The (Im)possibility of Revolution and State Formation in Nepal

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Abstract

The paper looks at Nepal's revolution and state formation process in post-agrarian capitalism by examining anti-systemic and systemic elements of class struggle.

The political articulation of the peasant question within the context of late 20th century Nepal has been widely popularized by the country's Maoist movement. The movement has since then undergone a great political and cultural transformation from an anti-systemic party-movement into a systemic one. After more than a decade of post-revolutionary politics, we are yet to examine the historical role of the Nepalese peasantry in the light of the anti-systemic and systemic politics in Nepal, and the restructuring of capital on the South Asian periphery. The aim of the paper is to explain the legacy of the revolution in its core contradiction: today the agricultural production is not central to the reproduction of capital, but it is still an important factor in the reproduction of power relations. In Nepal this relation between revolution and state formation is the central antagonism of class struggle that can be observed through two phases consisting of anti-systemic and systemic formations.

Introduction

Nepal's state formation process goes back to, what is often called, the unification of several Himalayan kingdoms that happened in the eighteenth and at the turn of the nineteenth century. The rule of the then Kingdom of Gorkha under Prithvi Narayan Shah and later the Shah dynasty, was bound to get into territorial disputes with the powerful colonizers of South Asia. The formation of a kingdom on the periphery of the territory under the control of the East India Company quickly drew both sides into the conflict that escalated in 1814, known as the Anglo-Nepalese war that ended with the Treaty of Sugauli in 1815. There the Nepalese government agreed to the terms put forward by the East India Company, which formed a new subordinate relationship, marked by territorial concessions, establishing formal foreign relations through a representative in Kathmandu and the recruitment of Nepali soldiers to the British Army. At that time Nepal has entered a world hegemonic order under a specific form of rule, which Mahmood Mamdani calls 'indirect rule' or 'decentralised despotism' (Mamdani, 1996). Quite different than direct colonisation of India, Nepal albeit fell under the influence of similar processes of state-formation, landlocked in geographical and political-economic landscapes, it felt short in emerging 'pathways of power'.

In the nineteenth century the Kingdom of Nepal was an agrarian society. Territorialist, in the form of rule, the early Nepalese state's exclusive ownership of the land was solidified through a tenurial scheme. This scheme was attributed to land not to ruling subject, and Richard Burghart has argued that in order for the concept of the modern nation-state to develop, the implicit differentiation between the kingship and the state had to be made. The break began to emerge within national administration after the shift to a system of guided democracy (known as the *panchayat* system) in the 1960s (Burghart, 1984: 103-113). This described era marks Nepal's transition between two 'modes of rule' or 'logics of power': capitalism and territorialism (Arrighi, 2010: 34). As Arrighi observes, the territorial and capitalist logic of power revolve around territorial expansion, and accumulation of capital in different terms:

> "The difference between these two logics can also be expressed by the metaphor that defines states as "containers of power" (Giddens 1987). [...] Capitalism and territorialism as defined here, in contrast, do represent alternative strategies of state formation. In the territorialist strategy controls 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). This inter-connectedness can be seen in Nepal's territorial form of rule that on the other hand started to progressively open-up to its own anti-politics machine[1]. Mishra and Sharma (1983) have argued that between the years 1951 -1980, the emerging development sector strengthened the traditional power structure of the upper class, the rule of which had still been firmly based in the despotic regime. However, the influence of transnational capital and the expansion of capitalism in the area of today's Nepal, pre-dates the democratic revolution that welcomed the development industry in the 1950s. This development of capitalism is connected, like in India, to the development of two classes. In one way, capitalism developed through the state and the ruling class that became the 'comprador capitalist elite' and in the other way, the international commerce and the alienation of land occurred, through the formation of the merchant class. This contradiction could instigate, very much like in

[1] 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).

Europe, a bourgeois revolution, an emerging capitalist elite asserting its power over the 'old' ruling class. Chibber argues in his critique of Subaltern studies that the fact that this has not occurred in India (that the bourgeoisie like in the West had not emerged as a powerful social force), does not mean that South Asia was not submerging to the logic of the 'universalization of capital'. Chibber argues that the liberal order in the West was not an achievement of capitalists, but a long process of struggles between the ruling and working and peasant classes, and much like in South Asia, we should pay more attention to this historical process (Chibber, 2013).

In Nepal, the development sector played a crucial role in the consolidation of the power relations between both dominant classes. Throughout the formation of the national-society it changed the social places and social meanings, not only for the rural people, but most importantly, how other, more powerful segments of the national society look at the 'periphery'. This created an:

> "ideology 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).

In other words, the development sector, as the instrument in the hands of the ruling class, has been able to consolidate the struggle from 'below' into the ideology of modernization and empowerment through development. This means that in Nepal, capital that is able to exploit labour in different social and historical circumstances, instead of transforming peasants into a fully industrial labour force, enlisted them into a scheme of accumulation. This restructuring of global capitalism that brought Nepal's agrarian economy under the direct pressure of transnational capital, and consolidated the national bourgeoisie, simultaneously created conditions for class politics. Analysing the conjectures between development and resistance movements of the last decades, Dinesh Paudel has argued that peasants' political consciousness had been 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). To understand the rise of anti-systemic movements, it is first important to outline the ways capitalism developed on the periphery, and apart from early development of capitalism in South Asia mentioned before, the development industry has been the leading force of capitalist restructuring in the region. What happened with neoliberal globalisation in the 1990s, according to

Bernstein's conceptualisation of the 'end of developmentalism' is that the macroeconomic structures completely took over previously state-led development (Bernstein, 84). What occurred with this shift, as Bernstein observes, are new waves of 'deagrarianization' or 'de-peasantization', an on-going process connected to the restructuring of capitalism at the periphery described by many authors. David Harvey (2005) has conceptualised it as a new kind of primitive accumulation or, what he calls 'accumulation by dispossession' and Mike Davis (2006) described its consequences by the emergence of a new class: the informal proletariat, the inhabitants of the 'global slum'.

These systemic elements of capitalism's class dynamics are the context in which anti-systemic struggles need to be re-positioned. Instead of seeing these developments of capitalism in the light of proletarization or as the 'elimination of peasantry' (Bernstein, 2007), we should, as Roseberry proposes, refrain immediate conclusions that may result in economism. As these processes undoubtedly occur and affect the life of the peasants and the rural proletariat, Roseberry warns us not to forget about class formations as material forces, and the agency of peasants in both political and economic domains (Roseberry, 1994: 190-196). The frame of our investigation should thus be informed by the understanding of peasant politics of the Wolf school, that had suggested to look at these movements as responses to greater social dislocations (Wolf, 1969: 295). The questions that follow should help us understand contemporary political struggles in the time where land is of little importance to the accumulation of capital and the world is observing the disintegration of the agrarian economies of the Global South. To analyse this complex situation, both systemic and anti-systemic elements need to be taken into account to help us unwrap this dialectical historical process that occurs between capitalist restructuring and social processes.

It is difficult at this place to present all the systemic and anti-systemic specifics of the recent Maoist in other movements in Nepal. If the reasons for these movements to take place in South Asia have been world systemic, the responses have mostly been confined to regions and states. Considering the systemic reconfiguration, or in other words, the restructuring of capitalism at the periphery that sparked these movements, I now turn to Nepal's example. With these theoretical suggestions in mind, I would like to present the inter-play between the systemic and the anti-

systemic within a more specific and contemporary case in order to provide insights on the possibility and impossibility of rural revolutions today.

The case of Nepal and anti-systemic articulation of the systemic

Nepal's Maoist movement is popularly understood as a consequence of Nepal's failed development (Panday, 2012), or rather as a consequence of underdevelopment of certain more remote regions. This argument, also present in the liberal conceptualisations of the Indian Naxalbari movement, fails to engage in the crucial systemic aspects that shape such responses of anti-systemic movements. By arguing, that there has not been enough development to keep the peasantry from revolting, this argument is completely blind to the systemic elements that capitalism has brought to these regions. Furthermore, it pre-supposes that development eliminates the possibility for oppositional projects from below. These (underdeveloped, remote etc.) places should not be seen as results of a lack of capital, but rather as consequences of capitalist development. Seeing development projects as one of the outreaches of global capitalism to these far-off places, Paudel has argued, that development has a 'double life'. The systemic life of the development industry did therefore not only consolidate the power relationships in the Nepalese society and significantly reconfigured the state-formation process, it also transformed into more subjective factors that instigated peasant resistance. In his study, Paudel brilliantly follows these systemic elements down to the local level, and shows how through subordination and 'othering', development as a hierarchical and multi-linear process creates conditions for oppositional 're-articulation' (Paudel, 2016: 1030-1034).

The Maoist revolution in Nepal, a 10-year long conflict between the Maoist forces and the state, mainly occurred in the rural regions and officially ended in 2006. In the final years, the Maoists managed to control large portions of the countryside and had, under the pressures from the international community, agreed to participate in the peace process. With a heavily militarized movement they have been able to mobilize and fight against the state apparatus, but mainly disintegrated into the state-formation process, as the party's revolutionary politics was replaced by the politics of taking slow steps towards socialism. Not much has changed in political-economic terms for the 'informal proletariat' of the Himalayan hills. Since the end of the revolution, the main changes could be described along the lines of further attachments to the global capitalist machine. Today, the development industry seems

to be accelerating, and widening its grip over the Nepalese society. An accompanying process to this, which occurs in many parts of rural Nepal, has been the increasing work migration abroad. The question that remains is: what has this anti-systemic movement, the goals of which were to drastically change the society, aimed to achieve and actually achieved in rural Nepal?

The internal dynamics of the revolution were complex and could be described through a full range of political strategies: the excessive violence used by both sides, the class politics and the rise of ethnic politicisation and identity politics, and involvement of the international community. Many authors have shown how the Maoist politics, under the threat of brutal response of the state, resulted in ethnic and nationalist politics, as this appeared to be a more convincing strategy for some oppressed nationalities[2]. However, what remains to be relatively unexplored are the objective systemic conditions of the revolution, and the theoretical underpinnings in which the Maoists have grounded their anti-state politics. How was their anti-politics project framed, and what were systemic features they aimed to overthrow? In other words, what constituted their political imagination to make such a revolution possible?

The Maoist political project was based on two main premises: (1) the democratic overthrow of the monarchy and the abolishment of feudalism and (2) the establishment of a multi-ethnic federal socialist republic. The so called people's movement of 1990 opened up the possibility of a democratic reform, but has left the situation at the countryside unchanged. In the years before the start of the people's war, the decades of liberalisation and development had already resulted in widening the gap between rural and urban areas. During this time, parts of the rural world were exposed to the notion of 'empowerment' through internationally funded developmental programmes[3]. The Maoists at first took advantage of this, using anti-NGO rhetoric, but largely failed to address a broader understanding of the

[2] See: Sales, A. de. (2009a) From ancestral conflicts to local empowerment: two narratives from a Nepalese community. *Dialectical anthropology*, 33(3-4), 365-381; Sales, A. de. (2015) Identity Politics and the Maoist People's War in Nepal In: Feuchtwang, S. and Shah, A. eds. (2015) *Emancipatory Politics: A Critique*. Open Anthropology Cooperative Press; Lecomte-Tilouine, M. (2004) Ethnic demands within Maoism In: Hutt, M. ed. (2004) *Himalayan people's war: Nepal's Maoist rebellion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 112-135.

[3] Fujikura, T. (2013) *Discourses of Awareness: Development, Social Movements, and the Practice of Freedom in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari; Leve, L. (2009) 'Women's empowerment and rural revolution: rethinking "failed development"' In: Shah, A. and Pettigrew J., eds. *Windows into a Revolution: Ethnographies of Maoism in India and Nepal*, 160–184.

developmental discourse and its consequences. Feyzi Ismail has argued that the left in Nepal adopted an "evolutionist, gradualist approach of the NGOs, and this partial ideological convergence between the NGOs and the Maoists [...] comes from a sense of solidarity with the left in Nepal and those NGO activists fighting for fundamental social change" (Ismail, 2017: 3). What we have seen in the last years is the fusion of both ideologies, as the Maoists have developed their own network of international partners and have fully integrated themselves into the Nepal's state-aid economy.

The trouble of the movement's analysis and tactics arises from the theoretical misconception of Maoist intellectuals that frames Nepal's underdevelopment and subordination as the result of still persisting feudalism. Their efforts were set to challenge the feudal structure of the society which resulted in cultural politics that took a military stance against all the 'backward' and 'malicious' social elements. The possibilities of the revolution thus began to emerge through a struggle that started to oppose unjust practices of landlords, 'old' village customs, and apparent political discrimination and economic marginalization of the state that still asserted its power along caste/ethnic lines. The Maoists were relatively successful on the local level where they applied a variety of different tactics to increase the mobilization of peasants. However, on a structural level, the Maoist ideology was unable to do much more than to shake the foundations of the already unstable state. Their own political strategies were starting to more and more resemble a rural populist discourse and the possibility of the rural revolution was undermined by the opposing nationalist political project of the rural elites. The peace process of 2006 can be seen as the political culmination and convergence of both failed projects: the national bourgeoisie's failed attempt to reconcile the dominant position through economic development and mild state restructuring – by default a systemic political agenda – and the Maoist anti-systemic project that aimed to radically change the society. This newly formed alliance, a foundation of the modern Nepali state has promised to build a bridge between rural and urban Nepal, a process that we have been observing in the last years as the decentralisation of the state and as a multi-linear national project of institution and constitution building. What started as a rural revolution, has transformed itself into a bourgeois political revolution, while the silent economic revolution of the periphery has only been briefly interrupted.

The systemic articulation of the anti-systemic

It is obvious from this example that world-systemic processes of neoliberal capitalism that resulted in the process of proletarization of the Nepalese peasantry and the failure of the state's agricultural and industrial change-over, were largely unaddressed by anti-systemic movements in Nepal. The fusion of goals between national liberation and socialism is not new when it comes to revolutions at the periphery (Amin, 2018), but the revolution in Nepal has nonetheless showed a different character. The communist party through the experience of parliamentary politics abandoned their Maoist roots and the route to socialism, and adopted a strategy that, according to them, better fits the 'semi-feudal' and 'semi-colonial' situation of Nepal. The new goal for the transformation of the state thus became to achieve 'the highest form of capitalist bourgeois dictatorship'. In the eyes of the majority of the Nepali left, this will first eliminate the remains of feudalism in the country, to make way for a new socialist revolution (Dhakal, 2016: 80-81).

The anti-systemic character of the Nepali left has succumbed to the logic of further integration of Nepal into the peripheral forms of capital accumulation. These developments of the anti-systemic, it seems, have similarly to the Chinese example, served only as a stage in the expansion of capitalism in the region. This position could be valid within the world-systemic argument of the expansion of capitalism, however, what I argue here is a rather different logic to that of capitalist expansion that we have seen throughout the 20th century.

Following Amin's concept of disarticulation of economy within developing societies (1982), de Janvry develops his model of the process of *semiproletariazation*. If we consider de Janvry's model that positions peasants in the process of capitalist accumulation, we see 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 proletariazation occurs[4], in contrast to disarticulated accumulation where "from the

[4] "(1) Under articulated accumulation, labor is both a 'gain' and a 'loss' for capital. That is, to increase or maintain profits, labor costs must be reduced as much as possible. On the other hand, labor is a market as well as a production cost, and laborers must be paid well enough to purchase the products of the consumer goods sector. (2) The drive to reduce labor costs and increase the market capacity of

standpoint of the labor force, labor is only *semiproletarainized* [...]. 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). De Janvry sees the process of 'de-peasantaisation' as an incomplete process of proletarization, as a result of 'functional dualism' and thus finds middle-ground between Leninist and Chayanov's approaches to the peasant question (Roseberry, 1994: 182).

De Janvry's model of accumulation could be applicable to the peripheral situation of countries such as Nepal. While Nepal continues to be integrated in the world economy in asymmetrical ways and disarticulation of the economy still remains as one of the main characteristics under the grip of the IMF and the aid economy, the integration and disarticulation have taken a different path. "The development of underdevelopment" (Amin, 1982: 209) is central to capitalist restructuring through which the 'centre' subordinates a periphery, but this system appears to have mutated into creating patches of informal economies that are not tied to the system of capital accumulation anymore. While this process has in many ways not been discontinued, the way capital is reproduced has changed. These economic patches are not yet to see further capitalist development, but on the contrary, have been completely disarticulated and left abandoned outside formal relations of production. This occurs, when the process of capital accumulation previously more reliant on its (geographical) market expansion, in its need for accumulation of greater future profits, begins moving and settling in positions where it can achieve a higher organic composition. The 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 1978) of capitalism's main contradiction between the creative forces of production and the destruction of capital, thus appears to be, not a crisis of accumulation of capital, but a long-term systemic crisis of the reproduction of capital.

The best example for this is Nepal's 'export' labor market. It does not function as the 'reserve army' of the working force, but rather an excluded sector from which people's struggles are directed toward entering the relation of production in any possible way. This disarticulation of class relations, similar to the process of semiproletarization, has completely disintegrated the class relations we had seen in

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labor implies the complete proletarization of the labor force, meaning that 'there is a rapid tendency toward *unimodality* and ultimately only two classes'" (De Janvry in Rossebery, 1994: 179-180).

the last century. Outside of relations of production and formal economies, today's semiproletariat is seeking ways of becoming a part of disarticulated accumulation schemes. The position is characterized not by relations of production, but by the lack of them, the only common characteristic of this 'non-class' is an increasing need to obtain resources for their social reproduction. This restructuring of capitalism that leads to the fragmentation of class relations, marks a social transformation that can conceptually be described only by going beyond the concept of the semi-proletariat to understand the formation of this non-unified 'outsider' class: the post-proletariat.

One of the main characteristics that we should consider from such restructurings of capitalism in general and at the periphery in particular, is the post-proletariat's relative absence from the relations of production. This crucial fact, considered in the aspect of anti-systemic articulations disables such political movements to challenge the ownership of the means of production. In this classic formulation of social struggles, the post-proletariat's tragedy is that it is not able, by any means, to extort and threaten the ruling class's position. The only means to do so, as the case of Nepal shows, is through the employment of violent politics, a powerful tool, but the reach of which is limited due to absence of structurally opposite positions within the relations of production. It is under such conditions that it is possible that the most systemic political agendas are seen as anti-systemic ones, as it occurred to the Nepali left. The most anti-systemic notion that has underpinned the Nepalese revolution has thus been the urge and necessity to enter the relations of production, not to transform them.

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