Militant collectivity
Building solidarities in the Maoist movement in Nepal

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Abstract: A stubborn, anticapitalist movement, Maoism has persisted in the global periphery for the many past decades despite its tainted image as a progressive alterpolitical platform. This article seeks to ponder why this is the case by looking at a recent and popular example of leftist radical politics in the MLM tradition. I argue that contemporary Nepali Maoism is offering a militant, collectivist, antiliberal model for confronting capitalist and state hegemony in an effort to forge new class solidarities. Responding to a changed political environment for continuing its program of socialist revolution, I trace how the Maoist party's efforts at building a mass movement become centered on the question of organization, and in particular the requirements of what I term an ethical organization. Through an analysis of how caste and gender equalities are institutionalized within the movement, and the various ways in which collectivity becomes linked to concrete practices, the article offers an ethnographic analysis of contested egalitarian agency within a movement undergoing rapid change.

Keywords: alterpolitics, ethical organization, Maoist militancy, political subjectivities, solidarity

Introduction

In January 2009, Nepal's Maoist party, the CPN-M, celebrated its recent success in the first postwar elections by uniting with the much smaller Unity Centre-Masal in an effort to showcase its broad and inclusive political mandate after having turned from a guerrilla movement into a full-fledged political party. The real celebration, however, was only carried out more than a month later, on 25 February, when the two youth wings were united: the Young Communist League (YCL), the most numerous wing

in the CPN-M, with tens of thousands of members, and the All Nepal People's Youth Association convened for a full-day political program at the prestigious Khula Manch open-air auditorium in the center of the capital, Kathmandu. Though the festivities only kicked off at 1 pm, local party cadres had been assembling since 8 am at the outskirts of the city with large banners announcing the unification, and large doses of red vermilion powder, *tikka,* were being liberally applied to participants' foreheads. Large buses, chartered for the occasion, ferried cadres from adjacent areas to the city while members

within the municipal zones lined up in long processions and slowly made their way downtown, quickly growing to fill up the streets and waving party flags and shouting slogans: "Long Live YCL Nepal," "Long Live Revolutionary Youth Unification," and many more. One banner read: "Large-Scale Youth Force Mobilization for the Sake of Drastic Change! Unification National Awareness and Development and Construction: Our Campaign!"

The next day, when I talked to Nishal, one of the local YCL leaders from the outskirts of the city, the immense workload of preparing for this event started to come into focus. While the party leaders had praised the movement and its youth wings for their concerted action against corruption and as a platform for uniting young people for the political transition to peace, there was a much more mundane level of organizational work penetrating the everyday life of the Maoist organization that was all too easy to forget. In these local party offices, cadres had only been notified two days earlier about the program and had since then been occupied around the clock with stitching the fabric for the flags and finding and preparing the sticks to carry them, and the same was the case for the slogans that needed to be painted; meanwhile, local-level leaders, who had a bit more time to prepare, had busied themselves with reaching out to the farthest corners of the movement and its sympathizers to convince them to participate, and this required, in turn, consulting members on different levels of the party hierarchy that were dispersed throughout its seven major wings and subwings.

In this article, I wish to zoom in on these routine aspects of organization and probe the everyday unfolding of revolutionary politics. The Nepali Maoist movement, despite its recent proclivity for patrimonial party politics, prescribes to the ideology of Marxist-Leninist-Maoist (MLM) thought, and this translates into a revolutionary code of conduct for its members and strong ideas about the antidiscriminatory nature and experience of membership. Maoists speak in flattering terms about the movement as

a space of equality and of the shared conditions of livelihoods and work within the party. Yet, how do these ideas sit with, on the one hand, the hierarchical history of Leninist communist parties to which the CPN-M[1] in large part conforms, and on the other hand, the stratified distribution of work that organizes and prepares for political outcomes such as the unification parade celebrating the two youth wings? It is probably no coincidence that Nishal was taxed with collecting sticks for the flags, while junior members were asked to stitch the fabric, and senior ones were given the assignment of reaching out to other party members and coordinate their participation. But what does this tell us about the vexed trajectories of revolutionary politics, and how do we sort out the intertwined relationships of hierarchical and egalitarian ideas and practices?

Bridging Maoist and anarchist anthropologies?

I am posing these questions at a moment when anarchist ideas have taken a renewed hold on anthropology (Graeber 2004; Nugent 2012; Ringel 2012; Scott 2012), one that seeks to think outside the bounds of the state and privilege spontaneous organizing against authority across historical and geographical cases. Yet, we might ask, why not a Maoist anthropology? Such an endeavor would presumably resurrect notions of peasant consciousness or privilege a praxis perspective to knowledge generation. However, rather than reproducing the fault lines between different theoretical traditions, my hope here is to overcome such an ontologizing of the anthropological project by initiating a dialogue across political movements that share many foundations and challenges. The crisis of the traditional left in the affluent global North has spurred the development of a new "rhizomatic" left based on "networks of outrage and hope" (Castells 2012) that is critical of party- and union-based politics. But this also puts them at odds with the strong popular and party-based

social movements in the global South that use classical techniques of collective organization and a Marxist vocabulary for critiquing elite class dominance. Maoist movements can bring new ideas to current forms of alterpolitics, not least the ethics of practice that rejects the division between knowledge and practice. David Graeber's elegant summary of the difference between Marxism and anarchism—the first conceived as a theoretical discourse about revolutionary strategy and the second an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice (Graeber 2007: 304)—nicely captures the historical developments between different revolutionary movements, but it also has the unfortunate consequence of reinforcing the differences, rather than the common ground, across the landscape of alterpolitical movements worldwide.

What unites these disparate efforts at resisting capitalist or state chauvinisms, despite their historically different modalities, is the strategic question of organization. To start this kind of enterprise, it is necessary to break down historical and ideological barriers between dispersed anticapitalist movements and to recognize the common struggle against capitalist supremacy in its many different manifestations, including those against privatization (Klein 2001) and dispossession (Harvey 2003; Kasmir and Carbonella 2008), as well as in the urge to invent new forms of democracy (Graeber 2002: 13) that transcend the limitations of representative democracy and corporatist states. David Harvey has referred to this ambition of building a global anticapitalist movement through the metaphor of the spiral: a dynamic of local struggles that reinforce rather than oppose each other (Harvey 2010: 250). The idea of militant collectivity that I propose here builds on this global ambition for connecting multiple and invariably localized forms of resistance and alternatives—what Raymond Williams (1989) theorized through the notion of "militant particularism"—by underlining some of the commonalities across historically and spatially juxtaposed movements and by seeking a way of reconceptualizing political subjectivities so as to break away from the historical individualism that has been one of the ideological underpinnings of capitalist accumulation.

This article is an effort to provide such a bridge between diverse alterpolitical traditions, building on my work with the Maoist movement in Kathmandu.[2] In their struggle to overcome some of the complexities of revolutionary organization, the Nepali Maoists have developed an idea of militant collectivity, if in practice more so than in discourse, and it is my aim to provide the first theoretical contours of what is implied by this tactic and ethic of organization. As I hope to show, militant collectivity as practiced by the Nepali Maoist movement shares many of the concerns of ethical organization that invigorate the new antiausterity and postpolitical movements in Europe and the United States (Davis 2009; Maeckelbergh 2012; Thorburn 2012). It provides, I shall argue, a way of conceptualizing the intimate relationships between people and movements to show the complex configurations of agency at the heart of radical egalitarian projects. In contrast to liberal ideas of agency rooted in the individual's ability to act (Jackson 1998), militant collectivity postulates the equality and agency of individuals through the obligatory bonds of solidarity established within the community.

These insights build, in part, on David Graeber's tripartite separation of the moral grounds of economic relations, which he divides into communism, exchange, and hierarchy, to show the mutual and interdependent bases of human relations (Graeber 2012). By virtue of its deeply political character, however, militant collectivity transcends the morality of economic relations to include questions of emotions and consciousness that make possible a different regime of relationships, where the uniqueness of each member is articulated within the common frame of an ethical organization. This requires paying attention to and showing the relevance of micropractices that are usually left out of sight in studies of alterpolitics due to their nonspectacular mundanity. By engaging the everyday aspects of activist organization—a project similar but not identical to Alpa Shah's recent

focus on Naxalite intimacies (Shah 2013) and Nicolas Jaoul's exploration of emotional power (Jaoul 2008)—militant collectivity thus describes a double movement: it is a way of actualizing the individual by realizing him or her as an agent of the common struggle, and it is also a way of conceptualizing the nature of the movement—one that derives its force from its myriad activities and ideas but that cannot be reduced merely to the sum of its actions or to an elusive common ideology.

A new organization for a new politics

> Transformation only can develop higher level of unity among its own rank, which is inevitable for the success of revolution. Our party, the CPN (Maoist), has regarded intra-party struggles as unavoidable without which no transformation takes place. It believes the preservation of party unity is founded on the paradox of incessant struggle within the party. Struggles guarantee its dynamism; progress can only come through resolution of contradictions.
> —CPN-M, paper of the CPN (Maoist) at the conference Imperialism and Proletarian Revolution in the 21st Century, 2007

Several years before the CPN-M united with the Unity Centre-Masal, it engaged in a process of rebuilding the party to better fit the requirements of competitive parliamentary politics instead of a People's War. Speaking at a conference in December 2006, the party chairman, Prachanda, opened the debate on party building in the context of a changed political environment and what he referred to, quoting Lenin, as a "tactic based on concrete analysis of the concrete condition." It was now time for a heightened "intra-party struggle" to bring out the inherent "contradictions" of the party and transform them into a new unity. It was in this period that the Young Communist League moved to the center of party activities, overtaking and sidelining the Maoist army, which had been barri-

caded during the peace process. The YCL was heralded as a "new movement for a new politics," and through relocations of party cadres and an aggressive mobilization drive in the cities, it rapidly grew in size within the first six months of its existence.

But the sudden appearance of the YCL was only the most conspicuous element of the renewed focus on organization. Underneath its united public image, the many different Maoist wings were reigned in and brought in closer alliance with the central party organization. An example of this can be found in the establishment of party committees on every administrative level to coordinate both the dispersed work of the different wings within a given area along horizontal lines, and to ensure their subordination to committee decisions from the upper echelons. During the preparations for the unification parade described above, a great deal of the work of local leaders lay exactly in the use of these committee structures to coordinate the work among the different party units. The unification itself is expressive of the movement's concern with embodying the only legitimate pro-poor platform and being *the* alternative to a liberal, pro-market, antinational politics.

Theories of organization occupy a central place in CPN-M debates about revolutionary tactics, drawing in particular on Leninist (vanguardism), Stalinist (scientism), and Maoist (dialectics of praxis) models of how to capitalize on the potentialities of class rage. Class, obviously, stands at the epicenter of the CPN-M political program, but in a society crisscrossed by multiple lines of polarization, tracing and translating configurations of class into concrete markers of equality has often been frustrated by people's overlapping identities and loyalties. While one aspect of the CPN-M's organizational focus lay on the formal relationship between different sections of the party machinery, the movement has therefore continuously been engaged in a process of disciplining members in accordance with its ideology for class relations. This is one of the critical aspects of the CPN-M as a revolutionary movement, in that unlike social

movements in general, it does not merely seek to organize resistance but to actually *transform* members to internalize the class perspective of revolutionary politics. Pradeep, a local YCL leader who had served in the People's War, explained to me in early 2009 how the people signing up for the movement should think hard about why they were attracted to Maoism. More important than merely joining the party, he explained, was their ability to stay and endure the difficult work that membership required, a dedication that rested on individuals' class perspective: "Every youth," Pradeep explained, "has to think which class he belongs to. Rich or poor? The youth have to be clear about which class it wants to serve, the rich or the poor."

From the perspective of the local leaders organizing the cadres for the party, one of the most burning questions thus revolved around this ability of members to align themselves with the class perspective of the poor and to develop an ethic of conduct. Inside the movement, in the everyday organization of work and leisure, life was about "living the change" and about turning the perspectives of class into an ethic of the everyday.

Gendering of class

For members of postwar Maoism, ethical questions of organization thus came to occupy a center stage in the movement's efforts at positioning itself in the political sphere, as this was the site where ideas about change and a "new culture" materialized through the struggles of gendered, ethnic, and caste subjects. Pradeep himself was an example of an uneducated rural youth from the minority Maithil ethnic group in southeastern Nepal, and as a leader of one of the many local YCL cells he strove to institutionalize a cadre culture based on the commonality of class by, for instance, transgressing the dominant Hindu moral codes of caste purity with regard to food preparation and consumption. Hence, within the YCL and in other Maoist wings I observed, mixed castes ate together, since meals were shared experiences that were seen to enhance community bonds. These were simple but effective efforts at communicating the cultural equality of all members, irrespective of their status outside the Maoist party.

More complicated than transgressing the disjunctures of caste has been the ethics of gender relations and the tense relationship between feminist sensitivities and more formal, gender-blind approaches to organizing collectivity. In 2003, one of the highest-ranking women in the Maoist movement, Hsila Yami (writing under the pseudonym of Parvati), warned against patriarchal tendencies in progressive movements, despite a widespread sensitivity toward the "women question". Pushing a more feminist agenda, she contended that "instead of taking women as reliable long-term equal partners in the communist movement it takes women's role as supportive" (Parvati 2003). This, she warned, "ultimately breeds alienation," as it robs women of initiative and creative power.

Structures of patriarchy run deep in the everyday texture of social relationships all across Nepali society (Rotchild 2006), and transforming the cultural embeddedness of gendered relationships on the ground has proved extremely challenging for the CPN-M, particular in relation to daily divisions of labor and in the inability of women to attain leadership roles on equal footing with men (Gayer 2013). What Yami highlighted was not, however, the absence of a critical stance against patriarchy in political organization as such, but the combination of a blind spot to mundane forms of organization on the one hand, and a "hypersensitivity" to women's liberation on the other, which sometimes installed rigid forms of equality (or "absolute equality") that were insensitive to women's special situations, particularly with regard to menstruation and pregnancy. Since women face a "double oppression" (Parvati 2003: 5–6)—of both class and patriarchal values—their struggle is more complex and needs enduring organizational support.

The CPN-M has experimented with different initiatives to accommodate gender imbalances,

but gender trouble in the Maoist movement starts from the problem of Nepali political space, which "suffers chronically," to use Mark Liechty's vocabulary (2009), from a surplus of not just adults but adult men. It is a systematic and entrenched masculinization of public power that does not seem to have improved with the changed form of struggle in the post-war context. The gender bias of the YCL is subject to these forces as well, despite their efforts at mobilizing female industrial workers, since its leadership was drawn from the already gender-biased (and now disbanded) Maoist army. Women cadres are therefore chiefly found in the platoon or section levels rather than among its leadership. Interestingly, though, this makes the challenge of instituting gender equality more manageable, but also potentially less enduring, than during the insurgency, where the gendering of entire life trajectories was at stake. More important than questions of marriage, child rearing, and leadership, which were the issues motivating Hsila Yami's critique, are now the daily distribution of workloads among the sexes and modes of interaction. In the YCL communities, cadres are divided into sections of seven to nine persons and female activists are distributed equally, where possible, across the sections to ensure that all units have members of both sexes and that work can be shared equally between members of both sexes. This ascertains that divisions of labor in the movement do not become gendered, but at the same time, because men significantly outnumber women, the latter are consistently a minority in their groupings.

Gender is thus treated de jure as a position of "absolute equality," and this has had a measurable effect on the level of consciousness. Contrary to both private and public spheres in Nepal, which are highly gendered, male cadres in the CPN-M spoke of everyday tasks in gender-neutral terms, while female cadres often recounted how work in the movement was, for once, the same as the men's. Damini, a 20-year-old laborer who had been a member for a little over a year and was actually in a position to command some of the "boys," experienced this gender

equality as extremely gratifying: "We can do the same work as the boys [keta]; there is no difference. In fact, it is more beneficial to be a woman in the movement, since we learn about politics and are treated equally with others."

While this kind of everyday revolutionary work, which included tasks like cooking, relaying messages, debating policies, and coordinating events, are too often relegated to the background of movement histories, they are important for grasping the consolidation of relationships on the ground. As argued by Alpa Shah (2013) in the context of the Naxalite movement in Jharkand, India, the intimacy of relationships index how new political moralities become culturally embedded. An interesting observation I made in some of the settings where I met members organized in small communes was that while retaining gender-mixed work units, women were still given separate quarters, ostensibly to control, and prevent, the proliferation of sexual relationships. The CPN-M subscribes to a notion of cadre asceticism, deriving from a focus, as noted by a Central Committee resolution, on "working hard and living in privations and to be wholly devoted to the cause of communism" (CPN-M 2003: 13). While not formally about gender equality, the morality of asceticism seems to be providing a space for women and men to "park", or renounce, sexual relationships and thus to bracket some of the issues of patriarchal continuities in the movement that Yami showed to be particularly related to processes of reproduction.

While gender is not neutralized, since this would also merely turn it into a blind spot, it is subsumed within organizational patterns and new moralities of interaction that give inter-communal relations new expressions. Whereas divisions of labor tend to efface gender divisions, installing what Yami referred to as an "absolute equality" between the sexes (which on its own may be problematic due to the "double oppression" of women), the spatial segregation of male and female cadres reinscribes gender differences into CPN-M and may, ideally, create the form of attention that subjects of "double oppression"

might need. In other words, because the consequences of romantic relationships have tended to reinscribe stereotyped gendered roles in the movement (Gayer 2013) and have been more detrimental for women than for men, providing female members with separate quarters creates protected spaces of feminized subjectivities that may ultimately empower them vis-à-vis their male comrades.

The scientism of struggle

The CPN-M's attention to the "scientism" of organization can help us analyze this practice. Leadership efforts at developing an organizational theory start, as argued convincingly by Amanda Snellinger (2009), with the problem of power. Unless reigned in, power is randomly effectuated and leads to "spontaneity"—the exact opposite of what systematic revolutionaries seek to accomplish. One of Snellinger's interlocutors expresses this problem with reference to the balance between "freedom" and "control": "we understand the balance between freedom and control. … There must be some limitation on freedom in the organization, otherwise the organization will turn into a chaotic mass" (ibid.: 83). Hence, as explained repeatedly in the CPN-M's Central Committee resolutions, the "basic theories" of revolution need to be "developed into an organizational theory; a methodology and system [to] stop counter-revolution." This requires, in turn, an emphasis on "establishing and encouraging scientific methodologies of judging between right and wrong" (CPN-M 2003: 13).

Linking gender with class emancipation and struggles against "counter-revolution" requires such a "scientific" approach to guard against the "spontaneity" of entrenched, patriarchal forms of power. The complicated relationships between gender, scientism, and the ethics of organization thus point to the fundamental role of struggle at the heart of Maoist practices of militant collectivity, since it is struggle, in its multiple forms and appearances, that pushes the problems of "feudal culture" into the realm of transformative action. As with Marxist movements in general, the Nepali Maoists base their philosophy of change on experiences and processes of struggle, delineating the movement from oppression to liberation. Struggle is therefore at the heart of the CPN-M conception and practice of agency, and this spills into organization through a recurring, dual movement between members' different perspectives on the one hand and within individuals on the other hand. Whereas "unity is relative," a party declaration from 2006 alerts, "struggle is absolute [since] none can build a party where there is no inner-party struggle and [since] no line is 100% correct" (CPN-M 2007: 7). In order to reform itself, the party organization must therefore constantly be in a process of fighting against the inequalities and discriminations that penetrate society and threaten to spill over into relationships between members.

The practice of gender relations is a good example of the complicated ways in which class subjectivities are being played out and addressed through struggles at different levels. Asking the "boys" about these practices adds another layer to the complex subjectivities of Maoist activism. "We treat the women here like our own sisters," says one 18-year-old cadre, and continues: "[W]e are like one big family of sisters and brothers." Indeed, outside the purview of official party politics, where all are gender-neutral "comrades", in the more relaxed, or "intimate", spaces of daily activism, cadres readily use sibling forms of address. This has the effect of simplifying the desexualization of cadre relations, since brothers and sisters can be on intimate terms without invoking moral panic about sexual liaisons. At the same time, however, it inscribes itself in the cultural history of patriarchal family values, since "brothers" are traditionally responsible for their "sisters". Moreover, in Nepali kinship terms, siblings are stratified according to age, and this naturalized and gendered hierarchization institutionalizes relations of guidance and obedience that go against efforts at breaking with the intricate institutions of paternalist culture. The gendered hierarchies

are easily mapped onto activist relations, such that older or more senior cadres become "elder brother" (*dai*) or "elder sister" (*didi*), while junior ones correspondingly are called "younger sister" (*bahini*) or "younger brother" (*bhai*), with the manifest authority that these terms signify. This "easiness" is at the same time the weakness of the kinship grounding of Maoist mutuality. By operating within the enframing idea of a single family and entertaining essential ideals of equality (see Parish 1996), sibling forms of address evidence one of the ways in which collectivity is created among activists, but they lack the "struggle" of countercultural practices and allow the activist community to become subtly divided into gendered leaders and followers with reciprocal but different obligations. These modes of address show the difficulties in eliminating gender discrimination and why the "intra-party struggle" must ideally remain constant and "absolute".

Egalitarianism in hierarchy

The gradual opening up of the party organization since 2006 has made the borders of the CPN-M more porous and has invited renewed criticism by party leaders for exhibiting "serious problems and weaknesses" with a "lethargic" committee system and an absence of regular "criticism" and "self-criticism" that form core pillars in the practice of struggle: "Now, there has been a rapid deterioration in the party's proletarian conduct and working style. The competition of individual concern, interest and return is trying to replace collective concern, initiative and sacrifice for party and revolution" (CPN-M 2010: 7).

The idea of the collective as opposed to the noncommitted individual has emerged as a strong trope in postwar Maoism, reflecting the changing subjectivities of urban migrants operating within a migrant moral economy and a flashy middle-class urbanity. But it is not only leaders who worry about how to discipline a new generation of activists in "proletarian conduct" and the culture of self-sacrifice so prom-

inent during the war (Lecomte-Tilouine 2006). Young activists themselves have taken to reflecting upon their commitment and membership through the tropes of collectivity, or *samuhik* in Nepali.

One young woman who had been a member for some time gave an intriguing account of the vexed relationship between self and other in the Maoist community. As a senior to several new members, Ashmi was mildly critical of some cadres' dubious efforts at "putting the collective first" and contributing to the common work chores. This was evidenced, she explained, in their wish to spend their free time meeting up with friends rather than helping other activists with their assignments, or in not dedicating themselves to studying the party history and Marxist ideology. At the same time, she admitted, these were extremely complicated and deeply felt challenges that were experienced as personal struggles of conduct; to participate in this political project, one had to learn "to act with the collective in mind." So, while Ashmi had experienced suffering and hardship before joining the party, her life had now become more enduring and complex because of the changing requirements of agency within the movement. She now had to participate actively and be committed within her new political community by learning to lead junior members and take on new responsibilities through the submission to a party hierarchy. This was an experience, she explained reassuringly, "that is a daily struggle."

> Life is a struggle, you have to compromise with so many things. Now I am living and working here. People think that we are just eating and sleeping, but we are also engaged in our own struggle. Life is totally different now. Before I could go anywhere, say anything, do whatever I liked. But now it is different. Everything happens under a chain of command, the party is really different.

The complexities of activist solidarity expressed by Ashmi and many others alert us to the con-

tingent structures of agency in particular historical contexts. In providing a criticism of contemporary capitalism and its alliance with a liberal notion of freedom, Nepali Maoism draws upon regional idioms of solidarity, where senses of self are defined through social relations and commitments to the common good over individual self-interest (Leve 2009). The Maoist criticism against "self-interest" as a form of selfishness that dissolves the political community is therefore a highly potent metaphor in Nepali society with a rich history of application. But what characterizes the Maoist application of collectivity is the way it becomes embedded in a hierarchical communist party structure that is potentially divisive and inadvertently stratifying. Ashmi invoked "struggle" to explain the multidimensional aspects of participating in a community where one did not have the freedom to do as one pleased, and where this "struggling" commitment was exactly the glue that tied activists together.

Importantly, Ashmi's account is not a complaint but an exposition of why Maoist activism requires a struggling self to institute collectivity. Maoist activism takes place through the formation of collectivist subjects that are shaped by the multilayered nature of class struggle operating on minds, individual bodies, and the "emotional textures" of relationships. The problem with "individual concern, interest and return" (CPN-M 2010: 7) is that it reduces the social nature of class and progressive action to singular persons, thereby separating individuals from the forces of sociality when the point is exactly to bring them together. Since the problem of marginality and exclusion are social by nature, so, too, must be their solution. The "organizational principle of MLM," according to the leadership, is therefore "collective decision and individual responsibility" rather than "individual decision and collective responsibility" (ibid.). Such formulations of collectivity, which put the collective above the individual, as it were, are reminders of the Dumontian conception of hierarchy as encompassment wherein singular elements (in his case castes, here individual activists) can be juxtaposed on the same level, thus creating a form of equality that is stabilized by the enframing order (Dumont 2004). Collectivity, in such a reading, is what makes the equality of individuals possible. Activists speak more concretely of the shifts from "I" to "we" when explaining the nature of their struggle. Ashmi's "daily struggle," then, is about the conditionality of "we" as an aspect of selves, the personal work to align the "I" with the "we" in ways that bring the latter into being through the transformation, not the effacement, of the former. In this way, the "I" becomes the site of "responsibility", the place of action, whereas the "we", as "decision", creates the condition for the transformation of the "I".

Not all YCL cadres were able to align themselves with such a struggling subjectivity, and this became a genre of talk among members. Cadres who left were generally spoken of in unflattering terms as individuals who "loved money too much" or who could not shed their desire of "tasty food" and "beautiful things." I even came to a point in my fieldwork where I could start to identify the cadres who were about to leave; small things like stealing moments away from the shared living spaces or asking me to bring fashion magazines were often sure signs that cadres would not going to last much longer. The struggle simply became too much, too inadvertent and possibly also too uneventful. Yet, we should not belittle the "struggle" connected with Maoist mobilization; on average, the people I met spent several years in the movement before they were transferred to other departments or quit.

Grounding solidarity

Maoist perceptions of liberation through struggle and submission thus complicate uncritical equations of agency with freedom. On a very mundane level, activism in the CPN-M involves a wide variety of activities that require collective organization and individual flexibility, such as going from door to door and collecting donations, traveling across town to full-day meet-

ings, participating in marches and protests, getting up in the night to patrol neighborhoods, and much more. Taking on these shared obligations demanded that members rotate responsibilities, communicate extensively, help where it is needed, and be prepared to swiftly change plans. Under these circumstances, the very condition of action takes on a collective dimension, since it is only within the community that this form of agency becomes meaningful and the myriad disparate tasks can add up to a coherent project. "Solidarity", explains the French legal scholar Alain Supiot, was for a period in the seventeenth century synonymous with the term "solidity", thus pointing to that which solidifies, or brings together, a human group (Supiot 2013: 109). While solidarity later became a key theme in the development of the social sciences, it has survived in the post-Durkheimian theorization, with its stressed focus on individual experiences, chiefly through the notion of "reciprocity" (see Chari and Donner 2010). However, there is an analytic purchase to be made by recognizing this legal reading of solidarity, as it points to the materiality that constitutes human relationships and realizes the potentiality of their aspirations. The presence of a strong institutional culture in the CPN-M could preferably be read as the contours of this solidity, which activates individuals through a command-obedience system and thus makes their contribution relevant to the political goals of the movement.

This would help explain the curious seriousness with which Maoist activists treat institutional culture, not unlike the almost sacral status that assemblies and horizontal decision-making processes have attained in the alterglobalization movement (Maeckelbergh 2012; Thorburn 2012). Submitting to the party hierarchy is considered by activists to be something akin to a constitutive act of membership, signaling their dedication to a new struggling self. The use of family terms in the movement seemed to help activists in making the connection between submission and equality, since it was due to newcomers' inexperience, and thus their status as "younger brother" or "younger sister", that

they were commanded. "It is true that we have a strict hierarchical discipline," one male junior member told me, "but these are not relationships based on inferiority and superiority. They are based on respect. Here we are all equal." Familiar forms of address, at least in a Nepali Hindu context, as explained by Steven Parish (1996), entertain this duality of being stratified and signaling equality at the same time, since siblings belong to the same moral community. Unlike in Hindu families, with their fixed patriarchies and generational divides, however, the Maoist youth movement seeks to undercut institutional authorities before they turn into individual privileges by constantly stirring up and mixing members' positions in the organization. Over a period of four months in the spring of 2009, when the YCL was adjusting to new political scenarios, local activists thus changed status and position relative to each other up to three times. In a few cases, the relationship between commander and commanded were even completely reversed, whereas others moved from being leaders into more administrative functions or joined different units. Such dynamic shifts made it possible to utilize members' different strengths and created the conditions of "unity in action".

The "formal equality" that David Graeber (2012) diagnoses for economic relations of "exchange" and that is by nature "impersonal" does not adequately capture the ways in which submission prefigured the respect for equality that followed from these interchangeable positions. Anarchism's engrained "skepticism of authority" (McLaughlin 2007) prevents an analysis of the egalitarianism in hierarchy and the empowerment that this kind of collectivity makes possible. By integrating activists into a militarized party culture with positional hierarchies, the YCL succeeded in creating a strong platform for cooperation among different units and across a vast organizational landscape. To underscore the institutional grounding of collectivity, activists in many cases moved into local communes to strengthen the formation of an alternative socialist space. Here we see a direct link to other

contemporary urban political movements, in particular the Occupy movement, where political leverage has also been coupled with social organization, thus necessitating an "ethical" link between "living" and "working" that can encompass the political geography of a multitude. In contradistinction to its Euro-American forms, however, the YCL's "camping" could easily last years, and this turned it into something more of a political technology than the liminal weekend camps employed, for instance, by the Thailand labor union to teach members the spirit of solidarity (Mills 1999). In the YCL, the liminality and potentiality of class had to be institutionalized to create a sustainable alternative sociopolitical modality. The institutional groundings of this form of political solidarity are hard to grasp through an analytic framework that sees "structure" and "agency" as mutually opposed, because it fails to understand how empowerment can grow out of massive institutional arrangements. Instead, as I have suggested here, we should understand the Maoist alterpolitics as an experiment in alterpolitical solidarity that recycles and transgresses cultural models of agency grounded in the social embeddedness of activists.

Conclusion

So how can we make sense of Maoist political articulation in the context of global resistance to capitalism? Counterintuitively, an important lesson to take away from how collectivity is practiced by Maoists is how the verticalization of membership seems to strengthen rather than weaken processes of solidarity due to its multiple sociological dynamics of institutionalizing guidance, being a mechanism for creating coherence across the networks of political wings, integrating new members, and making the individual communes run more smoothly. Within the YCL, there is an almost imperceptible shift from sociospatial arrangements of everyday activism to the metaphysical problematic of how individuals come to act in the interest of a collective through new forms of relationships and

by adopting a perspective on themselves from the vantage point of this collective. As pointed out by radical theorists such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Zizek, this requires appreciating momentary shifts in subjectivity (Badiou 2007; Zizek 2008) that can account for the ideological nature of any subject position and the ways in which they become allied to specific political projects. Maoism, as any other political movement, relies on being able to reconfigure subjectivities for purposes of generating new forms of solidarity and thus on the articulation of localized and dispersed subjectivities.

A burning question to arise from this ethnography of Maoist activism is how well it succeeds in creating an alternative political platform of relevance not only for the struggle for democracy in Nepal but for similar efforts elsewhere. The analysis has highlighted how transitional Maoism, particularly within the most radical and numerically strongest youth movement for the urban poor, integrated new members through forms of cooperation based on both vertical and horizontal relations, and that to take these positions seriously was one of the most concrete ways through which solidarity with the political community could be enacted. This created the seemingly absurd situation that newcomer activists' first "act of faith", as it were, became to showcase their willing submission to the party hierarchy—to be a good activist was for some to literally be obedient. Yet, the very notion of hierarchy here can blind us to more nuanced understandings of the ways in which political agency is generated in institutional settings. Only by adopting a historical perspective on Maoism, one that recognizes the struggles against entrenched local hierarchies of caste, class, gender, and so on, can we make sense of Maoist hierarchies as distinctly different modes of social integration; rather than being based on worth and societal status, activist subjectivities are produced around a formalized equality that puts all members in the same "submissive" relationships to the collective values of the movement and equally responsible for creating a space that invites everyone to participate.

These organizational hierarchies—based on a strong adherence to ideas of equality—can be seen as the formal equivalent of organizational horizontalities in Euro-American social movements; they are aspects of the "militant particularism" (Williams 1989) of the concrete challenges faced by South Asian progressives and alert us to the historically conditioned aspects of struggle and organization that create the grounds for certain forms of political action. The challenge for a resolute political platform against multiple forms of dispossession lies in building broad solidarity movements and uniting these efforts behind concrete political expressions. This discussion of Maoist militant collectivity has highlighted how these challenges have been addressed in the context of Nepal's revolutionary transition. While the YCL is today in disarray, effectively sidelined by the political establishment as too radical in a climate of "negotiation", its model for instigating a mass movement might still be of use to future militants of democratic struggle—even beyond the political geography of Himalayan South Asia.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. After uniting with the Unity Centre-Masal, the Maoists changed their name to UCPN-M, *United* Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist. Then, in 2012, a break-away faction adopted the party's pre-unification name, CPN-M to differentiate itself from the UCPN-M, adding to the confusion over names. For clarity's sake, I use only the "old" CPN-M abbreviation for the Maoists, as the article deals with events prior to the 2012 split.

2. I carried out fieldwork *with* the UCPN-M and *within* the YCL between January and October 2009. While the YCL is a highly controversial movement in Nepal due to its association with extortion and street violence, during my presence in the field, where I lived with and regularly visited some of the YCL cadre communities, I observed very little confrontational politics, and members in the movement were most of the time merely occupied with low-key organizational work and occasional public protests.

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