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## **Roads of change: political transition and state formation in Nepal's agrarian districts**

Katharine N. Rankin, Andrea J. Nightingale, Pushpa Hamal and Tulasi S. Sigdel

This paper explores the political field that has opened up in the wake of the recent civil war in Nepal. We focus on cultural-political developments in agrarian districts, where some of the most intriguing openings, and indeed the most pernicious closures, can be witnessed (as opposed to the national-state restructuring that commands more media and popular attention). Our research asks what spaces open up in the emerging political field at the district scale to entrench or transform dominant cultural codes and sedimented histories of socio-economic inequality. Preliminary research identifies specific sectors of local governance that have emerged as significant sites of struggle over the shape and meaning of 'democracy', namely forest management and infrastructure development. The primary contribution of the paper lies in specifying an analytical approach to the study of 'post-conflict' governance at the local scale via three conceptual terrains of inquiry – governance and planning, political subjectivity, and cultural politics. The ultimate objective is to develop a framework for assessing the conditions of possibility for a democratic restructuring of economy and society to accompany the official political institutions of liberal democracy.

**Keywords:** 'post-conflict'; political field; democracy; Nepal; cultural politics; political subjectivity; governance

Nepal emerged in 2006 from a decade-long Maoist insurgency and a centuries-old Hindu monarchy to form a secular democratic republic and elect a Maoist-led consensus government.<sup>1</sup> Since then, a critically conscious peasantry and a burgeoning public sphere have joined ongoing donor efforts to institutionalize liberal safeguards for 'good governance' and 'civil society'. In this conjuncture, Nepal presents a case where in some respects political space has opened up for articulating alternative development paradigms. And yet transitional politics, combined now with reconstruction planning in the aftermath of the 2015 earthquakes, have left many on the ground deeply skeptical about the ability of political leaders to capitalize upon that space. It is therefore timely to probe the practices and contexts wherein 'democracy' and new forms of rule – whether considered regressive or progressive – are emerging.

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<sup>1</sup>Political groupings subscribing to Maoist ideology in Nepal, like in neighboring India, have assumed multiple and shifting party formations. At the time of the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord (CPA), Maoist factions had joined as the Unified Communist Party of Nepal–Maoist (UCPN-M), but have since split multiple times. In this paper, 'the Maoists' refers to the post-peace accord unified Maoist party.

This paper explores the political field that opened up in the wake of the Maoist People's War (1996–2006) and associated mass *jana andolan*, or People's Movements (1990 and 2006) that succeeded in overthrowing the ruling political regime.<sup>2</sup> It engages the notion of political field, in the sense inspired by Pierre Bourdieu (1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), as a field of political practice through which cultural codes or ideologies (*doxa* in Bourdieu's lexicon) are produced and contested. The political field is not limited to practices associated with the formal institutions of political democracy, such as political parties. Rather, it includes the full range of practices through which power and authority are (re)produced, as well as those through which dominant cultural codes are revealed and challenged (see also Nightingale and Ojha 2013).

This orientation to the study of the *politics* of 'post-conflict' transition hinges on a more expansive understanding of class than is commonly articulated in agrarian studies (Bourdieu 1986).<sup>3</sup> It attends to socioeconomic inequality and material modes of dispossession, and also more broadly to differentiation in structures of access to multiple forms of capital. When capital is understood to encompass the full range of resources valued by the social agents active within a political field – cultural and symbolic as well as economic and political – then the analytical task becomes one of assessing the practices through which class advantage is communicated and reinforced, and also recognized and contested. An orientation to politics in this sense also brings into focus more complex temporalities than evoked by the widely circulating moniker 'post-conflict' (Shneiderman and Snellinger 2014). It underscores how continuity articulates change, and specifically how struggles surrounding the accumulation and dispensation of multiple forms of capital did not begin and end with a civil war between Maoist insurgents and state forces – as is glaringly obvious in 2015 with the resurgence of violence surrounding announcements of proposed boundaries for the new federal units.

Investigating the political field thus requires probing the daily business of gaining advantage and enacting and subverting authority through place-based ethnographic and historical approaches. We thus focus on the politics of state formation at the district scale, where some of the most intriguing openings, and indeed the most pernicious closures, are witnessed. As a result of eight years of political stalemate and derailed constitution-writing at the national scale, the district scale (including the official government planning divisions of Village Development Committees (VDCs) and District Development Committees (DDCs)) has acquired significance for a wide range of actors. In the absence of elected local *governments* (since 1997, due first to the civil war, and subsequently to the lack of a constitution), a loose and fluid network of stakeholders in the political transition – including state bureaucrats, party leaders, civil society organizations and ethno-national social movements – partake in district *governance* through officially mandated mechanisms (Byrne and Shrestha 2014). At the same time, budgets and planning processes have been decentralized to the 75 administrative DDCs, which continue to function as part of the state bureaucracy. Meanwhile, for a politically conscious peasantry, making claims on the planning function of the local state has become the surest means for expressing a sense of entitlement to citizenship and inclusion in the new federal republic. Our research asks what spaces open up in

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<sup>2</sup>Italicized phrases are in the Nepali language and have been transliterated according to the conventions of Turner (1931).

<sup>3</sup>The quotation marks around the term 'post-conflict' indicate that we reject prevailing interpretations that imagine a cessation of struggle and gloss over continuities in multiple dimensions of conflict. The term 'post-revolution' is engaged without quotation marks to signal simply the time period following the CPA peace accord (2006).

the emerging political field at the district scale to entrench or transform dominant cultural codes and sedimented histories of socio-economic inequality.

In this paper, we present an analytical framework rather than results from a completed research program. Case examples are furnished to illustrate the framework, and are elaborated briefly through ethnographic description. The paper is based on a pilot study conducted in three districts selected to represent a range of caste and ethnic demographics, human development, ecological zones and degrees of conflict during the insurgency.<sup>4</sup> A fundamental objective of the pilot study was to highlight processes of state-making from the interior of the country. Understanding these dynamics, we contended, could prove fruitful for anticipating the challenges and possibilities facing local states once their boundaries are determined. Preliminary research identified infrastructure development as a significant site of struggle over the shape and meaning of 'democracy' in Nepal's transition – and our case examples focus on road-building in particular.<sup>5</sup>

In developing an analytical framework to investigate this contested sector, we specify the following three terrains of inquiry as relevant to the study of state formation in contexts where the political field is undergoing significant shifts: (1) What competing political rationalities and claims to authority are emerging in practices of planning and governance at the district scale where development technologies encounter everyday life? (2) What kinds of individual and collective political subjectivities are produced and enacted in association with these multiple governance projects? (3) How are prevailing cultural codes and practices of authority reproduced or transformed in people's everyday engagements with the local state? The paper begins with some notes on Nepal's political transition and the expanding role of district-scale governance in the allocation of resources, followed by a section detailing the significance of roads as a key site of contested local governance. The bulk of the paper is devoted to elaborating the three conceptual terrains – governance, political subjectivity and cultural politics – as illustrated through road-building, in order to assess the progressive and regressive potentials in the current conjuncture. Overall, the analytical framework is developed with the aim of contributing some insights the spaces and practices of states-in-the-making and the possibilities they offer for democratic transformations of economy and society.

### **Revolution, political transition and district governance**

Nepal is one of the places in the world where in recent years people have mobilized to transform the situation that oppresses them. As in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, mobilization was built on the aspirations of socialist ideology along with the revolutionary agency of the peasantry. Not surprisingly, analyses emanating from Nepal's urban intellectuals and international donors alleged that peasant participants had been duped and coerced (for a

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<sup>4</sup>The pilot study was funded by a Royal Geographical Society Small Grant and International Opportunities Fund grant from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (grant no. 861-2008-1010).

<sup>5</sup>Districts were selected based on prior professional engagements of the research team as well as assessments of their significance for representing and influencing subnational regional trends. Two visits were made to each of the three district centers, a total of 102 interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in local governance, and gray literature on 'post-conflict' transition in Nepal was reviewed. The pilot study also collected data on the forest sector, which has been elaborated in Nightingale et al. forthcoming. The research team was comprised of the authors of this paper, with important inputs offered by three other researchers: Hemant Ojha, Sabin Ninglekhu and Fraser Sugden.

review of these arguments see Lawoti 2010; Thapa 2003). Yet there is ample evidence to contradict such representations of villagers as victims of false consciousness rather than political actors – not least the sheer number of combatants, over 19,600, who were registered in the cantonments established as part of the 2006 Peace Accord (ICG 2012; see also Hutt 2004; Shneiderman 2009; Thapa 2004).

As Wendy Wolford (2009) has argued, scholarship on social mobilizations has yet to grapple comprehensively with key questions about the political consciousness of participants: why they join, why they sustain or lose interest, what contradictory subjectivities they express – or, we add, what form popular political consciousness takes during state transition and reconciliation processes. Similarly, cultural Marxism grapples with the vexing problem of how it is possible, historically and theoretically, to build an emancipatory politics premised on recognition of difference and local specificity (Haarstad 2007; Hallward 2009; Neocosmos 2012). It is in the tradition of these engagements with people's experience that the paper takes up the themes of political subjectivity and cultural politics. In so doing, it stakes out approaches to researching the limits and possibilities for social and economic transformation in the wake of one of the world's contemporary revolutionary peasant movements. As a foundation for this work, this section details some of the key contextual elements of the People's War, its antecedents in state repression and aid dependency, and the political stalemate that has resulted in its aftermath.

The Maoist People's War commenced in 1996 following decades of underground political organizing by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (Thapa 2004).<sup>6</sup> It was among the most violent conflicts in Asia over its 10-year period (with deaths estimated at over 13,000; UNOHCHR 2012) until a Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) was signed in 2006 (Shah 2008; Shah and Pettigrew 2009). Initiated with a series of hit-and-run guerilla tactics in midwest Nepal, the movement expanded not only into a more comprehensive and coordinated offensive throughout the predominantly agrarian Middle-Hill belt stretching across the full width of the country, but also into a parallel regime with control over significant territories (Hutt 2004; Thapa 2004). Similar to the Shining Path in Peru (Mikesell 1993; Nickson 1992), the Maoists dismantled the local state and operated 'people's governments', *jana sarkār*, at the district scale across the country. In so doing, Maoist 'theoretical ideology', which advanced abstract notions of class struggle and revolution, was matched with a strong 'practical ideology' geared toward dismantling gender, ethnic and caste hierarchies, as well as providing concrete services relevant to the daily lives of villagers (Shneiderman 2009, 304). The stated purpose of the People's War was to overturn the monarchy and entrenched feudal relations across the country as well as to wrest control from imperialist sources of influence, especially international donors (Bhattarai 1998).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the state waged its own war to repress the insurgency, backed increasingly with US military aid after 9/11 (Onesto 2005; Tamang 2012).

Antecedents of the conflict lay in a long history of state repression that produced covert and overt resistance, severe poverty and pronounced socioeconomic inequality, and the

<sup>6</sup>By 1996, the communist parties in Nepal had been through five decades of factionalism and ideological and tactical dispute. The permutation of CPN-M that consolidated then reflected a consensus around the objectives of ending the Hindu monarchy, forming a democratic republic and initiating armed struggle to achieve these ends (Thapa 2003).

<sup>7</sup>Unlike in India (Patnaik 2006; Sundar 2006), the corporatization of agriculture has not been a major target of Maoist critique and organizing due to its virtual absence in the middle hills and the relatively weak capacity of the Maoists in the Southern Terai belt where larger-scale, but still semi-feudal, commercial agriculture is concentrated (Sugden 2009).

marginalization of *janajāti* (indigenous) groups like the Tibeto-Burman language-speaking groups, Terai-based caste Hindus (Madhesi) and Tharu groups indigenous to the Terai, as well as the lowest castes (*dalit*) (Dahal 2008; Shneiderman 2010; Whelpton 2005). As others have argued, feudal modes of governance and cultural codes of engagement with local populations persisted despite official reforms to land tenure and political representation in the 1950s (Nightingale and Ojha 2013; Tamang 2012). Popular, collective consciousness around these issues galvanized in the late 1980s to constitute *Jana Andolan I*, the people's movement to agitate for a multiparty parliamentary democracy, which was subsequently instituted by royal decree in 1990. On the one hand, *Jana Andolan I* opened the political field to free competition among political parties and a wider scope for ethnic identification; on the other hand, it expanded expectations for accountable political representation and the redistributive function of the state in a governance arrangement that continued to accord significant powers to the monarchy and the Hindu ideology which underlay it. These were some of the key preconditions that presaged popular support for the Maoists half a decade later.

A second people's movement, *Jana Andolan II*, ended the People's War, yet without resolving the problems of socioeconomic mal-distribution and cultural misrecognition. It is speculated that a galvanizing event was the assassination of the King's family and his brother's ascension to the throne, during the so-called palace massacre in 2001. The new king, Gyanendra, dissolved parliament, instituted emergency powers and scaled up the conflict by dispatching the army against the Maoists within 18 months of taking the throne (on top of a newly militarized internal security force, the armed police). The violent rollback of democratic reforms and the marginalization of the more mainstream political parties helped catalyze *Jana Andolan II* in 2006, which united the country's seven major political parties in an alliance that sought peace negotiations with the Maoists and forced the king to reinstate parliament and renounce executive power. For their part, the Maoists conceded to bringing their revolutionary struggle within the ambit of liberal political institutions and renounced violence. A peace accord was signed and the coalition of political parties plus the Maoists not only ousted the king but also constituted Nepal as a federal democratic republic. On return to mainstream politics, the Maoists reconfigured as the Unified Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (UCPN-M); they won the most seats in the 2008 Constituent Assembly (CA), and helped create the most representative political body (in terms of ethno-cultural, caste and gender composition) yet to govern Nepal.

Since then, however, the political process has been wracked by stalemate. Three Constitution writing deadlines were missed by the CA; there have been five governments in seven years, with political parties growing increasingly fractious and obstructionist and a constant reshuffling of top Ministry leaders; and, since 1997, there have been no elections for district- and village-scale government. In April 2012, a second Maoist prime minister leading an ineffectual coalition government dissolved the CA and ceded governance to a cabinet of former bureaucrats, and in so doing failed to observe either the Party's own theoretical or practical ideology. A second CA election 19 months later yielded a significant swing to the right, with the social democratic Nepali Congress securing most seats, the royalist party gaining a few, and the Maoists losing a substantial number. An illiberal draft constitution reversing rights that had been gained since the People's Movements was promulgated in June 2015 as the major political parties sought to collaborate in their desire to share access to billions of dollars in reconstruction aid after the earthquakes. Finally, nearly 10 years after the cessation of conflict, a constitution was ratified in September 2015; but rights for women and ethno-cultural minorities were so eroded as to spawn new rounds of protest and violence (including an 'unofficial blockade' of imports of

petrol, and kerosene from India, that severely challenged everyday livelihoods throughout the country for nearly 6 months) – and the instability endures.

The context of peasant revolution combined with stalemate at federal scales of governance prompts our focus on the district scale where an assemblage of civic organizations, political parties and marginalized social groups must collaborate one way or another in the absence of local elected *government*. During the People's War, as well, when formal governance institutions were severely disrupted, and where Maoist 'people's governments', *jana sarkār*, could not gain traction, it was widely reported that dense networks of local associations carried on the work of managing resources and building infrastructure (Nightingale and Sharma 2014; Shah and Pettigrew 2009). Meanwhile, starting with the 1994 'build your own village yourself' program and subsequently the Local Self Government Act (1999), development budgets have increasingly come under the direct management of DDCs and VDCs.

These mechanisms corroborate the critique leveled by Gupta and Ferguson against common representations of the state as operating through the principles of 'verticality and encompassment' – that is, ruling through a hierarchy of nested scales in which local officials function as marginal members of a state apparatus. Rather, a mix of stakeholders constitute the local state – in relation to multiple scales of influence and action (Lund 2006). In the transition period the specific composition of that mix of local stakeholders was in fact mandated through official mechanisms.

With the cessation of local elections, bureaucratically appointed VDC and DDC secretaries – non-gazetted clerical officials – had inherited the full functions of local governance and held formal executive authority. An interim provision for local governance, known as the All Party Mechanism (APM), formalized what had become (since the end of the term of the last elected government, 2002) their ad hoc practice of consulting with local elites, especially political party leaders, about resource allocation (see also Byrne forthcoming; Byrne and Shrestha 2014). Through the APM (2009) the cabinet gave political parties a mandate to serve as a consultative apparatus for the VDC and DDC secretaries (The Asia Foundation 2012). The APM was dissolved in 2012, under allegations of corruption following investigation by the CIAA (Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority, the government agency charged with investigating abuse of authority and other modes of corruption). But in practice, the style of 'consensus politics' that the APM sought to institutionalize, and that had actually been promoted by the 2007 interim constitution, has continued. In fact, it has now expanded to encompass what is specified in the VDC Grant Operational Manual (2010) as the Integrated Plan Formulation Committee (IPFC), which includes the VDC secretary, the health post in-charge, the public school headmaster and members of excluded groups (women, *dalit*, *janajāti*). Through the IPFC mechanism, political parties continue to wield considerable influence in decisions about local development. Because of the informal nature of the authority vested in IPFCs (and the diversity of party and civil-society configurations at the district scale), however, the specific dynamics of authority and influence vary considerably by district (see also Nightingale et al. forthcoming).

Under these circumstances, the local and district scales had, when we conducted initial research in 2009–2011, acquired heightened significance for a proliferating range of institutionalized stakeholders operating at multiple spatial scales. Donors continued to follow legal provisions laid out after 1990 that mandate engagement of local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to implement their programs; in so doing they were both playing a key role in catalyzing the burgeoning NGO sector and effectively bypassing the dysfunctional national state. NGOs, for their part, were furnishing an important mechanism for local elites to shore up power and authority. Regional party leaders found that in the absence of viable national party organizations, *their* authority derived more reliably from a capacity to



collaborate with others – other parties, donors, civil society leaders, NGOs – to actually *plan* and get things done, such as building roads. This was not the classic neoliberal governance scenario where the state devolves public functions to civil society (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Lemke 2002; Swyngedouw 2005); rather, these multiple and often overlapping interests *constitute* the local state through processes that have been conspicuously understudied (Gupta 2012). These dynamics not only persist, they have become more pronounced in the contemporary post-earthquake reconstruction period. Building from recent scholarship that examines the contested and often violent local processes through which state and non-state actors vie for authority in the constitution of national polities (Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Lund 2006; Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, and Vlassenroot 2008; Vandekerckhove 2011), our framework helps think through how polities are being built from the ground up through everyday governance practices of these colliding interests.

### The contested governance of roads

A key premise of the analytical framework sketched out here is that how people understand and perform ‘democracy’ in their everyday engagements with the local state has significant consequences for the possibility to overcome structural inequality at the root of violent conflict (Michelutti 2008). The revolution succeeded in overturning the monarchy and promulgating a constituent assembly for the new federal republic. Yet in the context of paralyzing stalemate at the national scale, we need to assess processes at sub-national scales, where the political base for change lies, to investigate the ways in which old cultural codes reassert themselves, as well as the form and practices assumed by new modes of collective political subjectivity.

Our desire to probe how ideas of democracy are lived and experienced by marginalized sectors of Nepali society is premised fundamentally on an understanding of the state itself as a fragmented and variegated terrain of material and symbolic production comprising multiple scales and sectors of practice (Fuller and Harris 2001; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Harris 2012; Lund 2006). It dispenses with interpretations of the state as a unitary agent and instead emphasizes how the ‘state idea’ is constituted as much through partial everyday encounters with local-scale officials, politicians and bureaucrats, as through ideological fiat at the national scale (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Gupta 2012; Lund 2011; Spencer 2007). The fragmented local governance arrangements in post-revolution Nepal create an additional imperative to understand the numerous situated practices and knowledges that might reveal the conditions of possibility for state restructuring to catalyze radical social transformation (see also Gupta 2012).<sup>8</sup>

In order to develop an analytical framework for the study of transitional politics, our pilot research thus selected three agrarian districts exhibiting a range of class, ethno-cultural and political configurations and three different ecological zones: Mugu (Himalayan zone, remote, least developed), Khotang (Middle Hills, mixed development, conflict-affected, ethnically diverse, active hill ethnic movement) and Morang (Terai, pockets of extreme poverty, active Madhesi political movements).<sup>9</sup> In Mugu, people identify around a

<sup>8</sup>See Akhil Gupta’s *Red tape* (2012) for a compelling illustration of how seeing corruption from the standpoint of poor peasants in India furnishes crucial insights on how bureaucracies operating at the local scale enable structural violence to be perpetrated against the poor, even in the midst of universal political freedoms and extensive poverty-alleviation programs.

<sup>9</sup>We use the term ‘agrarian’ simply to denote the prevalence of agrarian-based livelihoods throughout Nepal and to signal a different scalar focus for understanding political transition than can usually be



shared sense of geographic isolation and livelihood insecurity and a long history of outmigration; caste and ethnic hierarchies are particularly pronounced; as Nepal's least developed district in terms of human development indicators, Mugu has only post-2006 become a major focus of donor and state investment. In Khotang, livelihood security is representative of the Middle Hills (mixed, but sound); Khotang was a Maoist stronghold during the insurgency as well as a site of the Khambuwan National Front and the Kirat Janabadi Worker's Party, manifesting a strong hill ethnic-based social movement. For these reasons, and because of its status as the poorest district in the eastern Middle Hills, it has also become a focus of much new investment by bilateral donors and, at the time of our research, some interesting experimentation in community economy. Morang features significant agricultural market development, persistent modes of feudal tenure arrangements, absentee landlordism, a political class well represented in powerful bureaucratic positions (Sugden 2009), and the Terai-based Madhesi movement and parties, which have played a significant role in promoting an ethnic basis for federalism (ICG 2012). Each of the districts represents (and, indeed, influences) significant trends in the emerging conjuncture of state restructuring, as evidenced through the specific dynamics of the Integrated Planning Formulation Committees and the stakeholders that constitute them. Comparative research *across* the districts furnishes an opportunity to assess the ways in which governance by local 'stakeholder' groups could have progressive or regressive outcomes.

Our pilot research revealed that new infrastructure developments such as roads consistently enroll the aspirations, labor time and strong opinions of nearly everyone in all of our research sites, as well as the highest proportion of local budgets. Not coincidentally, infrastructure developments are often tied to the resource base of subsistence agrarian livelihoods, itself in the midst of a transition as foundational as Nepal's political transformations. Widespread outmigration and shifts in rainfall patterns linked to climate change, combined with highly fractious and uneven political economies within Nepal, mean that now more than ever, people are looking to infrastructure development as a basis for new rural enterprises. These are the issues that consistently emerged in our work as terrains of conflict and struggle, around which old cultural codes cement as well as alternative modes of citizenship and belonging become articulated.

As the iconic symbol of modernity, roads occupy a central place in the national imaginary (Campbell 2010). Everyone wants a road despite the fact that they notoriously flood, erode and lose vehicles off sharp, precipitous corners. Roads hold out the promise of connectivity, political power, cultural status and economic growth. After the conflict, Nepal's hill and mountain regions had some of the lowest road densities in the world, and a quarter of the population still lived more than four hours' walk from the nearest road head (Shrestha 2009). Rural 'feeder' and 'branch' roads have thus been a major site of government investment in the transitional phase. Budgets for infrastructure development were decentralized with an emphasis on local labor markets, local resources and local planning – an orientation that is promoted as 'green roads' (Shrestha 2009). At the same time, rural roads have become a major focus for the governmental ambitions of a wide range of multi-scalar stakeholders – donors promoting environmentally sustainable development, political parties securing local construction contracts, trucking syndicates controlling the terms of

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found in media and popular analyses, which tend to concentrate on national-scale restructuring. Madhesi refers to people of Indian origin who inhabit mostly the eastern Terai of Nepal, as well as to their political mobilization in the form of a social movement and numerous political parties vying to end discrimination and have their rights recognized.

trade once roads are built. Roads also furnish opportunities for more community-based forms of market engagement, such as agricultural export cooperatives (Campbell 2010). While the social science literature amply explores unintended effects of road-building in hard-to-access places (Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon 2005; Butz and Cook 2011; Campbell 2010), the literatures on mobilities and infrastructure have only recently begun to explore the contradictory governance processes producing those outcomes (see, e.g., Harvey and Knox 2015), which are integrally connected to our concerns with transitional politics at the local scale.

### **Researching political transition and state restructuring at the grassroots**

Our interviews, done over a three-year period in 2009–2012, asked a consistent set of questions about perceptions of democracy, the proliferation of institutions involved in local governance, dispute resolution and sources of local authority. These questions elicited road-building as a key zone of contest and struggle, and also helped identify three conceptual terrains of inquiry – in the areas of governance and planning, political subjectivity, and cultural politics – through which to probe everyday practices of state transition in Nepal and in other contexts where the political field has significantly opened.

#### ***Governance and planning***

The first terrain of inquiry is concerned with how planning happens through the loose assemblage of practices and actors thrown up by the 2006 peace (CPA). It draws on relational approaches to understanding the state as composed of competing rationalities, actors and institutions (Jessop 2007; Mitchell 1991) and to tracking ‘governance beyond the state’ through horizontal and networked arrangements generated in the wake of decentralization (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Lund 2006; Swyngedouw 2005). In Nepal, at the district scale, these encompass users groups, NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), political parties, donor organizations, and caste- and ethnic-based social movements. Collectively, these institutions constitute an ensemble of competing projects of rule bearing a range of multiple, sometimes rival, political rationalities (Jessop 2007; Raeymaekers, Menkhaus, and Vlassenroot 2008).

The theory informing decentralization advocates the virtues of citizen-community participation premised on shared values, iterative exchange and democratic representation; critics caution against a democratic deficit as the public sector thins and customary forms of power and elite capture re-assert themselves (Ribot 2003; Swyngedouw 2000, 2005). It is important to emphasize, however, that these critiques of decentralization were developed in relation to instances of neoliberal governmentality, wherein the state not only devolves governance onto responsible individuals, civil society and private entities, but also withdraws state resources and programming (Ferguson 2006; Li 2007). The Nepal context is different, and the difference proves instructive for developing an approach to researching post-revolution state formation. The proliferation of actors involved in local governance does not signal the retreat of the state; rather, those actors contribute to *constituting* the local state, in the form of relatively ad hoc decision-making processes (IPFC and APM) (Byrne forthcoming; Byrne and Shrestha 2014). Meanwhile, centrally mandated state programs are also alive and well, and local bureaucracies – the District Forest Office and the Department of Roads, for example, as well as the DDC and VDC – are staffed with officials responsible for implementing development plans. Now more than ever, Nepali state institutions are evidenced at the local scale, in the form of various

programs supporting peasant livelihoods. Thus, we argue that the actions of the local state have significant consequences for either supporting or undermining political stability.

In ‘post-conflict’ Nepal, then, what is at stake is not so much the thinning of the public sector, but its opening up to new (multiply scaled) governmental agents who collectively constitute the local state alongside, and in collaboration with, the local offices of government line agencies. Although they almost always involve a range of proliferating non-state actors in the context of decentralization, governance projects build the institutional framework through which state power is productively joined with everyday lives and a wide spectrum of stakeholders in local governance. Thus, we adopt a ‘practice’ orientation to the state, which emphasizes less administrative and ideological incorporation and more the ‘collaborative construction of locally specific state practice’ as processes of everyday state formation (Walker 2012, 21; see also Gupta 2012; Nightingale et al. forthcoming; Sikor and Lund 2009).

A key element of researching ‘governance projects’ is identifying which kinds of local institutions are being ‘recognized’ as legitimate agents of local planning. In a transitional politics context, the recognition comes from donor agencies who promote local governance projects, and also from local people who confer legitimacy via recognition of these projects and their sets of political values. Which institutions enjoy recognition and participate in local planning, in turn, has implications for how the benefits of governance projects, and indeed their harms, are distributed (Lund 2006, 2011; Ribot 2003). By attending to how different institutions and actors engage in local planning, we aim to illuminate the multiple political rationalities and struggles for authority among actors seeking a greater stake in forming the new federal democratic republic.

Road-building is perhaps the most pervasive governance project in remote districts. From the perspective of the central state, building roads constitutes a ‘regime of territorialization’ aimed at connecting up distant district centers to national-state projects of development, border surveillance and security, and the basic governmental objectives of making populations known and manageable (Wilson 2004). In this sense, we can think of roads as a remaining bastion of widely discredited modernization theories – vested with an expectation that they promote advancement along a trajectory of improvement entailing access to markets, urban centers, modern goods and production processes. Mugu is the 73rd out of 75 Districts in Nepal to become connected by road, and the deployment of the national army to manage construction reflects the high-priority status given to extending the national road network to areas least connected to the center in Kathmandu; if once these areas had been left largely to their own devices (Blaikie, Cameron & Seddon 2005; Brown 1996; Regmi 1978), access is now deemed critical for nationalist goals of development, integration and capacity for military deployment.

As a key example of district-scale governance projects more generally, road-building *within* districts is a massively funded and highly decentralized terrain of planning, involving state agencies, community-based organizations with ties to donors and political parties, and ad hoc users’ groups. The army major deployed in Mugu emphasized to us that building a mountain highway is not only a technological problem. It is also a social problem requiring extensive engagement of local populations to build legitimacy across scales in a contested political situation. In fact, much of the army major’s time is spent negotiating plans with local populations, navigating conflicts, collaborating with contractors and construction users’ groups, fielding complaints, and responding to health and natural disaster emergencies. In other districts, negotiations over the siting of road development, compensation for expropriated lands, contracting and local labor contributions are often managed without involving the military, although the armed police may play a

role. In all cases, however, the combination of the large budgets associated with roads, a national-scale state commitment to roads as a vector of development, and local aspirations for connectivity and modernization – all transpiring in the absence of elected local governments – has created a fluid space of local governance in which the management of road-building has become an important source of local authority. The point of comparative research across local governance contexts is to track the variability of institutions involved in road-building, their often competing political rationalities, and the implications of their relational practices for how the benefits and harms of development are distributed in practice.

### *Political subjectivity*

What kinds of individual and collective political subjectivities are produced in association with multiple governance projects? This terrain of inquiry explores the productive linkages between governance and political subjectivity (Dean 1999; Krause and Schramm 2011; Rose and Miller 1992). It begins with Foucauldian notions of governmentality to explore how governance projects seek to align the conduct of citizen ‘beneficiaries’ with their own political rationalities. In Nepal, the consensual, collaborative users’ group is often marked as an ideal form of participatory democracy, one which resonates with longstanding practices of ‘compromise’ (*kura milāune*) in rural Nepal (Byrne and Shrestha 2014). At the same time, the extraordinary proliferation of users’ groups as a governance technology – there are now users’ groups for road-building, sewage and water works and irrigation management, as well as the iconic community forestry users’ groups – suggests their function as a governance technology through which to enroll the labor of ordinary people in the provision of basic services via ideologies of participation (Cook and Kothari 2001). Meanwhile, the emphasis by donors on inclusiveness and gender has sought to foster new forms of political subjectivity. We found ample evidence of these, such as the chair of a microfinance borrower group boasting about her newfound ‘voice’ and ‘freedom of mobility’ (Morang), a mother’s group facilitator encouraging women to engage in traditional Dhaka cloth weaving for sale to the government Department of Small Business and Cottage Industry (Khotang), and the president of a *dalit* (untouchable caste) women’s association advocating for marginalized women’s rights to enjoy the benefits of government income-generating programs (Mugu). Such tropes of subjectivity – and their complicity in forms of self-supervision, self-regulation and self-subjection – are widely documented in the literature on decentralization and neoliberal governance (Hallward 2009; Nightingale 2011; Rankin 2001; Roy 2010).

The subject positionings associated with the political transition cannot of course be solely explained in terms of subjection to competing governance projects. They also encompass *dalit* and *janajāti* (indigenous or tribal) solidarity and new forms of peasant consciousness deriving from a complex intermingling of ethnic movements, donor-led decentralization schemes and Maoist-led revolutionary political mobilization (Nightingale 2011). In Mugu, a users’ group comprised of *dalit*, whose households form a community that has been historically marginalized at the periphery of the main district center, not only provides the labor power to build a key section of the road linking to another district center; it also demands to see the district budget of the employment generation program financing the capital inputs to local road-building, so as to ensure that their group has not been disadvantaged relative to others. And in a focus-group conversation with us, women members of the *dalit* users’ group publicly chastised the group chair for the unequal daily wages paid to men and women for equally demanding labor. Their point

was that, just as male group leaders had become empowered to publicly question longstanding resource inequalities among castes, so too women would now publicly challenge male privilege *within dalit* society (Sigdel 2013). Subjectivity, as Krause and Schramm (2011, 127) put it, ‘has a double face’. In addition to subjection, it also entails conscious political self-creation (Neocosmos 2012; Nightingale 2011); it encompasses the prospect that ‘[h] owever constrained your situation you are always free, as Sartre liked to say, to make something of what is made of you’ (Sartre 1969; 45 in Hallward 2009, 19).

In this sense, political subjectivity also encompasses practices of everyday claims-making. The conflict disrupted already fragile rural economies and infrastructures; under these conditions, peasants, particularly those belonging to marginalized groups, have increasing cause to rely on external sources of support for livelihood security. Remittances from migrant labor are critical, but decentralization and expansion of the local state also furnish new opportunities and resources (Shah and Shneiderman 2013). These conditions, combined with an increased consciousness of citizenship rights associated with the Maoist insurgency and official democracy, create a situation similar to that documented by anthropologist Andrew Walker in rural Thailand: a primary concern of peasants today is to ‘ensure a nondiscriminatory share of support and protection from the state’ (2012, 22). Doing so requires making claims and thus mobilizing the political subjectivity of the dependent supplicant. The continuities with caste-based forms of patronage are palpable. For example, when a *dalit* woman in Khotang introduced herself as a *dalit* (untouchable caste) at a public forum addressing accountability of government leaders, she was making a bid to stake a claim for participation in a government-run women’s health volunteer program, which she insisted was essential for someone of her disadvantaged status to acquire the social capital necessary for pursuing economic and political opportunities. These are familiar appeals to kindness in the face of hardship and long-time relationships with status seniors. Yet we cannot overlook the rights-based rationality consistent with the discourses of ethnic federalism and oriented to correcting historical injustices that she also interjected.

This kind of contradictory claims-making on the basis of both submission to a hierarchical order and appeals to a legitimate counter-hegemonic force is crucial to our understanding of political subjectivity (see Nightingale 2011; Rankin 2004; Rutherford 2011). Following Krause and Schramm (2011), we understand political subjectivity as the everyday ways in which people experience and in turn express themselves as political subjects. Such performances may express an adversarial position vis-à-vis a hegemonic order; they may involve aligning oneself consciously or unconsciously with it; and they may entail a strategic mobilization of relations of subordination. In this sense, subjectivity can be distinguished from identity, which connotes fixed positionings rather than the continual process of their production. Subjectivities can thus vary and reflect contradictory effects of power, as the *dalit* woman’s account shows. The task, as Wendy Woldford specifies in relation to a discussion of ‘Everyday forms of political expression’ (2009), is not to ascribe a coherence to political subjectivity, but rather to explore how certain political orientations take on meaning at specific moments.

A key concern for us is to understand the conditions under which political subjectivity takes a collective form, particularly one that might provide a foundation for progressive social transformation (see also Singh 2013). Taking Woldford’s caution, and following the preponderance of thinking in contemporary radical political philosophy (Hallward 2009; Neocosmos 2012), our inclination is to look for small instances of ‘democratic hegemonomies’ that express a convergence of political will across a range of subjectivities. In Khotang, for example, some leaders of the dominant Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) were, at the time of our visit and a subsequent interview in Kathmandu, collaborating

with other party leaders and farmer producers to explore the possibility of setting up cooperative bamboo export; however incipient, the initiative interested us as a *community-based form of market engagement*, centered on a vision of local control over the terms of incorporation into regional commodity markets. Together, those involved in the discussions were articulating a collective subjectivity in opposition to the modes of dependency typically associated with the arrival of a road. Accounts of collaborative planning for a bamboo cooperative were consistent with more general accounts by leaders of the major political parties of a consensual mode of engagement through the APM; party leaders emphasized how they collaborate in distributing resources *within* Khotang and, within the national CA, in making claims *on behalf of* Khotang as a relatively disadvantaged district. Collaborating especially across party differences involved a process of dis-identification, however incomplete, from predominant modes of subjectivity such as political party membership (Neocosmos 2012; Nightingale 2011). Within the approach we are advocating, learning to read modes of representation that convey such instances of deliberate, everyday, collective, theorized and organized politics becomes a primary methodological act – insofar as it creates the grounds for tracking how and under what conditions such modes of political consciousness could become available for wider-scale projects of political inclusion.

### *Cultural politics*

Our third terrain of inquiry asks how prevailing cultural codes and political societies are reproduced or transformed by people's everyday engagements with the local state. This question probes the articulation of governance projects with place-based social relations. We know from the theoretical contributions of Bourdieu and Gramsci, and related ethnographies of practice (Jeffrey 2010; Nightingale 2003; Rankin 2004), that the outcomes of planning and development tend to hinge on established social positionings and cultural meanings. At the same time, we are interested in the possibility that – and the conditions under which – new political ensembles might create openings for destabilizing antecedent forms of authority and give rise to new modes of political consciousness and public-sphere politics (Gibson-Graham 2006; Shneiderman 2009).

Here we draw on the tradition of cultural politics coming out of cultural Marxism, which grapples with the political problem of consent to domination, and the conditions of possibility for fundamental social transformation. Evoking cultural politics signals the intention to explore the cultural practices and meanings associated with planning and development, and the role of these practices and meanings in reproducing or challenging power-laden social dynamics. What are the formal and informal processes through which decisions are made about road-building? How do these processes reinforce dominant ideologies of caste, gender, ethnicity and class, and what is the nature of conflict and struggle? What critical interpretations are being articulated that challenge dominant ideologies and views of the social world? How are these critical interpretations being materialized in new social arrangements or decision-making processes? The analytical task becomes one of understanding how local cultural codes constitute a regulatory force in their own right, which in turn have a constitutive role to play in shaping the practices of the fragmentary, patronage-oriented local state. Exploring the cultural politics of local governance in this way helps anticipate the potential of transitional politics to hasten political stability or to precipitate further conflict and violence.

Here again, road-building proves instructive. In the nearly 20 years since elections were held at the district scale, local party leaders derive their authority by getting things done and



mobilizing various embedded cultural codes. Claiming responsibility for road-building is among the most effective achievements. Building roads, however, requires having control over the labor process, which requires alliances with the NGOs able to form and mobilize voluntary users' groups and the contractors retained to build designated sections. In Khotang, new mechanisms of accountability have developed as parties openly negotiate control over requisite 'shares' of the road. In this case, the APM functions as a kind of negotiated pluralism, through which parties collaboratively engage the formal open-bidding system to achieve the desired division of the work among affiliate-contractors and party cadres. While coercion was not entirely absent (for example, the youth wings of the major parties were active in Khotang and were known to adopt more confrontational modes of engagement), there was nevertheless open contestation between the parties over who should control what contracts while we were doing the research. Those seeking employment or other benefits then curry favor with a party leader or contractor who is in a position to allocate such opportunities. Political society here, which crucially encompasses both marginalized people and political elites, shows some promise of holding the allocation of resources accountable to public scrutiny.

In Mugu, a more fractious 'compromise' political economy prevails – an 'elite informality' as Ananya Roy (2009) puts it – within which elites use the APM to divide the development pie, and use contracts to reward loyalty and wield symbolic power. Control is exercised by a combination of social and cultural capital and the threat of force from a party's 'youth wing'. The hierarchy of control is established through a process that often involves compromise between local elites to ensure that control stays within established networks.<sup>10</sup> Collusion takes the form of rigged bidding, in which minor parties consent to a particular contractor/major party winning the bid, in exchange for agreed-upon kick-backs to the other parties who 'lose' the bid. Here, political society would seem to counter the kind of redistributive and pluralist commitments that the People's movements and People's War sought to catalyze.

In either case, the dynamics of collaboration and contestation among parties over the award of tenders are captured well in the expression '*Thekadār-netā*', the tight nexus of contractors and party leaders, which evokes the convergence of political and economic power in the business of road-building (or, similarly, in the business of securing lucrative timber contracts). For example, a well-known, high-caste, district-level leader is currently district chair of one of the major political parties; he has established an NGO that works on promoting awareness of social issues and development projects in the district; his wife is a registered contractor. He hires young political cadres from his party to work for the NGO and he uses the leverage of his accumulated social and political capital to win road construction contracts which also afford an opportunity to reward party loyalty. Control over construction contracts ensures that he can route the road through his own property and those with whom he has patronage relations to obtain the benefit of excessively high rates of compensation. Local businessmen seek to curry favor with him so as to benefit from his significant cultural-political power, which in turn ensures privileged access to the benefits of the road

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<sup>10</sup>As of this writing, reports from rural areas all over Nepal indicate that the situation we describe in Mugu is becoming the norm for many places. The entire Karnali zone where Mugu is located is considered particularly egregious, but the dynamics here are nevertheless recognizable across the country. We do not have up-to-date information on Khotang to know whether the situation there has also regressed into these kinds of elite-dominated, patronage politics.

for local trade. Through such dynamics, roads become a venue for deepening the power and authority of those who already have them by virtue of their social position.

At the same time, there is limited evidence in Mugu that road-building creates some space for disrupting long-held hegemonic understandings of people's proper social positioning. The *dalit* users' group previously referenced is a case in point; members explicitly credited road-building with providing a platform for demanding greater accountability from the local budget allocation process, as well as an equitable share of development resources. What is crucial to emphasize from a cultural politics perspective is the extent to which long-standing patterns of mal-distribution of resources and opportunity are entrenched or subject to critical scrutiny as political and commercial interests inevitably meet on the terrain of development.

A comparative approach helps to underscore that there is nothing natural or inevitable about these arrangements in any given locality. Road-building is a contested sector of local governance in which prevailing cultural politics may either flourish or face challenges, depending on the particular constellation of social forces. Tracking the variegation in these dynamics, in Nepal or anywhere else, is crucial to assessing the conditions under which planning could be beneficial to marginalized people (rather than dispossessing them) and could contribute to overcoming structural inequalities at the root of violent conflict.

## Conclusion

This paper presents a framework for probing how transitional politics in Nepal opens the political field in both progressive and regressive directions, and provides an approach that can be usefully engaged in other settings where state restructuring is underway. Tracking these political developments is imperative for assessing the possibilities for an equitable transformation of society. We have argued that a framework of cultural politics is ideally suited to this task because it foregrounds the everyday, culturally embedded dynamics through which power, authority and various forms of political economic advantage are produced, as well as contested. In contrast to scholarship on political restructuring where official technologies of national state governance are center frame, we contend that sub-national scales present even greater insight into how competing rationalities of governance are forged out of the everyday pursuit of authority and livelihood security. For however much the 'local' is constituted by its relation with other scales and other places, it is the district scale of practice to which a wide range of stakeholders in the political transition have turned their attention in everyday governing. It is here, too, where structural violence and transformative change are negotiated in practice.

The primary contribution of the paper lies in specifying an analytical framework based on three terrains of inquiry to probe how democratic polities are built from the ground up in transitional governance contexts. 'Governance' refers to the proliferation of projects of rule aimed at supporting local livelihoods, and involving an expanding range of governmental actors; examining governance projects allows us to identify the multiple political rationalities and struggles for authority in the construction of locally specific state practices through which the state and everyday lives are relationally constituted. 'Political subjectivity' connotes the experiences and performances through which new subject positions come into being; these encompass both alignments with governance projects and self-consciously adversarial stances toward governmental authority. Together, governance projects and political subjectivities constitute an evolving field of 'cultural politics'. Cultural politics foregrounds how established social inequalities and forms of authority are reproduced within

evolving political fields, but also how new political assemblages might generate modes of political consciousness and public-sphere politics in ways that may destabilize traditional hegemonies. In our case, struggles over roads furnish the empirical ground upon which these conceptual terrains are put to work in assessing the politics of Nepal's transition.

Taken as a whole, the framework developed here helps to highlight continuities and disjunctures with antecedent modes of governance and authority. It cautions against indiscriminate celebrations of participatory planning, social inclusion, or any of the other manifestations of national and transnational ideologies of democracy circulating vigorously through the districts. Rather, it provides some conceptual tools for parsing out the institutional arrangements and governance practices that might generate more just distributional outcomes and modes of group recognition. While prevailing theories of good governance and democratic state formation celebrate the virtues of civil society, an empirical focus on governance, political subjectivity and cultural politics foregrounds a wide spectrum of more contradictory political behavior and values mobilized in the everyday pursuit of resources and opportunity. A focus on this messy reality at least offers a better-informed basis for dealing with the realities of contemporary politics. More significantly it furnishes a window on the conditions under which political will might converge in collective political subjectivities of an emancipatory character. The task of accounting fully for such possibilities hinges on grounded, comparative accounts of everyday processes of state formation.

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