. He supported the party’s new strategies that had to fit into the new political system that was being formed. It was throughout this period that Sandesh’s view on politics began to change. Today he sums it up in the following way:

“Back then, it had to be fought, and we fought. That is why there have been so many changes. But today, if someone says that they can bring about even further change through the barrel of a gun, I’d call them cowards. The people, Maoist cadres and former PLA soldiers, have become weary of the war. They have come to see that change is not possible only through fighting; it can only be won with the help of intellect and dialogue.”

Seeing the results of more recent Maoist politics, Sandesh became more distanced. In his eyes, the party never really addressed the issue of representation of marginalised ethnic groups. It has remained Brahmin, and Chettri dominated, he argues. This was the main reason that convinced Sandesh to become a member of CPN (UML) and start a different political path.

‘Hanging in Between’: The Politics of Disappointment in Post-Revolutionary Nepal

“We are not happy now; before the People’s war the village was peaceful because there was no place for imagination, we didn’t even imagine what they would do after the fight and we were satisfied with that. However, we dreamt of new life and change, and we got involved in the war because we were dreaming of the point where we would get equality, a new life, but we couldn’t reach there. Now we are not in the early stage, where we were happy, so we are hanging in between – not in the early stage and not in the point that we wanted to reach, so we are not happy. However, for this, the Maoist party is not the only one responsible; national and international factors are responsible for this and are the reasons for this failure. We want to be either in our early time or to be at the point, where wanted to go, but we are not there, we are hanging in between” (Lajim Pun, Maikot, 2017).

The narratives of former guerilla fighters articulate in detail the transition from collective-action building and the movement process of the People’s War to the lived reality of the post-revolutionary situation where they have found themselves ‘hanging in between’. Today, the collective-action frames that have helped spark the Maoist revolution have a much more ambiguous meaning. Some are perceived as distant unachieved goals; their meanings that mobilized thousands of peasants in the aftermath of the unfinished

revolution became a source of disappointment. On the other hand, some collective-action frames are seen more positively and create important building blocks in social change and political transformation narratives. I argue that these two visions define the post-revolutionary common sense divided between temporal frames constituting two often contradictory ideological positions: narratives of resistance and social transformation and the narratives of disappointment. These narratives show how the people that have been at the centre of a powerful interpretative process that changed the social and political life in the area understand their own involvement in the social world around them.

As Greenberg (2014) and others (Junge, 2012; Paley, 2008) have pointed out, collective action frames associated with post-revolutionary scenarios can be stuck between narratives of past revolutionary action and new (democratic) possibilities of the present. Sidney Tarrow has argued that in the aftermath of revolutions, the experiences of disappointment can be proportionally intense to the utopianism expressed in the movement process (Tarrow, 1992: 165). This can be especially visible in the narratives of former activists, where the frames resonate with interpretations of political transformation and the contradictions emerging out of political action and organization. Greenberg has described this condition as the ‘politics of disappointment’, “a condition of living in contradiction, of persisting in the interstitial spaces of expectation and regret” (Greenberg, 2014: 8). These spaces, described by former guerillas that I have interviewed as ‘hanging in between’ are an interwoven set of meanings that reflect the experiences of collective action, imaginaries of social and political change and new understandings of the political. Although they generate disappointments and regrets, these coordinates of the post-revolutionary common sense did not cease to produce alternative visions of the future. The politics of disappointment does not only help us to locate the failed political projects of the past but locates agency in the period of political transformation. It is in the space ‘in between’ that a politics of disappointment emerges. It “[...] emerges when messy realities move within the same discursive field as normative ideals and expectations. When revolution and democracy don’t live up to their promises, people produce forms of ‘secular theodicy’, or ways of making sense of and negotiating the space between ideal and everyday lived experience” (Greenberg, 2014: 21). Within this discursive space, the former guerillas in Maikot are evaluating the outcomes of the revolution, the past struggles, and

the politics of the Maoist party that has ceased to uphold the banner of revolutionary politics.

In Surul's narrative, where the contradiction between revolutionary ideals and the experience of post-revolutionary everyday life is perhaps the most visible, there is a close connection between hope, pride and disappointment. Looking back at the times of revolutionary action, Surul remembers the pain and the suffering he had to endure. If the circumstances were slightly different, he argues: "We wouldn't have spent half our lives in an area between life and death [...]". Although he often refers to alternative versions of history, imagining how life would have been if he hadn't become a guerilla fighter, in the next sentence, Surul relates his experience with the achievements of the revolution. "But at other times, we are filled with pride and joy. We changed this country. The current generation of Nepalis might not grasp it, but perhaps fifty years from now, people will realize that their forefathers endured great pain and suffering to win back democracy from the oppressive regime". Surul is, at the same time, a disappointed political subject and a subject that is reevaluating and reframing the outcomes and the unintended consequences of the revolution. One source of disappointment about the organization of life in post-revolutionary Nepal that Surul's often refers to is the organization of livelihoods. The hope of collective action and the political imagination of collective restructuring of the village economy have produced ideas that envision local development at the centre of new utopian visions of the future. For Surul, the revolutionary transformation could continue by utilizing the local resources, establishing cooperatives and other forms of local economic restructuring that would fulfil the lost expectations the Maoists have left behind.

Malti shares similar expectations for the future. She is disappointed about the outcomes of the revolution, pointing out that marginalized nationalities and women are not well represented within the Maoist and state political structures. While she points out the changes that women had fought for themselves, she also agrees that the burden of revolutionary change has been rather unequally distributed. She feels that the party has abandoned the former guerillas; they have not seen the promised changes, and in the aftermath of the revolution, they have not received any help or compensation. This is the most significant source of disappointment for Malti. However, Malti has not given up on

the prospects of change. Connecting the ideas of development and progress that relate to ideas of Maoist modernity, as well as the development discourse (Pigg, 1993; Leve, 2009), Malti argues: “I want to give women, who have suffered like me, a chance to earn a living”. Similarly to Surul’s, Malti’s narrative reflects the imaginaries and expectations of the Maoist modernity discourse and brings it to the everyday experience of village affairs. The disappointments that emerged from the failed revolutionary transformation are central to the post-revolutionary common sense, with which the former revolutionaries make sense of the past and the future. Both Malti’s and Surul’s and Sandesh’s narratives show that despite the decline of Maoist revolutionary politics, they perceive themselves as agents of change. In this way, the politics of disappointment is not connected only to a particular utopian politics of the past, but it is also a resource for present and future political imaginaries.

This brings me to important conclusions about the post-revolutionary common sense and the philosophy of praxis. Thomas argues that Gramsci’s contribution in the *Prison Notebooks* was to see that the philosophy of praxis and common sense (*senso commune*) are deeply connected. The philosophy of praxis should be seen:

“in connection with *senso comune*, beginning with its elements pregnant with a new conception of the world. It aims at an intellectual and moral reform of *senso comune*, thus allowing the subaltern masses to exit from their passivity, to construct a new experience of the world and to become ‘actors’” (Gramsci in Thomas, 2009: 16).

According to Thomas, the incoherence of *senso commune* should not be seen as inferior to philosophy. Instead, philosophy is dependent on the *senso commune*, which is “not the negation of philosophy of praxis, it is its precondition, the ‘ground’ from which such coherence emerges” (Thomas, 2009: 377). As I describe it in this chapter, the post-revolutionary common sense as a ‘politics of disappointment’ should not be seen only in light of the failure of the Maoist utopian project. In the Gramscian sense, we could read the utopianism of the Maoist project itself as the deviation from revolutionary practice that has created an unnecessary gap between the practical experience of the revolution and its future imaginary. However, I argue that Surul’s, Malti’s, and Sandesh’s narratives should be read as the spontaneous philosophy created through experiences of collective action and subalternity but has nonetheless remained a politics that is oriented towards

the present. The contradictory emotions and opinions that range from hope, pride to disappointment reflect a wide range of discursive fields that have filled in the gaps left by the demise of the Maoist regime. As Thomas further suggests, it is crucial to recognize these contradictions as *social*, not just personal contradictions (ibid) that help us understand both the uncritical and potential elements of common sense. In this sense, the post-revolutionary common sense consists of important insight and critiques of the movement process that presents relevant building blocks for future counter-hegemonic projects. On the other hand, it shows that despite a long history of oppositional movements, the post-revolutionary common sense is not necessarily in opposition to the ruling groups. On the contrary, many former guerillas today see the mainstream Maoist party (Prachanda's faction) as the logical successor of the movement, despite the disappointments that their politics have generated in rural Nepal. A similar contradiction has perplexed Zharkevich in the case of Thabang: "[h]aving heard this critique of the Maoist movement and the aversion towards compulsion to take sides in the conflict, I was astonished when the same old woman, upon being asked whom she would vote for in the coming election, answered: for the Maoists." (Zharkevich, 2019: 101).

The three narratives discussed in this chapter present only a fraction of the interviews conducted in Maikot and elsewhere in Rukum. This topic is addressed in more detail in the doctoral ethnographic film 'Taking on the Storm' (2021). Besides Malti's, Surul's and Sandesh's narratives, the film captures other narratives of resistance, transformation and disappointment that define the post-revolutionary common sense. By following the lives of former guerillas, the film provides further insights into how the frames and narratives of the revolution continue to influence and transform present politics. To refer to Greenberg: "[s]uch a project entails an admission that our politics, like those of the activists that we study, are subject to constant reinterpretation, reframing, uptake, and co-optation, in ways that can make the work of assessing politics incredibly destabilizing and deeply frustrating. It is at this point that disappointment becomes the beginning and not the end of politics" (Greenberg, 2014: 187). While the former guerillas have abandoned the ideas of revolutionary change, the long-term participation in Maoist collective action continues to shape their engagement in the social world. The post-revolutionary common sense is thus constituted by sets of ideas that mediate between the

past and present in a self-reflexive way, creating political subjects that are building new utopian visions within a contradictory field of the politics of disappointment.

Chapter 12: Yarsagumba: The Mushroom at the Top of the World

The unusual life cycle of yarsagumba can serve as a constructive metaphor to describe the production process of capital. Just as the universal logic of capital subordinates the labour process to its end, the mushroom spores (*Ophiocordyceps Sinensis*) infect and mummify the larva of a ghost moth, ultimately transforming it. The process, referred to by Marx as the subsumption of labour by capital, occurs in at least two ways: as formal and real subsumption (Marx, 1977: 1025). Real subsumption occurs when capital transforms the labour process according to its needs to increase labour productivity. On the other hand, formal subsumption occurs when capital subsumes the labour process as it is, without changing its main characteristics (the two forms of subsumption are explored in greater detail in chapter 5). Marx also discusses another form of subsumption that he calls 'hybrid subsumption' (Marx, 1977: 645). It is this form of subsumption that reflects the creation of the mushroom caterpillar hybrid. Like the labour process through hybrid subsumption, the caterpillar is taken over by another logic but maintains its previous form. As the abstract process of capital finds itself a body, the fungus parasitizes the caterpillar, creating a new organic structure within the caterpillar's body. To put it in Marx's terms:

"In these forms, capital has not yet acquired a direct control of the labor process. Alongside the independent producers, who carry on their handicrafts or their agriculture in the inherited, traditional way, there steps the usurer or merchant, with his usurer's capital or merchant's capital, which feeds on them like a *parasite*. The predominance of this form of exploitation in a society excludes the capitalist mode of production [meaning that sporadic existence of these forms does not exclude capitalist mode of production]; although it may form the transition, as in later Middle Ages" [emphasis mine] (Marx, 1977: 645).

This chapter analyses this process that occurs in the mountains above Maikot. The relentless landscape of highland pastures, where the Kham Magars graze their sheep, is a site where nature itself becomes an accumulation strategy (Smith, 2007). The biological process in which the fungus parasitizes the moth's larvae becomes a part of the 'production process' of the caterpillar fungus' value. This is only the beginning of a long commodity chain that stretches from these remote Himalayan mountains to East Asia's gift economies and commodity markets. The harvesting process, where the accumulation of capital occurs by "taking advantage of value produced without capitalist control" of the conditions of production (such as the production of raw materials, but also human and

non-human life), has been referred to as 'salvage accumulation' (Tsing, 2015: 63). Although Tsing does not describe this as wage labour, creating value through salvage accumulation resembles what Marx had in mind with hybrid subsumption. Although the harvesting of yarsagumba could be interpreted as a pre-capitalist or even post-capitalist economic form, Tsing argues that sites of salvage are both inside and outside of capitalism; they are pericapitalist (ibid). Like Tsing's analysis of the matsutake economy, the yarsagumba harvest is dependent on local knowledge and the non-capitalist labour process that brings thousands of peasants into precarious living conditions of the high Himalayas. Yarsagumba is not picked for its use-value. While the pickers see it as a mushroom, it is later commodified, as it becomes a part of a lucrative commodity chain that produces immense exchange value. By commodifying the caterpillar fungus, business people in China and elsewhere created a specific market and a gift economy that reflects current cultural politics within the PRC (Yeh and Lama, 2013). The interrelations of these non-capitalist and capitalist economic forms within the commodity chain are what Tsing observes as salvage accumulation.

The history of the formation of the yarsagumba economy in Rukum touches upon a similar topic Tsing is describing in her groundbreaking book *Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). Tsing's understanding of how non-capitalist economic forms produce value through salvage accumulation is an essential contribution to non-reductionist theories of capitalism. Through the contingent and heterogeneous process of harvesting and trading matsutake mushrooms, she shows how non-capitalist and capitalist forms shape each other. What Tsing is describing then is a form of hybrid subsumption of labour, but at the same time, it is much more. Building her argument on contemporary feminist scholarship, Tsing discusses the diversity of non-capitalist processes that are subsumed into the logic of capital in ethnographic detail. Like the hybrid form of yarsagumba, the hybrid forms of capitalism tell us not how one capitalist logic conquers all other economic forms, but on the contrary, how capitalist and non-capitalist economic forms work together. Furthermore, Tsing brings these hybrid forms into a broader discussion of multispecies collaborations, tracking the interdependence between humans and non-humans in the ruins of capitalism. Similarly to Tsing, Yeh and Lama (2013) have followed yarsagumba through the social and cultural geographies of more-than-human

assemblages to unveil the potential of political economy and more-than-human analytical approaches to commodity chains. Following these approaches, I show how we can learn about political struggles and the unevenness of capitalist development in rural Nepal from the history of this extraordinary mushroom.

So far, I have discussed how peasants in Rukum have become guerrilla fighters. This chapter addresses a further transformation: how guerrilla fighters became mushroom pickers. First, I trace the history of the yarsagumba economy to its early beginnings to show how the local elites and entrepreneurs began trading this precious resource through a system of brokerage. I follow the local developments to the beginning of the People's War when the control of the yarsagumba fell into the hands of the Maoist party. During this time, the local yarsagumba harvest represented the main revenue generated by the Maoist guerrilla economy (see chapter 11) that was put in place to support the development of the movement and its more extensive military operations. The fact that yarsagumba became one of the primary funding sources for the Maoist party is a narrative missing from the anthropology of the People's War. The CPN(M) deployed the PLA to manage and harvest the 'Himalayan Viagra' but used the already existing trading routes and channels to move the fungus further down the commodity chain. While the revenue generated from yarsagumba was used by the party and the village community, it also produced new rural elites of brokers that began to establish networks of trading routes in the remote borderlands (Goodhand, et al., 2021).

In the aftermath of the People's War, the caterpillar fungus became the most important source of income for Maikotis. The village secured access to the yarsa picking grounds and established a local system of governance that manages all the aspects of the yarsa economy. Through my ethnographic observations, I discuss the changes in the local yarsa governance system and show how the local politics around managing this common resource have become a source for creating new political subjectivities. By looking at the micro-political arena and the different 'flows of power', I understand Maikot's situation within the global context of de-peasantisation that produces 'dependent autonomy' (Narotzky, 2016). While this has meant that new spaces for contentious politics centred around common resources have emerged in rural Nepal, producing a new politics of autonomy, the sites of salvage accumulation have not ceased to create an uneven

economic landscape that is increasing class differentiation, livelihood precarity, and creating new forms of economic disarticulations.

The History of Yarsagumba in Maikot

Maikot and other Kham villages in the Rukum district have a long history of trade. Although Khams primarily relied on transhumant pastoralism, travelling to the high Himalayan pastures in the summer and the plains of the Terai in the winter, these routes were also very convenient for simple commodity exchange. The salt trade on the routes with Dolpo probably dates back the furthest. The people of Dolpo brought Tibetan salt and bartered it with the Maikotis for grain (wheat, corn, barley, or buckwheat)⁶⁸. In this way, Maikot became an important post on the trading route between the north and the south. The Dolpals came down south to Maikot twice a year: in May/June and September/October. The salt was kept in Maikot, and it was later bought by people from southern Rukum and those from neighbouring Baglung, Rolpa, and Pyuthan districts.

The buyers usually paid with money, or there was a simple commodity exchange. This kind of trade established the main trading routes on which other goods would later be sold (agricultural produce, woollen items and yarsagumba). The commodity exchange between Dolpals and Maikotis was practised until 1972-74. After the decline of the trade with Dolpa, the trading routes to the south became the only commercial links to the outside world. The nearest markets were in Nepalgunj and Kolabas. From Maikot, it took one month by foot to get the commodities from these markets. In this time, instead of from the north, salt began to enter the area from the south. In turn, the Maikotis also traded medicinal herbs, woollen blankets and hemp items⁶⁹ at the bazaars in the Terai. However, trading of more considerable quantities only started when the value of yarsagumba became known. These early trade routes linking Maikot to other markets did

⁶⁸ According to Maikotis the exchange rate in those days was 1 sukka [i.e. 4 ana] of grains for 4-5 dharni [1 dharni = 2 kilograms] of salt.

⁶⁹ Rukum and Rolpa were the areas where until the mid-1970s most of Nepal's hashish was produced. It left the area to the south, to be sold in India, or in Kathmandu. The plant's bark was traditionally used to produce rope, bags and clothing. According to some sources it was "sometime in the early 20th Century, they harvested the gum which crowns the plant and processed it into 11-gram hashish balls. The majority of the population - including women, children, elderly and adult males - participated in hashish production during harvest season" (Gersony, 2003, non pag). The hashish economy represented an important cash flow for the remote villages of northern Rukum, and some traces of illicit hashish trade remain until today.

not produce a merchant class due to only a small amount of capital accumulated through differences in prices.

The Maikotis began harvesting yarsagumba after discovering that the Tibetan refugees from Dhorpatan had picked it in 'Buki'⁷⁰. The Tibetans were secretly camping in Buki and made up a story that they were going to Tibet. They camped there for a fortnight under the pretext of grazing their horses before continuing to the next camp and later north to the Tibetan border (where yarsagumba was sold). This happened in the 1980s, and the Maikotis did not know anything about the caterpillar fungus at the time. The shepherds used to pick it, thinking it was an ordinary mushroom, and they fried it alongside other vegetables to put it in the *tarkari*, a vegetable curry soup eaten with the local cornmeal. The Tibetans did not let them in on the secret, and the Maikotis remained oblivious to the value of the mushroom for the next decade.

Later, a goat herder from the area, named Tshering Dorje, learned about the yarsagumba trade and took some to Tansen (the headquarters of Palpa district) in 1989. He could not find any yarsagumba traders, so he had to dump everything and return to Maikot empty-handed. The first yarsagumba trader was Chaya Bahadur Pun, the former villager leader, that in the early 1990s stepped down as the Pradhan Panch. In 1991, a yarsa trader from Dolpo came in touch with Chaya, and they met in Nepalgunj (a city in south Nepal). Chaya had no idea about yarsa, not even knowing that it was growing near Maikot. The Dolpali trader had to explain the details and show Chaya the samples of the caterpillar fungus. They also discussed the locations in the mountains where it could be found. The trader proposed a partnership and advanced a cash payment to Chaya to organize the first harvest in Buki. Chaya agreed to recruit pickers from the village and organize an expedition to the remote pastures to search for the little known mushroom. In 1991, a group of Maikotis picked the first yarsa, and Chaya sold it for 1000 rupees per kilogram⁷¹. In the first harvest, the Maikotis collected a total of 80 kilograms. Chaya organized a

⁷⁰ Buki are the highland pastures above Maikot, where Khams have traditionally grazed their sheep. Today, while the Kham villages have seen a decline in pastoralism, this place is more often referred to in its relation to yarsagumba. For both purposes Buki is the word used in Maikot to refer to this highland place that begins with the Pupal lake and stretches all the way to the border with Dolpo.

⁷¹ For comparison: Today 1000 Nepali rupees is about \$10. The prices of yarsagumba can nowadays reach up to \$30.000 per kilogram on the international market, and one piece in Buki costs from \$6-10.

system of communal labour and recruited the shepherds that were grazing the sheep in Buki.

After realizing that the Dolpali trader had been buying the Maikot's yarsa well under the (black) market price, Chaya decided to find other traders that would be interested in the mushroom. He began to do business with a Tibetan from Manang called Ghandra Pema. Because yarsa was illegal at the time, Chaya and other traders from the area took on quite a risk. Chaya remembers these days in the following way:

"When I first met him, he lived in a small, dark room in Kathmandu. I had the money back then. I sold it to him on credit. They sold it with a huge margin; we didn't. Making 15,000 rupees from yarsa was a big business deal for us. That, too, was big money in those days. The Tibetan bought a multi-storied house and a car; I remained as I was before. A guy from Kathmandu used to say, "This Chaya enriches Tibetans, but himself makes nothing.""

In 1993, Chaya got caught by the police in Kathmandu with 70kg of yarsagumba. At the time, yarsa trade was illegal in Nepal⁷², and Chaya and his porters were sentenced to two years in prison. The bail was set to 10.5 million rupees, and after spending eight months in prison, Chaya was able to gather enough money from his relatives to pay it, coming to Maikot completely bankrupt. In order to continue trading, he took on a loan of 50.000 rupees from another Tibetan trader from Dolpo to be able to buy the harvest from the pickers. Other traders in Maikot have put forward similar stories of how the yarsa trade began. The Tibetan traders were giving them advances and loans to kickstart the yarsagumba economy in the area. Bharat from Pusar, another early trader from Maikot VDC, received even more capital from a Dolpali trader. The trader from Dunai in Dolpo had procured him with 900.000 rupees to organize the yarsa harvest in Buki. The picking season initially organized by Chaya was now expanding, with a handful of traders competing to buy off the season's harvest. The pickers and the traders of Maikot had no idea what the caterpillar fungus was being used for; the only thing they knew was that the lamas used it as medicine. Even in the early nineties, the emerging yarsa economy began to change village life. It improved the economic situation of the poorest families, as more and more young people went to Buki to be a part of the picking seasons. "It was like picking money from the ground", one picker reminiscent.

⁷² The trade in Nepal was illegal until 2001 (Shrestha and Bawa, 2013).

In the first season, only the pickers from Maikot's main village went to pick the mushrooms. In the second year, the word had already reached the surrounding villages, and the number of pickers increased. In the third year, the word had reached Takasera and even further, which meant that the number of pickers increased substantially. The Maikotis became worried that they would lose control of the yarsa grounds and chased the pickers away. The outside yarsa hunters scattered around the vast mountainous terrain, some stayed on the Rukum side, and the others went to pick the mushrooms on the other side of the pass, in Dolpo. It was then that Maikotis realized that they had to organize the yarsa season better and protect Buki from outsiders that wanted to harvest without their permission. The village chairman, Kaji Pun, organized the first yarsa committee and sent the protection units (*suruchiya pathaune*), to keep the rising number of outsiders off the yarsa fields. I spoke to the pickers who were a part of these early protection units in the mid-1990s, and apparently, there has been quite some contestation between the locals and outsiders. Several times shots were fired to scare the thieves away, and the young Maikotis spent weeks and even months scouting the area for potential trespassers. In the same year when Maikot began protecting the yarsa grounds, the People's War began and altered the already established yarsa committee's plans to develop the picking season further.

Yarsagumba and the Guerilla Economy

Buki began to play an essential role in Maoist organizing. It was in this remote terrain that Maoists performed most of their underground activities. According to Maikotis, two PLA training camps were placed in Buki. Some people continued to harvest yarsagumba secretly, but from 1999 the Maoists completely took over the yarsa grounds. The party began to organize the picking of the mushrooms in order to generate more revenue for its guerrilla activities. Although the initial decision of the people's regime in Maikot was that the yarsa revenue would be shared between the village community and the party, most of the revenue was spent on expanding Maoist activities. At the start, the Maoists bought the mushrooms from Maikotis, who were harvesting them themselves. However, later, the party deployed a platoon of PLA combatants to Buki and took over the harvesting of the

yarsagumba. The Maoist fighters trained in guerrilla warfare used their skills in the high mountainous terrain to pick mushrooms.

It is difficult to say how much the Maoists earned from the seasonal yarsa harvests. Most cadres have reported that the party usually earned around 40 lakhs Rs (4 million rupees or around \$30,000) per season. "The Maoists got so much from Maikot that they didn't get so much from any other part of the country", a former guerrilla recalled. The Maikotis remember that in 2006 when the end of the conflict was already in sight, the Maoists made the most out of the yarsa season. It was then that both Maikotis and the PLA were sent to Buki. More than 50 PLA members participated in harvesting; they collected the yarsa and gave it to the PLA commanders. The party also collected the yarsa from other pickers, and according to the former PLA commander going by the name Jujaru, the party made up to 80 million rupees from that harvest alone (today, this would amount to \$600,000). "The Party used the money to pay back the combatants' loans and to feed the PLA and pay for their basic needs (schooling, etc.)", he argued. While most of the funds were spent on party related expenses, the people's regime also invested some revenue in running the local school. The government had not allotted a full-time teacher to Maikot and provided sufficient funding, so the Maoists and the village committee decided to cover some of the school's expenses.

According to these numbers, during the People's War, the Maoists generated somewhere between \$500,000 – \$1 million in revenue from the yarsa harvest alone. This claim is supported by the rise in prices of more than 200% between 1995 and 2015 (Negi et al. 2015), which contributed to high earnings from yarsa sales. The CPN(M) incorporated the villages of northern Rukum into their guerrilla economy (see also chapter 11), a system that supported the establishment of the Maoist base area. However, although the Maoists were in charge of the local yarsa economy, they were not controlling the commodity chain that linked Maikot to the international markets. The small traders, such as Bharat, were banned from trading, while some others that were permitted to continue had to pay a fee to the party. In this way, the Maoist party monopolized the yarsa trade and was able to sell it directly to wholesalers. These yarsa traders were outsiders, and the party sold the yarsa in bulk in Kathmandu. This was not an easy business. The yearly yarsagumba harvest amounted to around 125kg, which makes for a large number of mushrooms. The

guerrillas had to transport the mushrooms to Kathmandu in the cover of the night and far away from the eyes of the police. Yarsagumba is not the only example of guerrillas using the black market to generate funds to support the insurgency. Other reports of poaching and smuggling endangered animals and plants paint a more complex picture of the illegal guerrilla economy (Baral and Heinen, 2005: 8). However, given the scale of the yarsa economy in Rukum, it is hard to imagine that any other natural resource would generate such an amount of revenue.

During the People's War, the yarsa seasons' revenue was mainly used to manage the PLA. However, the Maikotis argue that the Maoists misused the yarsa funds of the last years of the war. Today, most villagers doubt that the money had been used for the PLA and blame the Maoists for not keeping their promise of sharing the money with Maikot VDC. The lack of transparency is evident, as the party was in complete control of the harvest and organized the selling of the yarsagumba on its terms in Kathmandu. Most of the surplus never made it back to Maikot, and the village leaders today argue that the amount given to the VDC was not nearly as much as what the party had promised to invest back into the village. Other conflicts followed. At the end of the People's War, some Maikoti traders did not receive payment for the yarsagumba they had sold to the party. The Maoists had promised to sell their yarsa in Kathmandu and pay them off later. In the end, both the yarsa and the money ended up with the party, causing a chain of events in Maikot that caused both traders, and consequently, pickers quite some losses (according to testimonies, the Maoists owed more than 95 lakh (\$60,000) to the Maikotis). This conflict damaged the party's reputation in the village and was one of the main reasons people began to turn to other parties for support. In the first seasons after the peace agreement, Maikot's yarsa committee used the revenue from the harvest to repay villagers' debts that occurred in the last years of the war.

After the peace process began in 2006, the guerrillas became redundant in the yarsa grounds, and the villagers again took control of the yarsa harvest. However, all neighbouring villages wanted equal ownership over the yarsa fields in Buki. The Maikotis united and argued that Buki lies within their VDC boundaries, and protection units were again deployed to control the yarsa fields. One observer from Maikot commented that this was a fierce battle between different village communities:

"For instance, in 2069 B.S. [2012], the people of Hukam claimed they ought to have an equal share in the yarsagumba fields of Maikot. They enforced a blockade to pressure Maikot. All the Maikotis, even older people, said that we shouldn't give over the rights of our yarsa fields, no matter what. They said that they were prepared to die for ownership of the yarsa fields".

Shortly after that, in 2012-13, Maikot managed to get complete control over Buki, and no other village dared to interfere into the yarsa season. Some of the old strategies put in place by Kaji Pun before the war were revived, and a new governance system was formed under the new village leadership. However, further opening and commercialization heavily boosted this mountainous economy that became the leading local development strategy.

Maikot recognized the opportunity to generate more revenue and opened the yarsa trade to local and other business people that began pouring into the area. The yarsa economy that had already expanded under Maoist control reached new proportions in the post-war era that were unimaginable before the war. The Maikotis created a new harvesting regime and began to manage all aspects of the 'Himalayan gold rush' that began to attract thousands of pickers from all corners of Nepal. Maikot's yarsa committee that was now in charge of arranging security, fixing the harvesting fee, and handing over the season's revenue to the VDC, also began promoting and commercializing the yarsa grounds. Although the district and national levels of the Maoist party knew the amount of yarsa harvested there, Maikotis argue that it ceased to be their area of interest, and they never returned to oversee the picking season. For more than a decade, the village of Maikot used an informal governance system to manage the yarsa fields and developed a complex highland economy that built on the relations between different actors. Some say this was possible because of the losses Maikotis had to carry after the party had cheated them out of their earnings. Others say that it was due to the unity of Maikot that stood up against the unfair management of this precious local resource. Whatever the reason, the process of negotiating the yarsa governance system marked the village's political and economic development and its relation to state and non-state actors over the next decade.

Attending the Yarsa Season in Buki

In 2017, I attended the yarsa season in Buki as part of my fieldwork, during which I also made use of visual methods. The result of the three-week-long field trip was the film *The Mushroom at the top of The World* (2021) that explores the history of harvesting yarsagumba in Maikot and the different narratives connected to the mushroom economy that range from narratives of political struggle, resilience, and precarity. Although the film mainly consists of scenes from highland pastures above Maikot, the preparations for the field trip to Buki began in the village long before. The narratives about yarsagumba became a part of most of my engagements with Maikotis, and there was not a single interview about the People's War and Maikot's politics that would not touch upon the caterpillar fungus. The former guerillas often overlapped their stories of political struggle with the narratives of development and progress that could not be discussed without mentioning yarsa. A yarsa trader summed up these narratives in the following way: "Maikot is blessed with natural resources; if we would know how to commercialize them, we could change this country into a prosperous land". The local sentiment surrounding the yarsa economy followed these perspectives put forward by the local elites, most often influential yarsa traders.

In the house where I was staying, the *gharpatini* Dilmaya (the landlady) began with her preparations for Buki three weeks before the season. Like many others, she visited the shops in the village to buy food supplies and camping equipment, nothing more than trash bags and tarpaulins that would be used as tents and mattresses. The shopkeeper carefully noted down all the items in her notebook to later collect her payment in Buki, in the form of yarsagumba. In recent years, all of Maikot's shopkeepers have become yarsa traders and moneylenders, mainly because they hold the most capital in the village. During the yarsa season, they move their enterprises to the camping sites in Buki, where they sell goods at a higher price margin. At the same time, they collect the mushrooms from the pickers as payment for the supplies or loans they have advanced them in the village, creating patron-client relationships – one of the main characteristics of the yarsa economy in rural Nepal. This method secures them a good portion of the harvest in advance, on top of which they buy additional pieces of yarsa. Dilmaya, like most pickers,

bought the supplies on credit and later paid back the loan with the yarsa picked in Buki. She bought supplies worth \$200; however, according to the information I gathered in the village, the preparations for the yarsa season can cost anywhere between \$150 - \$800. The amount mainly depends on the time pickers intend to spend in Buki.

Most villagers buy additional clothes, essential camping equipment, food and medicines. In most cases, the supplies last for around 2-4 weeks; after that, at least one family member will return to the village to stock up on essentials once more. While some supplies are available in the highland camps during the season, it is common to return to the village to avoid paying the high prices in Buki. "The shops in Buki are for outsiders (*bahirako mancche*), Maikotis like to go down to the village, rather than spend money here", one observer commented. The other reason that makes people return to the lowlands is to stock up on firewood. All of Buki lies beyond the forest line, making it difficult to find any type of fuel. Some pickers can extend their stay by using horse manure, but eventually, everyone has to depart on the strenuous journey to collect firewood in the forest near Dhule (a day's walk away in one direction).

The season's management in 2017 was somewhat different from the previous years when more permits were issued to the pickers coming from the outside. The protection units (*suruchiya*) were sent to Buki in advance to protect the harvest and pick the mushrooms to secure that a good portion of the harvest would stay in Maikot's hands (discussed further below). Dilmaya decided to depart for Buki in the first wave of pickers from Maikot, three weeks before the season's official start. She packed her belongings into a basket and began a two-day journey to Pupal. Some pickers make it to Buki in one day; however, they often suffer from symptoms of altitude sickness. Dilmaya instead decided to stay in Dhule for a night (a small settlement above Maikot consisting of four guesthouses) to acclimatize properly for her extended stay at an altitude of almost 5000m.

From Dhule, the path leads through a narrow gorge and up an ancient glacier bed where more and more highland pastures begin to open up just above the forest line. To a firstcomer, the sight of the pastures in bloom with high Dhaulagiri range peaks at their back is truly breathtaking. After reaching Buki, several important parts of Rukum become visible: Putha Himal to the north-east, Sisne Himal to the west, the hills of Dhorpatan to

the east, and several Kham villages lined-up one after another to the south. In other words, Buki is a place where one can visibly connect the places essential to Kham mythology, political and ethnic imaginary, with the movement of an eye. Even in more recent times, Buki has not ceased to be a place of inspiration. It appears both in local communist songs of resistance and the popular Kham songs of the post-war era. For most Khams, Buki is a part of their first childhood memories outside the village setting, when they visited the pastures with the shepherds moving up the hill in the summer. Maikotis like to refer to their time in Buki, where they often played games or even fell in love. However, there are also stories of hardship; not only the hard work of shepherds, loggers and traders that were essential to Kham's economic life but also shamans who crossed the area on their ritual journeys (Oppitz, 1981; Oppitz and Sahebi, 2013). For others, Buki is a place they relate to the guerilla struggle. Apart from the Maoist guerilla activities (chapters 11 and 12), this was the place where the PLA performed revolutionary marriages (*Janabadi bibaha*)⁷³. All of these different ways Khams relate to Buki -- from being a land of Kham's ancestors to the site of guerilla struggle against the state -- constitute an essential part of their social identity and influence formal and informal processes of commoning⁷⁴.

For Dilmaya, Buki is important ancestral land with several mythological places. As we made our way towards the yarsa camps, she related some of the places we passed to mythological tales she heard from her father, an influential village shaman. While this was her first memory of Buki, later, like for many Kham women, this was the place where she fell in love with her husband. "Not like other marriages in the village, ours was a love marriage", she remembers. Since then, Dilmaya and her husband have been avid yarsa pickers; they have depended on the yarsa income for over a decade. Besides socio-cultural connections to Buki, for Dilmaya, the main relation to the highland pastures has become

⁷³ Zharkevich argues that Maoist marriage became a political issue during the times of the People's War. In her words, the Maoists were promoting love marriage in order to ensure "the unwavering commitment of their young cadres to the revolutionary cause, which rested not only on the power of the Maoist ideology but also on the power of interpersonal relationships between its cadres, with intimate bonds often having been conducive to the Maoist cause as fraternal bonds [...]". (Zharkevich, 2019: 150).

⁷⁴ Smith (2010) shows how nature is alienated from society in order to become external and ready to be accumulated by capital. While, I show discuss how these forces in Buki created the yarsa economy, a temporary highland economy that is constantly reshaped and commodified, it would also be worth exploring the history of Buki, by understanding the rhythms of everyday life and space as a creative process (Lefebvre, 1991).

of economic nature. "Sometimes we make around \$2000, which lasts us for a year. If we make less, we have to find other work in the village", Dilmaya points out. The yarsagumba harvest enabled them to send their youngest son to a high school in Kathmandu. This means paying for the tuition fees and boarding costs, expenses that only a few villagers could afford prior to the yarsa boom. Besides yarsa Dilmaya's family relies on subsistence farming and keeps a buffalo and a dozen chickens around the house. In summer, they both spend up to two months picking yarsagumba in Buki and make several trips back to the village to replenish supplies and stock up on firewood. While Dilmaya is approaching the age of 50, she can still carry up more than 20kg of supplies, an amount that lasts her two to three weeks. After arriving at Buki, she sets up her tent in the middle of the Pupal camp, next to the tents of her relatives.

In Buki, the Maikotis set up three different camps, between which there is 2-3 hours walking distance. The first and the main camp is Pupal, and it represents the main yarsa picking site. Most locals still argue that the grasslands in Pupal provide the most significant part of the harvest. Around 2000-3000 people camp at the site on a good season, making it the liveliest part of Buki. In Pupal, one can find several shops, restaurants and hotels. At the peak of the yarsa boom, the Maikotis even opened tent casinos, where card games and other gambling opportunities allowed the yarsa pickers to try their luck in what they referred to as the 'Himalayan Las Vegas'. There are other entertainment opportunities for pickers staying in the camp for months. There is a volleyball field at one side of the camp, where the locals like to organize a tournament between different village teams. In addition to this, between 2012-2016, a businesswoman from Pelma village ran a mobile cinema, where she screened Bollywood classics. For the price of 100 rupees, the pickers could end the day by watching their favourite film stars.

Besides being a hub for entertainment, Pupal is also the main yarsa trading point. The traders from Maikot and the outside are based in the camp. By sticking together and supporting each other, they form tents on the camp's south edge. They visit pickers in other camps and buy the dried and cleaned yarsa by the piece. While traders are expected to travel between camps during the season to find yarsa sellers, most pickers like to come to Pupal themselves and sell their whole seasonal harvest in one batch. By collecting different offers from the traders, they make sure to get the highest price for their precious

mushrooms. This makes Pupal the main trading point and a necessary stop-over for every yarsa picker.



Figure 6: The Pupal Camp in Buki (2017)

Moving along the highland plateau to the west, one reaches Rbiza camp that is settled higher up in the hill. Here the terrain is more demanding, and the camp is exposed to harsh weather conditions. Only more experienced pickers choose to stay in this camp, and it often happens that they return to Pupal for warmer weather and the wide range of facilities available there. This makes the Rbiza camp much smaller, reaching up to no more than 300 tents, with only one or two small shops run by locals.

Further along the path to the northwest, right next to the border with Dolpo, lies the third camp called Purbang. It is settled below the Jhangla Pass (around 5100m), which provides a natural cover from the severe mountain storms that sometimes take the pickers by surprise. As the second-largest camp, it can host up to 1500 people, with ample facilities lasting throughout the season. Besides Pupal, it is the only other option for long-term camping in Buki. In recent years, the local rumours hold that the yarsa harvest in Pupal has been impacted by overharvesting. This convinced more people to move to Purbang, which became a more significant trading point than in the past. Its vicinity to Dolpo also makes it a good base for traders that sell the yarsa to Dolpalis. Maikot's yarsa committee is planning to promote and enlarge the Purbang camp in the future. One

reason behind this is the importance of Purbang on the north-south trading route; however, these plans are also connected to the committee's longstanding desire to expand Buki westwards and thus gradually enlarge Maikot's common land.

These activities create complex geographies of the yarsa harvest and a temporary highland economy consisting of highland camps, trade and supply routes, market spaces, trading points, and security posts that mark the current limits of the yarsa territory. This presents only a small portion of the regional highland economy, which, in the whole area of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve (DHR), consists of as much as 20 highland pastures that are used for yarsagumba collection⁷⁵, but also expands further in Dolpo, where most of yarsagumba in Nepal is picked. Although the yarsagumba collection and trade fall under the authority of the state and the DHR, local communities such as Maikot have started to form their governance regimes of the yarsa fields. In order to keep up with the rapid development of yarsa collection and trade, Maikot founded its own yarsa institutions that enabled the local community to issue permits, tax the collectors and use the collective funds for local development projects. Scholars have observed other governance strategies put to use by village communities, such as protection units and control of outside people (Weckerle et al. 2010).

These governance systems regulate the relationships between local communities, markets, non-human actors, and the environment. These relationships are constantly changing and form a complex combination of systems that balance the interests of a variety of actors: local communities, individual pickers, non-state actors (such as DHR), state agencies and other regulators (such as conservation agencies and NGOs), and markets. Like many other peasant communities across the world, in Nepal too, these political struggles can be understood as struggles for the commons. It is without a doubt that in the last three decades, the remote communities in Nepal Himalayas have benefited from the process that has transformed the previously locally unknown resource into a

⁷⁵ According to a survey conducted by Thapa B., Panthi S., Rai R.K., et al. (2014) there are numerous yarsagumba picking sites scattered around the highland territories of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, and span across the districts of Dolpo, Maygdi and Rukum. According to their assessment these pastures are the following: Jwanla, Pupal, Phulbari, Panidhal, Arbija, Bhitrikhola, Agjukhung, Warmi, Parmi, Phaliyaghar, Nayanban, Mansoon Mela, Sundaha, Lamsar, Kholathari, Phurse, Phagune Deurali, Dailekolekh, Gurjakhani, Surtibangdhuri.

highly valued product. The transformation has brought noticeable changes by increasing personal and community income, but also by increasing the dependency of peasants on the yarsa economy. In order to understand the process of commoning and the appropriation of the commons by the rural elites, I further look at how different systems of governance developed to manage yarsagumba in Maikot. I show how the local yarsa narrative has become a source for a new politics of autonomy while empowering rural brokers and creating precarious livelihoods for peasants depending on the yarsa economy.

The Transformation of the Governance System: From Autonomy to Dependence

At the time of the preparation to join the Maikotis on my first yarsa trip in 2017, the post-war economic boom of the yarsa economy was already in decline. The golden years of Maikot's yarsa trade were in the years after 2012 when Maikot VDC again secured complete control over Buki. Today, harvesting yarsagumba still represents the most important annual income for most people in the area of north Rukum, but the number of outside pickers has somewhat decreased. Most Maikotis are involved in local business, selling yarsa, other medicinal herbs, alcohol or woollen items. Labour migration abroad has increased in the years after the People's War, but it has not reached the numbers we see in other places further south. The locals argue that it was due to yarsa that Maikotis have less often decided to migrate to Nepali cities or abroad. In other words, while yarsa has created economic opportunities, it has also increased economic dependence.

Outside of the widely critiqued idea of the 'tragedy of the commons' (Hardin, 1968); a more broad idea that self-interest rather than common good guides communities' use of common resources, scholars have proposed reconsiderations about the commons (see also Rose, 2020). The literature on common-pool resources, for example, has challenged ideas that local communities should depend on outside help in managing their valuable resources. There are many resource management systems with several variables that consists of too many differences to provide a comprehensive overview of the complex relationships between the commons and other actors and their interests in this chapter. However, it is worth noting some similarities pointing towards the possibility of sustainable local governance rather than the 'tragedy of the commons'. Comparing

private, government and local-level management, Acheson has pointed out that there is no universal solution that can prevent failure to produce effective management regimes. All the different governance systems (private, governmental, locally-led) can successfully manage natural resources. However, there is quite a large variety of circumstances that can also cause them to fail (Acheson, 2006: 128). Although failure is likely, Elinor Ostrom (1990) summarised eight main design principles for sustainable governing of the commons that help prevent the failure of common-pool resources⁷⁶. Sustainably managing common resources can be essential for the economic reproduction of rural communities. However, scholars also pointed out the ambivalent relationship between the commons and capitalist development; commons can be appropriated by capitalist development or play an essential role in creating anti-capitalist alternatives (de Angelis, 2007). Agarwal's critique of the commons shows we should not resort to the ideas of the sovereign, self-governing self and systems of politics as concepts residing outside politics. Agarwal instead argues that: "[a]ttention to power and micro-politics within communities is therefore critical in understanding how resources are used and managed" (Agarwal, 2003: 257).

By paying attention to the micro-political arena in post-war Maikot and the yarsa fields in Buki, I do not intend to put forward an idea for a sustainable governance system that could help avoid the looming failure of the yarsa economy. Instead, I look at how subaltern actors changed the relationship between the commons, the village community and the state, and how by modifying the local governance systems, they have become different political subjects. As Agarwal points out, paying attention to these local strategies enables us to follow how their "effects on flows of power shape human subjects, their interests, and their agency" (Agarwal, 2003: 258). Through the analysis of the socio-economic aspect of the yarsa economy in Maikot, I discuss the different pressures and decisions that have shaped the local yarsa governance system. I further outline the local actors, institutions and processes that form this complex constellation to help understand

⁷⁶ According to Ostrom these are the following: (1) clearly defined boundaries, (2) congruence between appropriation and provision rules and local conditions, (3) collective-choice arrangements, (4) monitoring, (5) graduated sanctions, (6) conflict resolution mechanisms, (7) minimal recognition of rights to organize, (8) nested enterprises (Ostrom, 1990: 90)

the effects of this socio-economic process on the transformation of political consciousness in post-revolutionary Nepal.

The local governance systems are influenced by a variety of factors: changes in property rights and management mechanisms, market accessibility, government and non-governmental interventions, and climate change (Folke, 2007; Pahl-Wostl, 2009). Pahl-Wostl (2009) has suggested a systematic approach to analyzing the influence of formal and informal institutions, the role of state and non-state actors and other 'multi-level interactions' of different actors and networks that shape governance regimes. While it is true that the constellation of the governance systems depends on several relationships between actors and several other social factors, I argue that knowledge obtained through long-term ethnographic fieldwork can help us better understand the socio-economic background of these processes. In this way, I argue that anthropologists should not be only interested in how the commons are being governed but look more closely at the interests, conflicts and political subjectivities that accompany the processes of commoning or their commercialization. In the case of Maikot, since its discovery, the yarsa governance system has become much more complex. While its discovery is related to the private expeditions of local entrepreneurs, the governance system of yarsagumba in Maikot is also deeply embedded in the socio-political history of Khams and their resistance against the state. Although the Maoists have been successful in presenting the yarsagumba harvest as an important part of their guerrilla economy and a symbol of the Khams' struggle for a common cause to establish an autonomous state of Magars, at the end of the People's War, a new wave of communal politics replaced this strategy.

After Maikot regained control of the yarsa grounds in Buki, a reevaluation of the yarsa governance system on the local level began to take place. Before the People's War, the yarsa harvest was mainly in the hands of influential villagers like Chaya, who established trading links and implemented informal labour systems for yarsa extraction. During the Maoist control of Buki, the PLA became involved in the yarsa harvest, and the Maoists established a governance system, which was a part of their guerrilla economy. As I have shown at the start of the chapter, both of these governance systems have been unsuccessful in utilizing the collective funds from the yarsa trade for community developmental activities. Because of these failures in the past, this became the main

agenda put forward by the rural elites that took over the village affairs after the end of the war. The rural elites in Maikot began to establish the local yarsa institutions and form a governance system that would at the same time protect the pastures and contribute to the economic development of the community.

Just before the end of the People's War, Lajim Pun, the former village chief, returned to Maikot after spending five years in South Korea. Although Lajim, like other influential leaders in Maikot, became a member of the CPN (M), he also became the main organizer against the Maoist mismanagement of the yarsa fields. After the party appointed Harka Bahadur as the village chief at the end of the war, the village rebelled against his rule, and Lajim won the support of Maikotis. This marked the *de facto* end of the people's regime in Maikot, and although Lajim remained a Maoist aligned politician, he was much less embedded in party politics than his predecessors. Maikot's political and economic life, previously subordinated to Maoist politics, began to gain new momentum in the politically uncertain post-war transition period. At the centre of these new developments, and the primary concern for most Maikotis was the management of the yarsa fields in Buki.

Although most Maikotis still support the CPN(M) until this day, the outsiders' exploitation of Maikot's common resources has caused great concern.⁷⁷ To prevent this from going any further, the Maikotis founded the village's 'high commission' that took over the post-war restructuring of Maikot's political and economic affairs. The political agenda of the high commission is to make sure that all state and non-state actors and different village organizations function in the interest of the village. "If the move is not going to be for the better of the people, they should not even listen to the leader – this is what we warn them about", Lajim has pointed out when asked about the main tasks of

⁷⁷ Another such case that resonates in Maikot, is the exploitation of the forest above the village by the police. After the police post had been established in Maikot, the police had their eye on the forest above the village. It was a dense pine forest that had an immense value to the village community. From the perspective of the police, however, the forest was seen as a source of valuable wood, often sought for in the cities. The police officers, under the pretension that this should help them find the Maoist guerrillas, exploited the local labour force in order to cut down the trees. People were forced to cut down logs and chopped them into planks to be eventually picked up by a helicopter and taken away. Eventually, the whole forest had been cleared and Maikot was left bare, without its natural wind protection. Many argue today that this was a profitable affair made possible only through crony police connections, and suspect that the wood had probably ended up in India or had been used for construction material for the houses of the Kathmandu elites.

the commission. In other words, the high commission is the highest political body in the village that has the right to inquire into other village organizations' roles and financial matters (such as committees, associations, and clubs). It includes a wide array of local leaders who became members through elections and other village political mechanisms (for example, being ward representatives). These local political institutions began to fill the gap in local governance left by the Maoist party and took over the village affairs for over a decade until the first post-war elections were held in 2017.

Following these developments, the yarsagumba committee was formed to prepare for the first post-war season in Buki. In order to achieve more transparency in the management of the yarsa fields, the yarsa committee was formed as an independent body that functions under the supervision of the high commission. The committee's role is to discuss and introduce new formal and informal regulations regarding yarsa collection and trade. For example, for the first time, the committee introduced a system of entry fees to regulate the number of yarsa collected per season (Rs 500 in 2006, Rs 2000 in 2017). In addition to this, the committee decided to issue trading permits to yarsa traders (Rs 2000 in 2006, Rs 15,000 in 2017). The revenue generated by this system was collected in Buki, and the committee handed it over to the high commission at the end of the season. With the help of the revenue from the yarsa season, Maikot was able to finance the school's management and use it to construct roads and trails, a village hospital, a temple and a small hydropower project. However, in recent years reports of mismanagement of funds have again caused political conflicts in the village. Different interest groups have argued that the committee has been overspending on unnecessary costs and that the commercialization of the yarsa fields in Buki has gone too far. This led to the creation of local volunteer organizations that helped with the management of the yarsa season.

In 2012, a younger generation of Maikotis founded Maikot's youth club. The youth club takes on small jobs in the village during the year, such as constructing paths and building public water pipes. However, during the yarsa season, the club takes on a vital role in managing the season in Buki. The club's 17 members are sent to the camps to oversee different activities: some give out permits to pickers and traders, some talk to the restaurant owners, while others are there to settle disputes. "The Youth club goes up to Buki with the people. We ensure safety on the trails, check excessive drinking in the camps

and prevent brawls", one member has put forward. The general aim of the club is to increase the transparency of the yarsa season and ensure that all the rules are enforced. In order to achieve this, the youth club closely collaborates with the committee and the police force that is employed by the village to provide additional security. Security posts are set up, where the youth club and the police force check the incoming and outgoing pickers to prevent the smuggling of mushrooms out of the camps. This helps the Maikotis evaluate the total amount of the harvest and prevent illegal picking and trading throughout the season. Due to the limited resources, the club operates voluntarily.



Figure 7: With Maikot's Youth Club at the Pupal Camp

In the last two years, Maikot's yarsa committee and the Youth club found it challenging to mobilize volunteers to help them oversee the yarsa season. In 2017, Maikot adopted a new system that made it obligatory for every household to send a member to serve in the security team (*suruchiya*). In contrast with the previous years, the security teams dispatched to Buki weeks in advance of the season have to cover their own expenses. In turn, they are allowed to pick yarsagumba before the official start of the season. In this way, the yarsa committee has assured that a sufficient number of volunteers is placed in Buki while also cutting down some management expenses⁷⁸. This also gives Maikotis

⁷⁸ The only expenditure for the committee in 2017, was to hire a dozen policemen from the district police station.

privileged access to the fields, a political demand gaining momentum in the village. A yarsa committee member observed this new situation in the following way:

People are more independent now. Everyone wants to exercise their rights, including their right to resources. There are also more political parties and political beliefs. There are also opportunities for individuals to do business on their own. The political situation has become more complex. The Maoist Party doesn't have sole control over the yarsa harvest now, nor does it dominate the political sphere in Rukum district like before.

In the eyes of Maikotis, the changes in the management of the yarsa fields helped them to retain the most benefits for their community. The first post-war harvests, managed by the committee, were legitimized by Maikotis, demanding more decisive leadership over common land with consistent politics against outside actors. However, Maikotis have become sceptical of this top-down system in recent years and have expressed further claims for a more shared sense of ownership. While the committee has been recruiting volunteers and employing people, the new system has created community-led protection units that involve members from each household. While Maikot is trying to develop a sustainable governance system of the mushroom harvest, the village leaders also tried to increase the resource's commercialization, reaching out to customers abroad and attracting new traders and investors from China, Japan, and Europe. They were also concerned with building relations with state and non-state actors within Nepal. This was a critical local topic in the state restructuring period, as Maikotis continued to fear that Buki could be taken away from them or even fall under the control of another district or rural municipality (*gaunpallika*).⁷⁹ Given the fact that most households in the village today depend on the yarsa economy, it is not surprising that this concern is at the centre of their political identity. While the yarsa economy has caused a dependency on a single resource, creating a precarious and uncertain economic situation for the Khams, the

⁷⁹ It is worth noting here that it was never clear-cut to which district Maikot's territory belongs to. Throughout the last century, the state allocated Maikot's territory to different administrative zones several times. When, in 1961, the Panchayat system was introduced, Maikot became a part of the Dolpo district. At the time when the king was still drawing up the plans for the districts, Maikot had been considered to become the district headquarters. Maikotis opposed the idea, because they were worried, that in such a case, a police post would be established in the village. After being a part of Dolpo for 4 years, in 1965, the villagers petitioned the government to include Maikot into Baglung district, because the village was cut off from Dolpo for half a year in case of heavy snow fall. The government agreed, and Maikot became a part of the Baglung district to the east. Only in 1973, the village became a part of the Rukum district. It is not surprising that today, Maikotis are still worried what will happen with the village territory, as the boundaries continue to be redrawn every couple of years.

vulnerable and marginalized post-war livelihoods have also reconfigured local subaltern politics. The described intersection between dependence/autonomy and moral/political economy defines Maikot's relationship to the mushroom trade.

Apart from the changes in the yarsa governance system that steered its' path between commercialization and protective measures, this contradiction can also be observed in the village's other economic strategies to balance the development of the yarsa economy between the autonomy of the Highland economy and its integration into the international market. The first wave of development after 2006 was marked by increasing expansion of trade, easing restrictions, and establishing links with more prominent traders in Kathmandu and abroad. This went hand in hand with Maikot's high commission's plans for local tourism development. At the same time as Prachanda was promoting the Guerilla Trek in 2012, the plans for the Yarsa trails were drawn up and presented to Nepal's Tourism Board. Maikotis intended to use the economic boom of the yarsa trade to promote other medicinal herbs found within village territory and to put the place on Nepal's tourism development agenda. Because the village is located close to the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, the Maikotis wanted to attract the attention of the state and NGOs to get external funding for their local development ideas and conservation plans. It did not stop there. The local traders summoned private investors, and at the peak of the yarsa trade, Chinese and Japanese investors were flown in by helicopters to inspect the economic potential of the mushroom business. This process of expanding trade and further market integration developed complementarily with a new politics of autonomy.

After the People's War, Maikot emerged as a powerful economic centre in the region of Mid-Western Nepal. The local elites that centred their power around the yarsa trade have consolidated their political strategies using the discourse of autonomy. Even though this discourse became the *modus operandi* in several fields of village politics, in Maikot's case, the issue of territorial autonomy became central to post-war politics. The local leaders framed this through a particular struggle: the right to communal land, most notably the yarsagumba fields in Buki. In this way, the local identity was enhanced by a struggle based on the village's cultural uniqueness and territorial autonomy⁸⁰, which drew the Maikotis

⁸⁰ Scholars have argued that the Kham's sense of belonging and tribal identity is connected to their relationship with earth, and is most evident in the celebration of the Bhume festival: "Intimately linked to

to take further political actions towards the state. A small delegation of 20 local representatives was sent to Kathmandu to negotiate a better position for the village in the state's new federal system. The Maikotis felt that the new territorial and political reality resulting from local struggles that followed the 2006 peace agreement was not acknowledged by the government, and Maikot was again put on the margins of district-level politics. Instead of acknowledging the village's territorial autonomy, Maikot was incorporated into a larger *gaunpallika* with the headquarters in Takasera. This sparked a new local movement for political autonomy that demanded Maikot to be the new headquarters of the *gaunpallika* or get a special status within the district. One of the informants present at the negotiations described the issue in the following way:

"Our rationale for requesting a *gaunpallika* for Maikot was that it is culturally unique and that it had always been marginalized. We said Maikot's territory totals 15 per cent of the area of Rukum District. Also, our annual turnover is nearly 10 million rupees, when the criterion to qualify for a *gaunpallika* has been set at 3.5 million. The prime minister at the time was Prachanda. He suggested that we team up with Hukam and try for a combined *gaunpallika*. We didn't agree to that because Hukam has no source of revenue whatsoever, and there has always been a rift between our villages."

In contrast to previous struggles in the village that culminated in the Maoist movement, post-war yarsa politics has developed stronger tendencies towards autonomous communalism. However, the history of Maoist politics played a crucial role in the turn to the local as the most sacrosanct political and economic world. The establishment of the base area and the Maoist turn to ethnic politics in the later years of the People's War can be seen as a precursor to these recent developments. When the decline of the Maoist organizations left a vacuum in village politics, the rural elites stepped in and reconfigured the discursive field opening the village struggles to new identity formations. In this new configuration of subaltern politics, yarsagumba became the symbol of the new popular resistance demanding local autonomy. To Maikotis, it represents a source of hope in the post-conflict politics of disappointment. At the same time, the restructuring of local livelihoods around one environmental product created an economy heavily dependent on a commodity chain Khams know little about. While this incorporates Khams into the cash

the founding of a village, the cult of Bhume remains associated with the first settlers. More often than not, Bhume's priesthood is conferred on a person of tribal lineage. [...] At any rate, the collective cults dedicated to Bhume are intimately tied to power and political units. Bhume is an omnipresent deity, defined by the sociological group that worships her" (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2011: 72).

economy and creates opportunities for upward social mobility, it is, as Yeh and Lama suggested, simultaneously marginalizing them, "making them highly vulnerable to the whims of Chinese consumer demands through a narrowing of livelihood options (Yeh and Lama, 2013: 320). Like the Tibetan community in China, as described by Yeh and Lama, the Kham community too became marginalized through the commercialization of yarsagumba and increased dependency on the economic relations of the commodity chain. This process developed alongside a new politics of autonomy, by which Khams have tried to negotiate new communal arrangements for securing access to this precious resource and resisted further regulations from the state. Susana Narotzky has called this 'dependent autonomy', a key contemporary characteristic of peasant lives that have developed into dependent precarious livelihoods obscured by the 'ideology of autonomy', an enclosed cycle of the reproduction of their life that is defined by the lack of access to the means of production (Narotzky, 2016: 309).

Conclusion

The development that I am describing through the last two decades in north Rukum can be connected to similar developments in the Dolpa region. Scholars have shown how the yarsagumba economy has integrated whole communities into the exploitative commodity chain that reaches China and other East Asian Markets. In the process, during the post-war transition, this has created new markets, local governance models, 'institutions of extraction' (Snyder, 2006), and new spaces for mobilization. In other words, it has reconfigured the centre-periphery relations (Goodhand et al., 2021)⁸¹. By exploring the political and economic restructuring of Maikot VDC, I have discussed how different types of political projects have tackled the management of Maikot's common resources, thus reconfiguring the core of subaltern politics.

First, the yarsagumba economy emerged as an extension of trading relations with 'borderland brokers'⁸² from Dolpo. These brokers have been able to use connections that

⁸¹ In Dolpa more specifically the "centre-periphery tensions coalesced around struggles for the control of revenues generated by yarsagumba and increasingly in relation to road building and development programmes (Goodhand, et al., 2021).

⁸² According to Goodhand et al. (2021: 3), brokers are "key individuals who mediate power, resources or ideas between different places (see also: Meehan and Plonski, 2017; Wolf, 1956).

stretch between districts and across borders to begin the first processes of accumulation and investment into the yarsa trade (Goodhand et al., 2021). In Maikot, this process was led by the former village chief, Chaya Bahadur, an emerging broker, able to mobilize the village resources for his private gain. This process was interrupted by the People's War. The Maoists established a guerrilla economy, and the yarsagumba trade became an important part of their economic activities in the base area. While some harvesting and trading were allowed, the Maoists strengthened their grip over the mushroom trade toward the war's end. During this time, the Maikotis, under the leadership of Lajim Pun, rebelled against the unjust practices of the CPN(M) and the mismanagement of the yarsa funds. They initiated a new local governance system that would ensure transparency and bring control over this precious resource back to the village community. Because the Maoists monopolized the resource throughout the People's War, the Maikotis sought to establish new governance arrangements to commercialize the trade and open it to outside pickers and traders. The new local organs of power that de-regulated the yarsa trade and put the yarsa ground on the local development agenda, seeking support from the state, non-state and private actors, transformed Maikot into an important economic hub in Mid-Western Nepal. While the first wave of commercialization increased profits, it also created a dependence on the yarsa economy. This vulnerable position was the main reason for new political subjectivities to emerge, demanding the more ordered and closed system of harvesting and trade that I observed during my fieldwork in 2017. Within the context of the post-war state restructuring, this has brought the issues of territorial autonomy back on the local political agenda. A new movement for political autonomy that has sprouted mainly from the conflicts regarding the yarsa fields in Buki has put forward claims for Maikot's independence within the system of rural municipalities (*gaunpallika*). This shows a broader picture of how the centralizing dynamics of post-war restructuring have opened up a new field of contentious politics within which the local elites are negotiating better positions with the new economic and governance regimes (Goodhand, et al., 2021).

As Paudel (2016) has pointed out, such local governance systems have emerged in line with the development ideology and mobilized local communities to 're-invent the commons'. This process has been taking place by creating new relations of production

that are producing new forms of commoning, and as Paudel points out, new forms of accumulation strategies. Paudel is suggesting that this transformation of the commons should be seen as a part of the wider process of 'accumulation without dispossession'; appropriation of surplus-value through community-based institutions (a more detailed discussion in chapter 5). Paudel describes the commercialization of forest products through a process that has mobilized non-productive labour and thus integrated non-capitalist modes into capitalist accumulation schemes. Although Paudel, using an articulation-of-modes-of-production approach, refers to these modes of production as pre-capitalist, it is worth drawing parallels to Tsing's salvage accumulation. This broader concept recognizes the mutual existence of non-capitalist and capitalist forms, a logic central to capitalist expansion. Tsing's salvage accumulation also appears to be a more flexible concept that explains how value is created in non-capitalist production processes:

"In contrast to primitive accumulation, salvage is never complete; accumulation always depends on it. Salvage accumulation is also required for the production of labor power. Factory workers are produced and reproduced through life processes never fully controlled by capitalists. In factories, capitalists use the abilities of workers to make goods, but they cannot produce all those abilities. To transform workers' abilities into capitalist value is salvage accumulation" (Tsing, 2015: 296).

However, while Tsing's analysis accurately shows the broader picture of how non-economic factors such as gender, race or ethnicity, become a part of supply chains, Paudel's 'accumulation without dispossession' brings our attention to the concrete processes of the commercialization of the commons. Both concepts explain how different social and cultural processes become a part of the life cycle of capital. In the case of the Kham Magars, Tsing's salvage accumulation is informative in exploring all aspects of social life that are subsumed by capital's logic. As I have shown in this chapter, this transformation has transformed their communal land into a space where nature itself has become an accumulation strategy (Smith, 2007). According to Marx's discussion on the forms of subsumption, I argue that what Tsing and Paudel are describing can also be explained as hybrid subsumption. In other words, economic practices such as the yarsa economy that we observe in rural Nepal are not remnants of old production modes being subsumed into world capitalism but should instead be seen as evidence of evolving capitalism.

The subsumption debate has contributed to non-reductionistic explanations of capitalist development (see chapter 5). Stepping outside of a linear and stagist understanding of capitalist development, authors such as Harootunian (2015) have proposed to see formal and real subsumption (with all hybrid forms in between) as economic forms that accompany the capitalist mode of production in its developed form. Following the prodigious analysis of authors such as Rosa Luxemburg, who foresaw the political and cultural impacts of capitalist expansion on non-capitalist societies, Harootunian suggests that we should see the different forms of subsumption, corresponding to different forms of capitalist production based on creating absolute or relative surplus-value. While formal and hybrid subsumption relies on regimes of absolute surplus-value, it is only the real subsumption that can increase labour productivity by developing technology and consequently changing the nature of the labour process itself (Harootunian, 2015: 57). The co-existence of different forms of subsumption (not their linear or hierarchical relation) produces an uneven capitalist landscape comprised of different historical temporal forms (Harootunian, 2015: 59). How does this relate to peasant life in rural Nepal more generally, and to the yarsagumba economy and struggle for the commons I have discussed in the village of Maikot?

Raju Das has pointed out different models of the uneven transition between formal and real subsumption to reconceptualize capitalism in the Global South. Following Marx, Das specifically notes the system of advances given to direct producers as a parasitic form of exploitation, which subordinates labour to capital without introducing technological change, thus only extracting surplus value through increasing labour intensity. This is not yet wage labour, but "an intervening process between pre-capitalist relations and formal subsumption of labour under capital", he argues (Das, 2011: 182). To understand the unevenness of capitalist development, Das argues that we have to acknowledge the role of class struggle in this conceptual scheme of different forms of subsumption. "It is the class struggle that plays a crucial mediating role in the transition to real subsumption from an under-developed capitalism to a developed one", he argues (Das, 2011: 185). This means that class struggle may contribute to the rise of labour productivity and increase the appropriation of surplus through the transition to real subsumption.

However, in the case of rural Nepal, what we are observing is not a transition to real subsumption but what Das calls reversion to hybrid subsumption (mercantile or usury-based extraction). Das observes this in the case of Orissa, where the merchants advance cash loans to small land-holders in order to organize a system of 'tied-harvest', thus appropriating the surplus through exchange relations (ibid). This reflects the system that was put in place in Maikot. The capital owners in the village, the rural elites (usually shopkeepers or moneylenders), advance the payments in the form of loans or goods and collect the yarsagumba as payment after the harvest. This does not yet produce wage labour and is thus a hybrid form of subsumption, relying on resource-dependent peasant labourers, whose labour is controlled by rural brokers who created an enclosed system of money and commodity capital that produces surplus value through tied harvest and unequal exchange. Additionally, we can observe how class struggle, or Maikot's fight for the commons, increases the power of the rural elites. This critical evaluation of Marx's view on class struggle advances an important perspective that emphasizes the geographical unevenness of class struggle against formal and hybrid subsumption, resulting in different place-specific articulations of the subsumption forms. Here, Das's intervention in outlining the three different forms of how rural capitalists respond to class struggle is essential: a) the transition to real subsumption by increasing labour productivity, b) reinforcing formal subsumption, c) resorting to hybrid subsumption (Das, 2011: 195).

This creates a contradictory situation where class struggle does not necessarily produce a transition to real subsumption but instead creates backward forms of capitalism. This is what Tsing is referring to in her analysis of supply chains when she argues that: "contemporary supply chains have many characteristics of older forms of capitalism" (Tsing, 2012: 40). In this way, to echo Tsing's further arguments, as workers in supply chains discipline themselves, peasants get organized to become part of accumulation schemes. The case of political reorganization of Maikot's yarsagumba economy shows how such social and spatial configurations emerge as a consequence of political-economic unevenness. The economic link established in post-war Rukum, with the development of the yarsagumba supply chain, has enabled the political project of the rural elites to find new ground. In an economic sense, these actors have become brokers that participate in

extracting surplus value from a peasantry that has become dependent on a single natural resource. This has reconfigured relations between autonomy and dependence and has created a situation of 'dependent autonomy', as Narotzky (2015) has suggested. The political subjectivities that I describe as the post-war politics of autonomy that resulted in the political reorganization of the yarsa governance regimes indicate the ideology of autonomy obscuring the dependency on the mushroom trade. The contentious post-war politics in Maikot, which arose through the local struggle for the yarsa grounds, have obscured the relations of production and empowered the rural elites through commoning strategies. As Paudel puts it: "[i]n this viewpoint, accumulation can be understood from the perspective of the rearticulated relationship of capital and the commons rather than from the linear logic of displacement and enclosure. [...] These new aspects of accumulation might provide us with different ways of conceptualizing the relationship between re-invented commons and peasant politics" (Paudel, 2016:19).

In a broader sense, the narrative of the yarsagumba economy helps us understand the contingency and unevenness of capitalist development in rural Nepal. While in other parts of Nepal, the process of de-peasantisation has urged peasants to look for work in the cities or to search for alternatives through labour migration networks, the yarsa economy has helped Khams and other communities depending on it, to maintain precarious livelihoods at the margins. This has brought the forces of commercialization to the remote hinterlands of the Himalayas and created new forms of dependency and increased class differentiation in the villages. In Maikot, the shopkeepers and moneylenders have increased their control over the commodity routes, expanded their property ownership and opened up new enterprises (a local private school and a medical clinic opened up by local yarsagumba traders are such examples). What can also be observed locally is the expansion of monetary, social relations and capitalist entrepreneurial logics that have replaced community labour practices and the moral economies of the past. The commercialization of Maikot's natural resources is paired with the local politics of autonomy and seen by the local leaders as a way to promote community-led development. However, the characteristics of hybrid subsumption have created a way for the emerging rural capitalist class to accumulate surplus value without privatizing the village's natural resources. The recent political subjectivities that have

sprouted in rural Nepal, demanding territorial autonomy and self-reliant communalism, thus cannot be understood without the political-economic analysis of the reconceptualization of capital-labour relations that submitted these communities to the recent waves of commercialization of the commons.

Concluding Remarks

In this thesis, I explored the conditional and potential elements of class by looking at a community that was at the centre of the peasant revolution in Nepal. In a broader sense, this is an effort to understand today's people without history, whose life stories and political struggles are interwoven within different fields of force. The chapters throughout the thesis deal with class in two ways. The first part, where I address the conditional elements of class, describes class in its historical and political-economic dimension that I explore with the help of the idea of uneven and combined development. In the second part, I explore the potential element of class through a historical situation where class became a material force employed against the state and relations of production through an uneven development of revolutionary action. To conclude, I think it is worth further pondering on the relationship between revolutionary action and world-historical processes.

The thesis brings together several different scales on which class needs to be understood. While in the second part, I go deep into the level of activist experience, where I deal with class and agency on an ethnographically observable level, other chapters provide an understanding of class beyond these temporal historical forms. I intended to create a kind of dialogical interaction between different scales and elements through which class can be understood. As Smith proposes, these scales can be divided in two ways: "the various scales of interaction and practice that produce society as capitalist on the one hand, and the various scales of counterforces that arise within and beyond these relations" (Smith, 2014: 166). According to Smith, this dialectical tension between different scales and dimensions of class presents the most difficult challenge for anthropologists that should try to explore how they get translated into each other (ibid). Apart from Smith's work, I have argued that a similar concern is present in Gramsci's work and in the works of scholars that engaged with the framework of the anthropological political economy, such as William Roseberry and Eric Wolf, in which this dialectical understanding of class, is widely explored. I argue that the recontextualization of questions posed by the previous generation of Marxist anthropologists should help us fine-tune the dialectical relationship

between the systemic transformation of global capitalism and the praxis against this history (chapter 3).

For this reason, I situated Nepal's peasant question within a broader understanding of capitalist development that emerged within a renewed interest in the idea of uneven and combined development (see chapters 3 and 5). As I show in chapter 5, capitalism's pluralizing tendencies can be observed in Nepal's uneven history of capitalist development that has expressed itself through co-existing temporal forms and different forms of subsumption. This helps me map the heterogenous capitalist and non-capitalist spaces shaped by universalizing and pluralizing tendencies of capitalist development. In this sense, uneven development is not only the uneven transition to real subsumption (which would end in a single history of capital) but should rather be seen as the co-existence of separate forms of subsumption that create a temporally uneven, historically contingent, contradictory and incomplete capitalist process (Harootunian, 2015). This provides a powerful critique of the articulation-of-mode-of-production approach and other approaches that emphasize capitalism's universalizing tendencies. At the same time, it helps us situate peasant struggles outside pre-capitalist pasts and reframe them as struggles that occur within historical temporal forms that share contemporaneity with the capitalist present.

As these struggles emerge, they do not always express an apparent class character. The Maoist path, as it is discussed in the second part of the thesis, is full of contradictions. By moving through different contexts and scales, the combined political struggles have been greatly affected by past and present. In chapter 8, I have outlined how the Maoist's have tried to reconcile the struggles for redistribution and recognition in order to build a revolution that addresses the problems of the contemporary peasant logic, that is continuously divided by capitalism's cultural hegemony that is producing plural identities. This is why Smith has stressed that we should pay attention to the uneven development of both: capitalist hegemony and class struggle (Smith, 2014). With the help of Fraser's redistribution-recognition dilemma, I show how these discrepancies between theory and action can be put into a productive relationship in the formation of social movements. Although anthropology of Maoism in Nepal has mainly concealed these conscious struggles from below through the narratives of war, violence and ethnic

mobilizations, I argue that it is essential to understand that the Maoist movement process was trying to unify several struggles for recognition and redistribution into a broader counter-hegemonic struggle. In order to grasp how peasants in rural Nepal have become active participants in the Maoist movement, further chapters deal with the micro-levels of social movement building, which help me map the movement process and the post-revolutionary common sense.

In the second part of the thesis, I continue with a multi-layered analysis of the uneven development of revolutionary action in rural Nepal. By following the Maoist movement process in the former base area in Mid-Western Nepal, I show how ‘particular’ struggles against landlords have already developed universal demands and broader collective action networks that point beyond narrower categorizations of militant particularism (chapter 9). Paying attention to the long history of rebellions in rural Nepal can aid us in building approaches that refrain from categorizing peasants as mere passive participants in revolutionary struggles. By turning around Zharkevich’s (2019) observations in the case of Thabang, I propose that what is often seen by outsiders as a political process imposed by the Maoists should rather be seen through the prism of uneven development of class struggle: a longer movement process that incorporated peasants into a heterogeneous arena of revolutionary practice. I explore this process as it occurred in the village of Maikot, on the fringes of the former Maoist base area. With the help of the counterhegemonic framing approach, I show how the Maoists have shaped a new ‘language of contention’ (Roseberry, 1994). Although this emerged through several political and discursive practices, I show that the part of the success of the Maoists was connected to creating a space that facilitated a heterogenous framing process. By entering Maoist-led organizations, the local population entered spaces that can be defined as subaltern counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), or what Feuchtwang and Shah (2015) describe as ‘spaces of embryonic emancipation’.

The Maoist counterhegemonic narrative emerged throughout the different phases of the insurgency. It was built on master frames that could link heterogenous peasant groups and organizations through several contexts and socio-spatial scales. I argue that in this sense, the Maoist movement successfully brought the discourse of resistance to a different level of abstraction that began to facilitate a more comprehensive counterhegemonic

project. At the peak of the movement process, discussed in chapter 11, the Maoists were able to turn the framing process and the small-scale organizing into political-ideological institutions that further strengthened their revolutionary project. The so-called *Jan Sarkars* that popped up around the country represented a Maoist controlled parallel state, in which the experience of Maoist political culture was brought to the broader population. The history of Maoist rule in Maikot shows that in the former base area, the Maoists organized the peasants experience into a thickly interwoven world of subaltern counterpublics, where theory and practice were set in dialectical motion. However, this occurred only for a brief period, and the success of Maoist politics in the countryside was short-lived. The Maoist movement process was pulled apart by different struggles for recognition and other discrepancies in Maoist political praxis that began to disorganize the movement entering the national scale. Although the Maoist party had ceased to play such an important role in rural Nepal, the experiences of collective action continue to significantly affect the lives of individuals in the aftermath of revolutionary action.

This leads me to the question of social transformation in the aftermath of the unfinished revolution. Here, I propose a conceptual move from Bourdieu's habitus, to Gramsci's common sense, as a more appropriate tool to help us understand the nature of revolutionary change in rural Nepal. Crehan refers to it as an unsystematic, 'messy conglomerate' (Crehan, 2011: 283), that as observed in chapter 10, was transformed into a more coherent discourse of resistance. In this way, the Maoist organizations in the base area included local organic intellectuals that had a good understanding of the subaltern world and were able, through practices of learning, political training, and reorganization of village affairs, to create a locally grounded counterhegemonic movement. Although the Maoist movement has seen its decline, I argue that to understand the process of social transformation in rural Nepal, we should investigate the constantly changing elements of the subaltern experience. I explore this through the life stories of former Maoist combatants that help me map the rough coordinates of the post-revolutionary common sense.

The ethnographic investigation into these narratives portrays the lived reality of people who formed the social movement's backbone but were left behind after the peace process dismantled the last revolutionary organizations of the Maoist party. The frustrating

relationship with the politics of the past shows how the potential elements of class can be turned into disappointment as the central aspect of post-revolutionary politics. Through the narratives of disappointment that I have collected in Maikot, I follow Greenberg's (2014) conclusions that these narratives continue to shape the politics of the present. Through investigating these narratives, we can understand the post-revolutionary common sense, not only as a politics oriented toward the past but a contradictory social field that contains both uncritical and potential elements of common sense (Thomas, 2009: 377). This topic is further explored in the doctoral ethnographic film *Taking on the Storm* (2021), a filmic exploration of post-revolutionary common sense in the former Maoist base area.

The last chapter, entitled *The Mushroom at the Top of the World*, is also accompanied by an ethnographic film going by the same name. The film explores the post-revolutionary narratives of Maoist ex-combatants that have become mushroom pickers, thus entering a lucrative commodity chain through a non-capitalist labour process occurring in the high Himalayas. We follow the Maikotis on the three-week-long journey to the yarsagumba picking grounds, where narratives of resilience, precarity and the struggle for the commons are shaped by the new forms of exploitation and capitalist accumulation. The topic addressed in the film is further explored in the last chapter by closely looking at the restructuring of the yarsagumba economy in Maikot. By narrating the local history of managing this precious resource, I show how the yarsagumba economy has created a hybrid form of subsumption, in which brokers organize a system of 'tied harvest', appropriating surplus through an enclosed system of exchange (Das, 2011). Such forms of accumulation, referred by scholars with terms such as 'salvage accumulation' (Tsing, 2015), and 'accumulation without dispossession' (Paudel, 2016), help us understand the contingency and unevenness of capitalist development in rural Nepal. This process has enlisted peasants into accumulation schemes that help them maintain precarious livelihoods at the margins. Within the context of post-revolutionary politics of disappointment, this has sprouted new waves of contentious politics centred around territorial autonomy. These political subjectivities have increased the dependency on the yarsa economy and strengthened the grip of the local elites, who have profited from the recent waves of the commercialization of the commons. This creates a contradictory

situation typical for the contemporary peasant logic, described by Narotzky as ‘dependent autonomy’. The post-revolutionary situation in Rukum has increased the integration of peasant lives into dependent precarious livelihoods obscured by the ‘ideology of autonomy’ (Narotzky, 2016: 309). I argue that through this situation, we can observe how class struggle, or in this case Maikot’s fight for the commons, increases the power of rural elites over the resource-dependent peasantry. According to Raju Das, this is a specific way rural capitalists can respond to class struggle and create backward forms of capitalism. In other words, this brings us to a radically different conceptualization of peasant politics and capitalist development, where the potential elements of class can result in strengthening the parasitic forms of subsumption and create new fields of contentious politics within which the local elites are negotiating better positions with the economic and governance regimes (Goodhand, et al., 2021).

This presents us with a case of passive revolution, caught between the revolutionary rupture and restoration of social relations (Morton, 2010: 316). Dinesh Paudel has argued that it was due to the failure of the Maoist movement to address the ethnic and peasant issues that led to the emergence of bourgeois identity politics. This restoration of power that expressed itself through the politics of indigeneity created a new form of unity between subalterns and elites wrapped in “programs of ‘inclusive’ development to promote property rights, entrepreneurship, and political representation” (Paudel, 2016: 6). In the aftermath of the failure of Maoist politics in the countryside, the NGOs and development programs seized the opportunity to enter the villages to consolidate the forces of ethnic identity politics from below (Paudel, 2016: 13). Similarly, as I have shown in the case of Maikot, the politics of autonomy have empowered rural elites creating a form of passive revolution by restoring backward forms of capitalism. However, passive revolution in this form does not express itself only as the revolution from above, as Paudel proposes. I have shown that we should instead analyze Nepal’s uneven economic landscape consisting of different forms of subsumption that create a mix of historical temporalities. It is the simultaneity of different temporalities that shows how capitalism’s internal contradictions are being reproduced as “the non-contemporaneity of the present” (Thomas, 2017: 22). It is through understanding these different temporal forms that Gramsci’s work, according to Thomas, theorizes modernity as passive revolution

(Thomas, 2006). In his extended argument and re-evaluation of Gramsci's work, Harootunian proposes to see the inter-connectedness between political practices and capitalism's uneven economic structure. He argues:

“[I]f we accept Marx's definition of formal subsumption as the general form of all capitalist development, with its capacity to generate 'hybrid' and other subforms that coexist with capitalist productive practices, then it is not too far afield to propose the category of the passive revolution as an equivalent political form to a production process that privileged suborning what was useful as hand to serve capital's pursuit of surplus value and along the way produce continuing economic unevenness modern nation-states were pledged to eliminate, but perhaps only in the last instance. (Harootunian, 2015: 130).

In this sense, the passive revolution in Nepal can be understood beyond merely being a project of the ruling groups (as a movement from above), as Paudel proposes. Instead, it should be seen as an outcome of capitalism's incapability to resolve its internal contradictions of resolving the past, thus generating countless incomplete transformations by incorporating non-capitalist economic forms into the capitalist present. This 'uneven mix' of different temporalities that produces contemporaneous noncontemporary (ibid), one of the main contributions of Gramscian thought, should be the central concern of anthropologists studying contemporary revolutions. Smith draws together Gramscian and more recent development in the theory of UCD in the following way:

“Gramsci and Rosenberg, taken together, it seems to me, urge us to understand the reciprocal constitution of the global field of power that, through UCD, produces the specificity of heterogeneously formed 'political societies' ['states', 'societies' 'supra-states'] on the one hand, and simultaneously the unevenly combined economic, social and cultural spheres within specific national social formations. As we move across scales then, we need to understand these distinct spheres in terms of their mutually constitutive combination while also acknowledging their own specific particularisms— that is to say their qualitatively distinctive character vis a vis the relations of capital” (Smith, 2016 :4).

Throughout the thesis, I intended to understand both sides of the process in Mid-Western Nepal. By drawing on the economic and cultural history of the Kham Magars, I outline the scales of capitalist development and argue that the concept of combining temporal unevenness of peasant communities is central to understanding revolutionary politics (Smith, 2014). The ethnographic chapters help me elaborate on the process of their combination, a reality that is perhaps best observed in the post-revolutionary common sense. Although throughout the thesis, I bring together many faceless structures that

explain the interwoven processes of social change, the most profound understanding of how the lives of peasants in rural Nepal are unevenly combined comes from daily conversations with people that have experienced this process inside-out. By analyzing political praxis as lived experience, I have shown how this political subjectivity is always becoming; it is a potential praxis that never achieves its goal. However, I follow Smith, who argues that we should go beyond conceptualisations of *resistant* subjectivities: “the political expression of enduring insecurity and risk who participate in a spasmodic and often concealed social life fighting revolutions that are always only provisionally won, returning to the present from perpetually unrealized futures (Smith, 2016: 8). I have argued that transformations of peasant consciousness are more complex, dynamic, and contradictory and should be seen “less as failures to become what it is impossible to become and rather as the necessary counter-life to the society of capital” (Smith, 2016).

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