

Masters of hybridity: how activists reconstructed Nepali society

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This article discusses the changes that activists have brought to Nepali society in relation to two key elements of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT): (1) its account of modernity and (2) its radical downplaying of human agency. ANT, contrary to the way it tends to be understood, deserves to be seen, at least in Latour's treatment, as a major theory of modernity. As such, it is important and enlightening, even though its attack on human agency – at least when discussing activism – is unhelpful. On this point Ian Hacking's notion of 'making up people' provides a better guide. The main example explored is the new kinds of ethnic identity that have achieved state recognition and become politically influential in Nepal over the last thirty years. The case of one ethnic and religious activist, Dr Keshabman Shakya, is used to illustrate the argument. Based on notions of human rights, rather than similar processes of 'making up people' have also occurred with other minority groups, most strikingly in the case of the 'third gender', a context in which Nepal is famously 'progressive' compared to other nation-states in the region.

Introduction: Agency, modernity, Nepal

The history of twentieth-century social and cultural anthropology could be written in terms of a gradual rejection and deconstruction of Durkheim's legacy. Anthropological theory has, step by step, dismantled and discarded the notions 'society' and 'culture' that are combined in the name 'sociocultural anthropology'. It has replaced them with more individualistic, fluid, and ad hoc concepts. It has – to put it simply – beaten a gradual, sometimes precipitate, retreat from comparative and generalizing frameworks. The brilliant gadfly and major social thinker Bruno Latour (2005) may be taken as emblematic here. He set out, quite deliberately, to expunge the last remnants of Durkheimian thinking from the social sciences. His theory (or anti-theory) actor-network theory (ANT) aims to erase references to 'the social' and to demolish the idea that there is a separate or distinctive social sphere that is the preserve of social scientists. In its place, he posits networks of things, artefacts, people, and hybrid entities, all of which 'have agency' and therefore all of which are 'actants'. Latour has always

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championed Tarde against Durkheim; indeed, Durkheim would appear to be the prime target of Latour's relentless attacks against 'the social' as capable of explaining anything.¹

This side of the Latourian approach is particularly challenging for the study of social and political activism, which would seem to be premised precisely on the centrality of human agency. By contrast, Latour's analysis of modernity as a performative achievement is, I argue, particularly apposite for studying activism. A well-known monograph on activism that shares ANT's interest in networks, material distillations, and avoiding conventional explanatory approaches is Annelise Riles's *The network inside out* (2000) on the Beijing conference of 1995. It is noticeable, however, that Riles avoids ANT's attack on the primacy of human agency. In writings influenced by ANT, in all the talk of distributed agency and assemblages, of materiality and the agency of things, along with doubtless well-meant attempts to rescue objects from the condescension of history, the achievements of particular named people seem to have got lost. Dedicated individuals do sometimes make a difference. For example, there is a small ethnic group in Nepal, the Chhantyal, whose group identity and recognition have been more or less single-handedly conjured into existence by one man, Dil Bahadur Chhantyal (de Sales 2007: 331). But for his efforts, the Chhantyal might very well now be counted merely as a subgroup within the largest of the Janajati groups, the Magars. In other words, they would be an obscure ethnographic footnote, rather than a state-recognized entity.

Latour's decentring of human agency was innovative, but (I argue below) ultimately misleading. By contrast, his analysis of modernity is a major achievement. His portrait, in *We have never been modern* (1993), of what he calls the constitution of modernity is acute and perceptive. He provides a brilliant dissection and analysis of what – according to him – we have never been. On his view, we can imagine modernity, we can attempt, performatively, to enact its categorical distinctions, but we can never actually achieve or fully embody it. Thanks to the negative in his title, many have failed to recognize him as a theorist of modernity. The fact that the dissection and analysis of modernity is the Latourian project par excellence became ever more evident with the publication of *An inquiry into modes of existence: an anthropology of the moderns* (2013).²

For their part, anthropologists have tended to be sceptical about modernity and have rightly criticized so-called 'development specialists' and others who think they know exactly what it is and how to bring it about (Li 2007; Mosse 2004). The history of development efforts – from infrastructure, to education, to 'social capital' and 'empowerment', to 'good governance', and, finally, for now, settling for 'poverty alleviation', 'capacity building', and 'disaster resilience' – has by and large been characterized by the erroneous assumptions that modernity was a thing (to be transferred) or a set of traits (to be inculcated), rather than a relationship, a process, or a set of performative discourses.

Latour analysed modernity as a set of categorical distinctions that in practice require hybridity (i.e. mixing and moving between categories). I use the term 'hybridity' here in this specifically Latourian sense, but I contest the denial of agency to those who seek to introduce those distinctions. Once one has accepted that modernity does indeed exist, as an idea and an aspiration, then the way is open to study comparatively how that idea is applied, understood, and created (Appadurai 1996; Ferguson 1999; Hefner 1998; Knauft 2002). One trend that surely is universal is the reworking of local notions in terms of the *idea* of modernity: that is, the process of deciding which traditions can be maintained in the modern world and which must be reformed or abandoned. That reconstruction is now more or less advanced everywhere.³ It is still a seductive idea

even in those places where it is oldest. (Witness the appeal, in the 1990s in the United Kingdom, of 'new', 'modernized' Labour.) In other parts of the world, the creation of modernity is a work in (and of) progress. Late twentieth-century neoliberal ideas of the appropriate role and extent of the market and the state, spread and imposed by the institutions of global economic governance, are an important part of this, but they by no means constitute the whole story, which is much older and deeper. (Earlier terms were 'progress', 'improvement', and even 'civilization'.)

This article is about those people who aspire to bring some version of modernity to Nepal. They are mediators, brokers, and translators between Western and/or global ideas, on the one side, and local understandings of them, on the other (Lewis & Mosse 2006). They also mediate between the state and 'society', and often between political ambitions and local realities. Of course, it is not only local practices that must be adapted to concepts of modernity; conversely and perhaps more strikingly, universal ideals are vernacularized, that is, adapted to local understandings and translated into the terms of particular cultures (Levitt & Merry 2009).

Nepal is an interesting case study because changes that took place over 150–200 years in its influential neighbour, India, and over a still longer period in Europe, were compressed there into the fifty years of the second half of the twentieth century. Within the span of a single lifetime, Nepal has moved from a deeply hierarchical society, where caste differences were utterly taken for granted by the vast majority and supported by custom, law, and the state, to one where the invocation of universal human rights is pervasive, where a Maoist revolution has occurred and been domesticated, the hereditary Hindu monarchy has been replaced with a republic, and a 'third gender' option has appeared on official forms.

In what follows, I start by suggesting that Ian Hacking's (1986; 1995) formulation 'making up people' captures well what is at stake here. I then introduce the way in which the nation of Nepal has been reimagined as made up of a limited number of 'macro-categories', which are in turn divided internally into different state-recognized ethnic groups.⁴ These new categories are introduced by activists, the denizens of civil society, who mediate between people and the state. I then consider, as an extended ethnographic example, the career of my friend Dr Keshabman Shakya. However, my argument applies much more broadly than just to processes of ethnicity and religious identity. I sketch briefly how the same processes apply also to the category of the 'third gender'.

This article draws on repeated visits to Nepal, and especially the Kathmandu Valley, since 1982. Ethnicity and ethnogenesis have been part of the research from the beginning (despite not being formally the topic of my D.Phil.). I have known Keshabman Shakya since 2003. Discussions with him have contributed to two research projects (on activism and on democratization). Ethnicity was highly relevant to both, and continued to be relevant when my research shifted to west Nepal.⁵

Ian Hacking and 'making up people'

The philosopher Ian Hacking (1986; 1995) coined the phrase 'making up people' to describe how new kinds of personal identity have emerged, with specific reference to medical syndromes. He suggests that, whether or not syndromes exist before they are named (and it varies from case to case),⁶ once the name and the diagnosis have been invented, they can be owned and 'inhabited' by particular people. Hacking identifies ten distinct processes that happen in chronological order once a new syndrome

has been identified: counting, quantifying, creating norms, correlating, medicalizing, biologizing, geneticizing, normalizing, bureaucratizing, and, finally, reclaiming the identity.

Ethnic identities are *not* medical diagnoses. Nonetheless, there are some parallels in the ways that they emerge and become normalized.⁷ Not all the processes listed occur with ethnic identities, but the counting, correlating, occasional biologizing, normalizing, bureaucratizing, and reclaiming of identity certainly do happen. These processes are part and parcel of the creation of modernity in many multi-ethnic states. While they could not occur without many material correlates (e.g. census forms, identity cards), the prime mover is surely human agency, both on the part of state functionaries and on the part of activists and their followers seeking to influence how state functionaries perceive and count them.

The politics of Nepal in the years since the revolution of 1990 have been very largely about the gradual incorporation into the state of newly created ethnic and other identities that are the basis for political action. The ethnic macro-categories I will outline have acquired an existential and phenomenological reality that is capable of feeling threatened by the proposed provincial boundaries of federal Nepal.⁸ Whether these boundaries express or violate those identities has become one of the key questions of the day, for which some people are willing to fight and die (Adhikari & Gellner 2016).

Creating new categories in modern Nepal

Nepal, as it is today, was largely the creation of one man, Prithvi Narayan Shah (b. 1723). He ruled over the tiny kingdom of Gorkha (which gives us the name 'Gurkha' for soldiers from Nepal). From 1743, when he ascended the throne, until his death in 1775, he fought continually and against the odds to expand his territory. Once widely lauded as 'the Great', the father and founder of the nation, he is today a controversial figure. Some still see him as a unifier, the creator of modern Nepal, and believe it a matter of national shame that his day is no longer observed as a national holiday. Others, by contrast, see him as an imperialist, the enslaver of minority peoples. A major early revisionist was the India-based historian Kumar Pradhan (1991). According to Pradhan, '[T]he Gorkhali conquests created a unified kingdom, but not a unified society' (1991: 201). On this view, Prithvi Narayan, insofar as he had an ideal kingdom in mind, was really interested in a 'true Hindustan': that is, in being the pure and legitimate ruler of a caste-ordered Hindu kingdom, not (as his present-day followers like to claim) in being the leader of a modern, egalitarian, and multicultural nation.⁹

Following the 1990 People's Movement, Nepal entered a new world of freedom, where for the first time (with the brief exception of 1951-60) political parties could mobilize and compete in elections and ethnic groups and castes could organize openly. It seemed as if the whole of life was suddenly politicized. The Panchayat period (1960-90) had been the pre-eminent period of *nation*-building, whereas after 1990 Nepal experienced a new and pervasive process of *ethnicity*-building.¹⁰ This kind of politicized ethnicity construction is directed at the state, at winning official recognition and gaining access to resources. It is not primarily a question of attracting tourists, converting ethnic groups into legal corporations, or asserting intellectual rights over ethnically defined intellectual traditions or bioproperty as in Southern Africa or North America (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009), though activists are aware of these processes elsewhere in the world through their contacts with the United Nations and other international bodies.

A key part of the process of creating new ethnic identities in the post-1990 period has been the attempt to perform them in everyday life, whether through daily greetings or the propagation of big annual festivals and public holidays (Holmberg 2016; Krauskopff 2003). Ideally, each ethnic group is supposed to have its own distinctive name, language (including distinct greeting), script, cultural practices, history, New Year festival (with associated era), traditional dress, territory, and anthem (some add a flag as well).¹¹ Every group is identical in the way that it differentiates itself from all other groups. The ethnic group thus becomes a shadow nation within the nation. Where these distinguishing features do not exist historically (and in very many, if not most, cases, they do not), they have had to be invented.

Not every group is equally capable of playing this identity 'game', the new identity politics, what Leve calls 'the identity machine' (2017: 205f.). Notably, Dalits (ex-Untouchables) – who have no homeland and no distinctive language, and who have inherited a position at the bottom of the traditional caste hierarchy that conventionally deemed them to be 'without culture' – find themselves seriously disadvantaged. Dalit activists therefore focus on discrimination and structural oppression rather than on claims to indigeneity. Muslims have mostly opted out of the indigeneity competition altogether, preferring to go for a transnational, religious, and non-local identity; but that identity, too, has required concerted activist action and the policing of boundaries that were formerly much more fluid (Sijapati 2011), just like the identities sought by the advocates of indigeneity.

These new identities are created first through ritual. The new ritual practices, symbols, and events are not, of course, invented out of thin air. Activists draw from pre-existing ties, traditions, and memories. David Holmberg (2016) tracks in detail the creation of the Tamang Lhochhar or New Year ceremony. No one had heard of it before it began to be developed in the early 1990s. By the mid-1990s, the government had officially recognized seven different New Year celebrations: the Vikram Samvat or era (the original government-recognized new year), the Tamangs', the Gurungs', the Tibetans', the Kirats', the Newars' (Nepal Samvat), and the Gregorian.

In developing these rituals, it is not merely a question of finding a new way to express a pre-existing solidarity. Activists have to work very hard at building a new encompassing unit and new relationships. The creation of the new cultural unit works simultaneously to downgrade and overcome pre-existing internal divisions. Sometimes such internal divisions inherited from the past are quite sharp and considerable friction is caused in attempting to deny or supersede the old affinities and old hierarchies.

At the next level up from distinctive ethnic groups, a completely new terminology has evolved, one that was unknown in the years before 1990, a new way of grouping castes and ethnic groups into large blocs or, as I call them, macro-categories. Four major ethnic macro-categories have emerged, all with names that were not in general use before 1990: Janajati, Madheshi, Dalit, and Khas-Arya. 'Janajati' is a neologism borrowed from Hindi and/or Bengali for those groups who were formerly known as 'hill tribes', though the category also includes the Tharus and similar smaller groups who inhabit the Tarai plains belt in the south. In the immediate aftermath of the 1990 revolution, Janajati intellectuals got together and formed the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN), which in 2003 was renamed the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN).¹²

'Madheshi' refers to the plainspeople of Indian cultural and linguistic background. Of the four macro-categories, it is the one with the most fluid denotation: it is highly

contested whether or not Muslims and/or Tharus are full members of the category. The term shot to prominence with the first Madheshi movement, occurring just after the promulgation of the Interim Constitution in January 2007. 'Dalit', the term for ex-Untouchables, is also borrowed from India; it is by no means universally liked by Dalits themselves, but there is no widely accepted alternative. 'Dalit' came into use soon after 1990 and, presumably because it corresponds to an already existing highly salient social category, it is the most widely and immediately understood and recognized of the new macro-categories.¹³ 'Khas-Arya' is the most recent neologism to emerge and refers to the former 'high' castes of the hills: that is, Bahuns, Chhetris, and allied small castes (such as Thakuri and Sannyasi). This term was coined as part of the reactive movement of high-caste ethnicity formation in the very specific circumstances of 2010-12, in the lead-up to what was expected to be the promulgation of a new federal constitution in May 2012 (Adhikari & Gellner 2016). For all these macro-categories, many activist hours of work, many meetings, demonstrations, and petitions to government and international bodies, were required in order to conjure them into existence.¹⁴

Sectors and norms; the official and the demotic

Civil society, where activists are the leading denizens, is the sphere in which mediation takes place – between government schemes and daily life, between international programmes and local realities.¹⁵ Those who mediate in this way may or may not qualify as 'activists'. This is a highly contested, morally appraisive term, with fierce arguments over who deserves to be considered a 'true' activist and who does not (Heaton Shrestha 2010). Regardless, there is widespread agreement that 'civil society' or the 'third sector' covers those areas of associative activity that are *not* the state, *not* the market, and *not* the family. In practice, of course, there are all sorts of interference from kin, from economic incentives, and from the state. People move from state positions into NGOs and back. Political parties and their front organizations represent a special case, with one foot in society and another, when successful, in the state. None of these qualifications invalidates the model, however, any more than the existence of mafias invalidates the nation-state's aim and value of monopolizing the legitimate use of violence.

The notion of 'three sectors' (government, the market, and the 'third sector') is, therefore, a model or set of ideal types. But this does not mean it is '*just* a model', with the implication that it does not affect practice or life. The model and its distinctions underlie the institutions and practices (what Latour calls the 'constitution') of 'modernity'. Latour (1993: 11, 30) delights in demonstrating how the world is made up of hybrids which do not respect our conceptual apparatus. But the fact remains that this set of concepts, the ideology – or 'constitution' – of modernity, has spread throughout the world. Despite great differences in the ways they have been interpreted, adapted, and institutionalized, Western-inspired distinctions and institutional boundaries between the political, the economic, and the religious have spread to places where previously other, overlapping, or incommensurable distinctions were made.

It is possible to observe ethnographically what Latour calls 'purification' (1993: 11, 51, 141): the messy, on-the-ground work of institutionalizing the key distinctions that constitute modernity. This is the process that Weberian sociologists refer to as societalization (*Vergesellschaftung*): different spheres emerging each with their own logic and, to a considerable degree, autonomous of each other. There is a strong current of opinion that would like to keep politics and charity, politics and religion, politics and sport, and so on, separate from each other and in their self-governing

boxes. The state-backed attempt to institutionalize such distinctions can never fully succeed, as influentially argued by James C. Scott (1998) and, in a very different way, by Gerd Baumann (1996). Baumann, with his distinction between official and demotic discourses, showed how a kind of conceptual bilingualism (i.e. hybridity) that both recognized and breached the accepted political distinctions was required both to practise and to analyse culture in the west London suburb of Southall.

Activists as mediators: the example of Dr Keshabman Shakya

Anthropologists, as specialists in the backstage and the informal, are well placed to study just how the boundary work happens, and where, when, and in whose interests different definitions are mobilized. One way in which this can be done is to look at how particular individuals move across these boundaries, from state to 'third sector' or from parties to 'third sector' and back again (Lewis 2008; Lewis & Mosse 2006). To illustrate, I advance the case of Dr Keshabman Shakya, a well-known development specialist and ethnic activist intellectual in Kathmandu.¹⁶ He was born in the southern part of the old city of Kathmandu in 1951. As the oldest of five brothers from his father's second wife, he had to become a father figure to his younger brothers after their father died when they were all still very young. He both supported the family economically and insisted that his younger brothers study hard.

Dr Shakya has written an autobiographical account of his life as a development worker, which charts the changing fashions in the development industry (Shakya 2008). For many years he was a government officer, working in the Forestry Department. Like quite a few others of an entrepreneurial bent, following the revolution of 1990 and the coming of parliamentary party politics, he resigned from his secure position with HMG (as it was called until 2006) in order to work in the international NGO (INGO) sector. (Others set up their own NGOs; Dr Shakya always remained as an employee or consultant.) As he notes, there was 'exponential NGO growth ... the 1990s can be recognized as the decade of NGOs in the arena of foreign aid, democracy, and development' (2008: 263).

From the bare bones of Dr Shakya's educational and employment history one would be hard pressed to deduce the ethno-nationalist interests that have motivated much of his life's work. Only with contextualizing knowledge about his 'extra-curricular' activities is it possible to read between the lines that close his essay and gain some slight hint as to where his sympathies lie: 'Although the Nepalese population is composed of diverse ethnic groups such as indigenous nationalities ... social inclusion aspects have been almost completely neglected in both democracy and development agendas. In future, foreign aid needs to pay close attention to this issue' (2008: 275).

The fact that Dr Shakya comes from the strongly Buddhist Shakya subsection of the Vajracharya-Shakya priestly caste among the Newars is an important and relevant part of his background. For Shakyas, their Buddhism and their Newar identity usually reinforce each other. (They are, as it were, a minority twice over.) Consequently, Shakyas and other Newar Buddhists tend to have a greater attachment to the Newars' language, Nepal Bhasa, than do many other Newars, most of whom are Hindus (Gellner 2003). For Dr Shakya, two of his key personal experiences were (1) participating in Nepal's now defunct National Development Service (NDS), as part of his Master's degree, when he was sent to Ilam in the far east of the country: here he first organized youth for development activities; and (2) studying in the south of the United States, first for a Master's degree at North Carolina State in Raleigh (1980-2), and later for a

doctorate in forestry at Virginia Tec (1984-7). In the United States he first experienced 4-H clubs, which carried out agricultural extension activities (Shakya 2008: 259). He also experienced first-hand the evangelizing activities of various Christian churches, to which he was invited while a student.

Inspired by the example of Christian activism, on his return from the United States, Dr Shakya decided to organize a Buddhist Youth Group (*yuva bauddha samuha*) and to take campaigns to the villages. He and some friends contacted local youth and organized seven days of talks on Buddhism by nuns, monks, and themselves. Later it occurred to them to contact non-Newar groups, first the Tamangs and Gurungs, who, as Buddhist, or partially Buddhist, groups, were also debating the position of Buddhism in those dying days of the Panchayat regime, when parties were still illegal but cultural and religious organizations were beginning to flourish. The aim was to spread Buddhism, and thereby increase the number of Buddhists (and decrease the number of Hindus) recorded in the decennial censuses.

Then we thought, 'Let's try something new, let's try the Magars, who aren't Buddhists'. We'd come into contact with Suresh Ale Magar as he was Chairman of the Nepal Magar Sangh. We put the questions to him: What is the religious identity of the Magars? Are they happy to be Hindus? We discovered a lot in discussions, that they were looking for something else. M.S. Thapa Magar, a communist leader in Syangja, and others were discussing the possibility of the Magars being Buddhist. M.S. Thapa Magar started studying in the village where he lived. His daughter happened to participate in Buddha Jayanti [celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death] at school and in a general knowledge quiz. She won the prize, which was a lot of Buddhist books, including Prakash Bajracharya's *Buddha Pachi* [After the Buddha] . . . He read these books and [was] influenced. He had already read Samuel Beal's translation of Xuanzang [Hsüang Tsang]. We started inviting him and he said, 'Magars have to become Buddhist in order to fight the Brahmins'. Others were researching Magar language and literature, and they began to agree that Buddhism would enhance their identity, for which they needed their own language, script, and religion (Keshabman Shakya, interview, 29 December 2003).

Dr Shakya helped to organize the massive march for a secular (or religiously non-aligned) constitution on 30 June 1990, which was up to that time the biggest march that had ever been held in Kathmandu (Leve 2017: 32-3, 206). His younger brother, Anil, became a Theravada Buddhist monk in 1974 and went to study in Bangkok, where he is now the most senior Nepali monk and used to be secretary to the head of the Thai Sangha (i.e. the monastic community). Through this Bangkok connection, a group of non-Newar monks were sent for training in Thai monasteries in 1991 in the hope that they would eventually return and proselytize their groups back home (LeVine & Gellner 2005: 140). They were the first of many Janajati boys (and a few girls) to go for monastic training in Thailand. Some of these have indeed returned to Nepal and have enabled the Theravada movement to move out of its Newar enclave, making significant inroads among Magar and Tharu communities, especially in the Tarai (Letizia 2007; 2014).

Dr Shakya's Buddhist activism may be said to have come to fruition when the coalition government of 2007-8 made him the Deputy Chairman of the Lumbini Development Trust. (The Minister of Culture is the Chairman, and is officially not meant to interfere in the executive running of the Trust.) He was now in charge of co-ordinating the development of the 'Lumbini garden', a UNESCO-designated World Heritage site of nearly 8 square kilometres centred on the place where the Buddha was born. He resigned from the position in July 2009, after completing twenty months of his intended five-year tenure, in order to devote himself to party politics. He was under pressure from the Culture Minister to join the Maoist party, but he preferred to quit his post and set up his own Newar party, the Nepa Rastriya Party, of which he became



Figure 1. Keshabman Shakya (centre of picture, with spectacles and palms joined in respectful worship) takes temporary ordination for ten days as a Buddhist monk along with eighty-six others in Sumangal Vihara on the occasion of the 87th birthday of the Ven. Buddhaghosa (1921–2011), at that time the most senior Theravada monk in Nepal (January 2010). (Photo: Raja Shakya.)

Chairman. His Buddhist activism was not abandoned, however: in January 2010 he took temporary ordination as a monk, a relatively new ritual practice in Nepal, but one recognized as meritorious (Fig. 1).

Thus, alongside his Buddhist activism, Dr Shakya was also heavily involved both in the Newar ethnic movement and through that in the establishment of NEFIN (mentioned above). He sees the two forms of activism – on behalf of Buddhism and on behalf of indigenous nationalities or Janajatis – as complementary. The premier Newar organization in 1990 was the Nepal Bhasa Manka Khala and it was the Newar representative in NEFIN. But because it never held internal elections, there was no way for new generations of activists to become involved and for it to grow into a genuinely national organization (Gellner & Karki 2008). In response to this situation, various new organizations were established. Dr Shakya was instrumental in setting up the Newa De Dabu, which became the new national organization of the Newars, and he served as its founding General Secretary. This was a relatively rare case of Dr Shakya taking the main leading role. Otherwise, his speciality would seem rather to be to provide ideas and organization behind the scenes. He has kept up a running commentary on the Newar ethnic nationalist movement in numerous articles published in the *Sandhya Times*, one of the leading Nepal Bhasa weeklies, always arguing the case for more intense political action.

When the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections were announced, with a 60 per cent proportional system that would allow any party achieving between about 25,000 and

30,000 votes to gain a seat, he seized the moment and established the Nepa Rastriya Party. He and other senior Newar activists had been talking about this possibility for years. However, many of the others, coming from a leftist background, hesitated. Several were hoping to be nominated by the Maoists on their proportional list. In the end the Nepa Rastriya Party achieved 37,757 votes (0.35 per cent), just enough for a single seat in parliament.

In his professional life, Dr Shakya has mediated Western-derived development ideas to rural Nepalis, and made a highly successful career doing so. Starting as a government civil servant, he made the switch to freelance consulting and NGO work. He has worked for many of the big players in Nepal's development world: DFID, Helvetas, GTZ, and SNV. Consequently, he is well known and highly regarded in that English-speaking, logframe-using milieu for his talent for organization, motivating subordinates, maintaining contacts with all political sides, including the Maoists, and getting things done. I suspect, however, that for many years the fact that these very same skills were also applied to activities in the world of ethnic activist politics remained opaque to the expatriates who were paying his salary. They were probably unaware that his many travels across Nepal for development purposes were simultaneously being used to build a countrywide network of Newar activists.

Dr Shakya gives the impression of being on a restless intellectual quest, trying to find the tools and the language to advance the causes he believes in. As an intellectual fluent in English, Nepali, and Nepal Bhasa, and with an easy writing style in all three, and a clear idea of the messages he wants to convey, avoiding clichés, he is ideally placed to mediate new ideas and put them into circulation in activist circles in Nepal. As we have seen above, he knows perfectly how to express ethno-nationalist concerns in the neutralizing language of development agencies. At the same time, when writing in Nepal Bhasa, he has been fearless both in backing Maoist actions (when they set up ethnically based autonomous regions in 2004) and in criticizing them (when they withdrew the regions after entering mainstream politics in 2006). When it was clear that there would be a new constitution, he acquired copies of the Thai, Belgian, and other constitutions to see if they could provide models for Nepali federalism. Following his travels working for development agencies in western and far western Nepal, he often wrote articles about how the Khas-Chhetris of west Nepal – if they were willing to cast off the Hinduizing label 'Chhetri' (= Ksatriya), and go back to the Buddhist past of the fourteenth-century Khas kingdoms – would be able to apply for the Janajati label. The idea was taken up by some Chhetri activists (Adhikari & Gellner 2016: 2027, 2031–3) and Dr Shakya is often invited to speak at their meetings.

Dr Shakya's career reached even greater heights when, as President of the tiny Nepa Rastriya Party, he was invited to become the Minister of Environment, Science, and Technology in May 2012 (Fig. 2). Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai was in the process of reshuffling his cabinet in the last days before the end of the first Constituent Assembly. Dr Shakya remained in post for ten months until 14 March 2013, when Bhattarai's caretaker government was replaced by a 'civilian' cabinet tasked with preparing the country for the new elections that were eventually held in November 2013. As minister, Dr Shakya attended nine international conferences on climate change and sought to diversify Nepal's energy sources.

Dr Shakya resigned from the Nepa Rastriya Party in December 2015. He was fed up with the infighting and he had come to think that the next stage should be to



Figure 2. Keshabman Shakya (right) receives induction from civil servants as Minister of Environment, Science, and Technology (20 May 2012). (Photo: Raja Shakya.)

‘mainstream’ the demands of Janajati peoples. To achieve that aim, it would be essential to be part of one of the larger national groupings. The party closest to his ideas was Naya Shakti (‘New Force’), founded by Baburam Bhattarai when he quit the Maoists after the declaration of the new Constitution of 2015. To have any chance of pursuing a Newar and Janajati agenda, Dr Shakya thought, it would be necessary to forge an alliance with the Tamangs and together to try to make a majority in the new central province in which the Kathmandu Valley falls. (As it turned out, Naya Shakti, along with other small national parties, was steamrolled into near oblivion by the three main parties in the 2017 elections.)

Religion, ethnicity, development, politics – even this highly compressed account of his career shows how Dr Shakya has worked with all these categories and taken resources from one sphere to build in another. He has both crossed boundaries and built them up. He is a ‘master of hybridity’ who has done much to forge a modernist Buddhist identity in Nepal, as well as Newar identity and Khas Chhetri identity. He has argued for, and worked for, ethnic federalism, and yet he also recognizes that politics is the art of the possible, that, at given conjunctures, opportunities have to be seized and radical compromises have to be made.¹⁷

Further forms of ‘making up people’

I have concentrated on emergent ethnic identities, but it is important to stress that this is not the only new kind of identity to appear in modern Nepal. In the aftermath of 1990 many new groups began to emerge and to make claims for recognition. These claims were often cast in the language of human rights and, as a consequence, entailed

demands for state support. Furthermore, the 'modern' person is also a performative act, as has been described in detail for the case of development workers visiting and working in villages by Celayne Heaton Shrestha (2002; 2006; 2010).¹⁸ Nepalis affected by the Maoist insurgency have had to learn how to phrase their claims on the state in terms of human rights and how to construct an identity as 'conflict-afflicted' (Marsden 2011; 2014). Even 'Maoist-cantonment-excluded' has become a rights-based identity sought and elaborated in the search for support from the state (not to mention other, more mainstream, constructions, such as 'earthquake victim' and 'hydropower-affected'). Erika Hoffmann-Dilloway, meanwhile, has argued that 'the adoption of an ethnolinguistic framing of Deafness potentially aligned Deaf Nepalis with other marginalized ethnic groups' (2016: 112).

Perhaps the most dramatic case of 'making up people' is the creation of the 'third gender'. For some time I was puzzled by the fact that my Nepali friends had started referring to gay people as 'third gender' (*tesro lingi*). They seemed to be mixing categories (gender and sexuality) that I expected to be kept separate. In brief, what occurred was that, in the new politically and culturally revolutionary times of the 2000s, and particularly after the fall of the monarchy in 2006, all non-heteronormative people were recognized as an omnibus new minority, on the paradigm of the new ethnic macro-categories, and this new category was named 'third gender'. For Nepalis, the paradigm case of 'third gender' is the flamboyant male-to-female cross-dressing transgender woman, building on the long-standing South Asian *hijra* stereotype (Knight 2014: 131-2); but, within the 'third gender' macro-category, there were many local terms referring to different types of sexual preference (Knight, Flores & Nezhad 2015: 108-9; S. Tamang 2003: 229).¹⁹ Politically aware Nepalis understood very well that this was a heterogeneous category mobilized in order to bring pressure on, and claim resources from, the state, even though many people found the new term confusing and even inappropriate (Knight 2014: 152-3).

Much of the creation and institutionalization of the new category was down to the skill and charisma of one man, Sunil Babu Pant, a computer engineer trained in Belarus, who founded the Blue Diamond Society (BDS) in Kathmandu in 2001. Pant wanted to establish an NGO working for gay rights but was obliged to register the BDS in 2003 as working in the area of male sexual health (S. Tamang 2003: 228). Pant's speaking and fundraising skills, as well as his ability to speak the language of the Nepalese bureaucracy and judiciary, were exceptional. In 2007, thanks to a PIL, Public Interest Litigation, brought by the BDS, the Nepali courts, and therefore Nepali law, recognized a third gender which, because of the judgment's emphasis on self-identification, permitted a single identity for all LGBTI people. Following the Yogyakarta Principles of 2007, which prescribed how the law should deal with issues of sexuality, a new kind of legal person was invented and was reaffirmed in the 2015 Constitution. Pant was present in Yogyakarta to help draft the principles. He was also there in Kathmandu as the driving force ensuring that they were incorporated into Nepali law. Pant himself was well aware of the parallel with ethnic rights and even joked that the 'third gender' was Nepal's 104th ethnic group (Knight 2014: 154).

As a foreign-educated, high-caste, gay man from an elite rural background, Pant was a highly effective figurehead for a movement whose most publicly visible members were male-to-female transgender people, many of whom worked as prostitutes. Pant's TV show in 2012 mobilized many Nepali celebrities behind LGBTI issues (Knight 2014: 161). The BDS was even accused of encouraging people to become transgender (*meti*). When

the backlash against LGBTI activism began, it is no surprise that familiar accusations wheeled out against all kinds of activism surfaced: that the activists concerned were just in it for themselves; that they wanted to siphon off all the NGO's income; and that the creation of the category was entirely motivated by personal aggrandizement (Knight 2014: 165). Pant tried to resign from the BDS on more than one occasion. When he did finally leave, in 2013, the organization did not fare well and his successors were unable to replicate his dynamism (Knight 2014: 166–70).

In what Michael Bochanek and Kyle Knight call 'the most far-reaching implementation of the "third gender" category' (2012: 32), 'third gender' responses were also collected by the 2011 census. However, it was decided not to include the results when the census figures were published as there were numerous problems during data collection (Knight 2014: 154–5). Nepal is now one of the few countries in the world that allows a response other than 'male' or 'female' on its official forms and is renowned globally as 'progressive' for its recognition of a 'third gender'.²⁰ As Seira Tamang (2002) shows, this vocabulary displaces, or sits on top of, a rich and complex demotic discourse which – rather similar to Latin American ways of viewing the matter – ultimately comes down to the contrast between the penetrator (more male) versus the penetrated (more female). It remains to be seen whether these demotic discourses are tamed by the new official vocabulary, or indeed whether the official category 'third gender' leads to enforceable rights for those who fall under it, as ethnic macro-categories such as Dalit and Janajati have.

Conclusions

Bruno Latour famously declared that there are four things wrong with actor-network theory: the words 'actor', 'network', 'theory', and the hyphen. Following Mike Lynch, he wrote, it should in fact be called 'actant-rhizome ontology' (Latour 1999: 19). In Latour's understanding of the theory, it is a non-theory, a solvent of all existing theory that puts nothing in its place, just as Madhyamika philosophy within Buddhism is supposed to dissolve all philosophical views and leave us with an enlightened, illusion-free non-view as a consequence. Perhaps, given Latour's predilection for political analogies, his theory should rather be compared to de Gaulle's political party that claimed not to be a political party.

Reviewing the long history of the emergence of modern ethnic identities in Nepal, I do not see a parliament of things, or objects with agency, but rather human beings acting, collectively, to bring into existence new forms of life. Two political technologies have, it is true, facilitated this process, both in Nepal and more widely, namely the census and adult suffrage (to which, more recently, one could add PILs). It has taken some time for the implications of these two technologies to work through their various consequences. For thirty years, from 1960 to 1990, elections were held without political parties and the census was subject to a degree of manipulation by an authoritarian regime directed from within the royal palace. A conscious decision was taken *not* to collect census data on ethnicity, or to collect it and not to publish it. The publication of ethnic/caste figures from 1991 (and the contrasting decision in India not to publish such figures, except for Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes) has had political consequences. But those consequences did not happen *because of* the data, but only because certain activists believed that they mattered and fought to make them relevant. I therefore sympathize with James Laidlaw's critique of ANT (2014: chap. 5) as providing a dehumanized vision

of the world, one that voids it of the moral and evaluative content that is central both to human sociality and to the practice of politics.²¹

I have sought to emphasize that the world of activists is full of what ANT calls hybrids. This has a very specific meaning that may not be obvious to those not familiar with STS-speak²² or anthro-speak. A hybrid is any 'actant' – something that has an effect, anything that constrains action – that fails to respect the formal boundaries of Latour's 'modern constitution'. These can be contexts, individuals, or processes. Such hybrid actants mix, for example, politics and religion, or sport and economics, social service and politics, and so on. An obvious case of 'purification' (i.e. the attempted separation and avoidance of such 'hybridity') is the pretence of political non-alignment on the part of NGOs. This is forced upon them by the logic of the 'third sector', and, in the case of Nepal, by the overwhelming influence of INGOs, but it is frequently explicitly or implicitly breached. NEFIN, for example, lost its valuable development funding from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development when it took the political step of holding a Nepal Bandh, or general strike, that shut the Kathmandu Valley down for a day in 2011. A commonly heard metaphor in Nepal is that the organization in question is, or should be, like Pashupatinath, the most holy of the country's Hindu shrines: one leaves one's shoes (i.e. one's political preferences) at the door before entering. In practice, however, everyone assumes that, even if a particular organization is not formally aligned with one or other political party, it will be so implicitly or through personal networks. It is a fact of life in Nepal that advancement in any sphere influenced by government (e.g. universities) is virtually impossible for individuals with no such party-political alignment.

To sum up, I reject the flattening effect of ANT and its lack of interest in distinctively human agency, however salutary that may have been in some respects (bringing things back in to social theory, focusing on human-animal relations, etc.). Hacking's conceptualization 'making up people' is an alternative, and arguably less misleading, terminology. By contrast, I find Latour's theorization of the 'constitution of modernity' felicitous and productive. At the everyday, 'demotic', or unofficial level, the formal distinctions of modernity are inevitably confounded. To operate the distinctions, to think in terms of them, on the one hand, and to know how they have to be connected and breached, on the other, is what activists do. The skilful ones, those who build and mobilize large networks, are masters of hybridity; the less skilful remain confined to small circles of like-minded people, both geographically and (increasingly) on the Internet. Of course, living with 'hybrids', moving between contexts and different conceptual constraints and opportunities, is what every human does; there is nothing specifically activist about it. But to be an activist is to set out to mould other people's ways of being and ways of doing in one sphere according to principles derived from another sphere; it is also, often, an attempt, as the slogan has it, 'to be the change you want to see': that is, to perform the category one wants to establish.

Activists translate, mediate, and create the links that bind the unofficial level and particular official models together. To adapt the words of one of Raúl Acosta's informants (2015), they are the plumbers of modernity. Moreover, it is not only that activists mediate between global norms and local realities, translating modernity into the vernacular and back again, as has been stressed by many observers of activists and their movements (e.g. Levitt & Merry 2009; Merry 2006). Activists also introduce the very distinctions of modernity itself and then translate from one modern sphere to another (e.g. from law to politics or vice versa).

These various forms of translation (both conceptual and literal) are one reason why the famous dichotomy between civil society and political society set up by Partha Chatterjee (2004) – his idea that in India only the English-using middle classes are able to belong to civil society, the rest of the population being confined to political society – is too rigid, too dichotomizing, and by no means accurate for the whole of South Asia. The examples I have given show that there is a vibrant South Asian civil society in the vernacular too. Activists set out to mould society in line with modernizing frameworks and official classifications. What is often less obvious is that they are also moulding themselves at the same time.

NOTES

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¹ Latour (2000: 113, 118; 2005: 13f.). For a critique of Latour that recognized his deeply anti-Durkheimian approach, see Bloor (1999). On Latour as a major philosopher, see Harman (2009; 2014).

² 'Whenever Latour emphasizes that we must dissolve the modernist opposition between nature and culture and throw all entities into a single witches' cauldron, we can be sure that we are drinking Latour Classic. But if instead we hear him distinguishing carefully between science with its referential mode and various other modes such as religion, law, and politics, we can be sure that we are drinking a bottle of New Latour' (Harman 2014: 81–2).

³ For case studies on the reconstruction, reform, and creation of religious traditions in Nepal, see Gellner, Hausner & Letizia (2016).

⁴ Another version of the argument, with specific reference to ethnicity and nationalism, and supported by a lot more historical and ethnographic detail, but without the focus on activism or the examples given here, appears in Gellner (2016; cf. Whelpton, Gellner & Pfaff-Czarnecka 2008).

⁵ The three research projects referred to are a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship for research into activism (2002–5); an EU-Asialink grant entitled 'Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action in South Asia: The Micropolitics of Democratization' (2005–8); and, most recently, the Economic and Social Research Council-funded 'Caste, Class, and Culture: Changing Bahun and Dalit Identities in Nepal' (ES/L00240X/1) (2013–17).

⁶ Hacking (1986; 2001) believes that high-functioning autists, unlike split personalities, existed even before there was a label for them.

⁷ Hacking recognizes the parallels (e.g. 1995: 370).

⁸ On these proposed federal boundaries, see, *inter alia*, Adhikari & Gellner (2016); Karki & Edrisinha (2014); P. Sharma, Khanal & Tharu (2009); and Shneiderman & Tillin (2014).

⁹ See discussions in Leve (2017: 41–6); Pradhan (1991: 155–6); Regmi (1978; 1999: xi); P.R. Sharma (2008 [1997]); Shrestha (2016); and Whelpton (2005: 56; 2008 [1997]: 42).

¹⁰ Gellner (2007: 1823); cf. Adhikari & Gellner (2016). On ethnicity in Nepal, see also W.F. Fisher (2001); Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka & Whelpton (2008 [1997]); Guneratne (2002); Hangen (2010); Lawoti (2005); Lawoti & Hangen (2012); Lecomte-Tilouine (2009a; 2009b); Shneiderman (2015a; 2015b); and Toffin (2013: chap. 3). On the reconstruction of religion in this period, see Gellner (2005); Gellner *et al.* (2016); Letizia (2011; 2013; 2014); Leve (2017); and Sijapati (2011).

¹¹ The search for a script for each group has gone furthest over the border in Sikkim, where the national newspaper is published simultaneously in thirteen different languages, each with its own distinct script (though some are evidently marginal adaptations of the dominant North Indian Devanagari). Shneiderman & Turin (2006) dub this 'scriptophilia'. They note the irony of a written script being a key symbolic marker of officially 'Tribal' populations who in other contexts are defined by their distinctively oral traditions.

¹² On NEFIN, see the sources given in note 10, as well as Gellner & Karki (2007; 2008).

¹³ To be absolutely precise, the term 'Dalit' was in fact known to a few intellectuals before 1990, and it was even used by Ambedkar during his visit to Nepal in 1956, the year of his death (Cameron 2010: 16). However, it was only after 1990 that the term began to enter common usage and be widely recognized. Likewise, the term 'Madheshi' existed and was in use to refer to inhabitants of North India and the Tarai, but it only became the name for a broad category of Nepali citizens after 1990.

¹⁴ The big three macro-categories – Khas-Arya, Janajati, and Madheshi – comprise approximately 31 per cent, 36 per cent, and 15 per cent, respectively, of Nepal's total population; the two smaller macro-categories, Dalits and Others, comprise 13 per cent and 5 per cent, respectively. If Tarai Dalits, Tarai Janajatis, and Tarai Muslims are included as Madheshis, the Madheshi total increases to 32 per cent (M.S. Tamang, Chapagain & Ghimire 2014: 6–9). This means that, very roughly, each of the three largest macro-categories makes up around one-third of the total.

¹⁵ On civil society in the Nepal context, see Gellner (2009; 2010); Hachhethu (2015); Heaton Shrestha & Adhikari (2010); and S. Tamang (2002).

¹⁶ As with many Nepali names, his also appears in several variants (Keshab Man, Keshavman, etc.; 'Shakya' frequently also appears as 'Sakya'). Dr Shakya is an old friend and he has read and approved this account. Full disclosure: I was the supervisor of his younger brother, Anil Sakya, a.k.a. Bhiksu Sugandha, when he did a Ph.D. on kinship and marriage in Newar society at Brunel University in the 1990s.

¹⁷ For other detailed accounts of activism as a moral project in Nepal, see Heaton Shrestha (2010); Krauskopf (2003); Onta (2015); Rai (2013); Shneiderman (2010; 2015b); and M.S. Tamang (2009). It would be an interesting exercise to compare these activist biographies with those of politicians (e.g. J.F. Fisher, Acharya & Acharya 1997), on the one side, and of Maoist fighters (e.g. Hutt 2012; Lecomte-Tilouine 2006) and Christian converts (Gibson 2017), on the other.

¹⁸ Such performances are not without their ambiguities and tensions, for example over caste (Heaton Shrestha 2004).

¹⁹ On *hijras* in South Asia, see Nanda (1989) and Reddy (2005). On the emergence of the 'third gender' category in Nepal and the highly diverse identities that underlie it, see Bochanek & Knight (2012); Knight (2014); Knight *et al.* (2015); Pigg (2001); Tadić (2017); and S. Tamang (2003). On the emergence of 'transgender' in New York, see Valentine (2007); and on the similarities and differences between transracial and transgender identities in the United States, see Brubaker (2016).

²⁰ See Biggs & Lewis (2009) for an account of a different context (Nepal's fair trade movement) that stresses both hybridity in the Latourian sense (even though Latour is not mentioned) and the agency of particular activists.

²¹ Lezaun (2017) helpfully traces the history of ANT and shows how later iterations, rather than rejecting the social *tout court*, seek to rethink it. I take that as a rapprochement with the more thoroughly social view of action that I am espousing here.

²² STS = Science and Technology Studies. Ironically, ethnic activists are often allergic to talk of hybridity in the more conventional (and non-Latourian) sense, as I discovered when proposing that one way to move the discussion forward in Nepal would be to acknowledge its history of hybridity in the sense of ethnic mixture (Gellner 2011).

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Les maîtres de l'hybridité : comment des activistes ont reconstruit la société népalaise

Résumé

Cet article discute des changements que des activistes ont apportés à la société népalaise en relation avec deux éléments de la théorie de l'acteur-réseau (ANT) de Bruno Latour : (1) son récit de la modernité et (2) sa minimisation radicale de l'agencéité humaine. Contrairement à ce que l'on en comprend habituellement, l'ANT mérite d'être considérée comme une théorie majeure de la modernité, du moins dans le traitement qu'en fait Latour. Sous cet angle, elle est importante et éclairante bien que son attaque sur l'agencéité humaine ne soit pas utile, du moins lorsqu'il est question d'activisme : dans ce cas, la notion de « façonner les gens » (*making up people*) de Ian Hacking fournit un meilleur guide. Sont ici principalement explorées les nouvelles sortes d'identité ethnique qui ont obtenu la reconnaissance de l'État et gagné une influence politique au Népal au cours des trente dernières années. Le cas de l'activiste ethnique et religieux Keshabman Shakya illustre cet argument. Basés sur des principes de droits humains, des processus assez similaires de façonnement des gens se sont aussi produits dans d'autres groupes minoritaires, le cas le plus frappant étant celui du « troisième genre », à propos duquel le Népal est notoirement « progressiste » par rapport aux autres États-nations de la région.

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