

Last week i heard a talk about the Maoist revolution sweeping the countryside in Nepal. François Thibault had visited the Himalayan nation last November as one of nine members of an “International Brigade,” spending a little over a week meeting with members of the Communist Part of Nepal (Maoist) and villagers in a liberated zone. When not talking to members of the CPN(M) and its People’s Liberation Army, Thibault and the other [Brigade members helped work on the “Martyrs Road”](#) being constructed by the Maoists and villagers in the region.

This talk was organized by the [Revolutionary Communist Party \(Organizing Committee\)](#) of which Thibault is a member, in co-operation with the Center for Philippine Concerns. *(For those interested in leftist archeology: I am not an expert on the different Maoist groups, but i can tell you that the RCP(OC) is **not** identical to [Bob Avakian’s RCP](#)... so far as i know the latter has no presence in Canada, whereas the RCP(OC) is a “pre-party formation” based primarily in Quebec, but which hopes to establish a Canada-wide Party later this year.)*

I found Thibault’s talk **very** interesting, and it made me appreciate the importance of what is going on in this tiny country on the other side of the world. This is a story for some of the poorest, most oppressed people on this planet struggling and succeeding in winning a better life for themselves and their children. Despite serious political misgivings about aspects of the CPN(M)’s practice and programme, what is going on in Nepal strikes me as one of the most advanced revolutionary struggles today. Advanced both in terms of how close they are to succeeding, and also in the quality of their ideas.

I’m not going to even attempt to summarize the chain of events which have led the CPN(M) to the brink of power – I would instead recommend that interested people check out the [Wikipedia Nepal People’s War](#) page, the [page maintained by the RCP-USA on the conflict](#) or else this article from [Monthly Review by John Mage](#). I would also strongly recommend the book [Dispatches from the People’s War in Nepal by Li Onesto](#), which i read as further background to this posting. *(i will indicate when citing information from this book and not Thibault’s talk.)*

Thibault started his presentation with a brief history of Nepal, which i will not attempt to summarize. He also provided some background facts on the country which i found interesting. Nepal has a population of 26 million people – almost the same as Canada! – and is the second poorest country in the world, with a per capita income of just \$240 US, and an average life expectancy of less than sixty years. There are over thirty major ethnic groups in the country who speak over 100 languages.

Onesto helps to further flesh out the context:

...70 percent of the population live below the poverty line. There is extreme class polarization and social inequality. Ten percent of the population earn 46.5 percent of the national income and own 65 percent of the cultivable land; 85 percent of the population live in the rural areas, most without electricity, running water, and basic sanitation. There are hardly any doctors in the countryside and malnutrition is widespread [...] The

infant mortality rate is more than 75 per 1,000, about ten times the rate of Japan or Sweden. (p. 3)

...the Khas nationality, the Hindu religion, and the Nepalese language have been imposed throughout the country. And for centuries, the Nepalese ruling class has exercised discrimination, exploitation, and oppression against other religions, languages and nationalities. (p. 185)

Onesto also writes that 2.6 million children in Nepal work as child laborers and one million work *without pay* as “bonded laborers.” (p. 146) Slavery in our sparkling 21st century, didja say?

This widespread misery forms the background to the “people’s war” being waged by the CPN(M) for ten years now, a war which started as an insurgency with only two firearms (*one of which we were told did not even work!*) and which today controls most of the country.

Taking it for granted that the monarchy must be overthrown and that the people are right to rebel, i’m interested in the nature of this Nepalese revolution. If they succeed, the CPN(M) will be the first people to wage a successful “people’s war” under the communist banner since i was a wee child, so this is something new for me. I want to know what kind for society the Maoists are fighting for. Will this be something inspiring, or will this be yet another embarrassing example of what happens when “authoritarian leftists” seize power?

In a nutshell: i want to know if things will get better or worst.

I have no crystal ball, so with the question in mind, what i’m most interested in is what life is like in areas controlled by the Maoists right now.

Life in the Liberated Zones

According to Thibault, the CPN(M) has already taken control of 80% of Nepal. The young Maoist was adamant that the areas controlled by the rebels were truly being liberated, that everything there was now much better than before.

The main accomplishments he described in these liberated zones were in terms of agriculture, healthcare and eradicating the oppression of women.

Agriculture

Three out of every four people living in Nepal are peasants, and growing food is not only their main occupation but it is also their means of sustenance. The work can be back-breaking, and yet [studies by UNICEF in the 1990s](#) were showing the malnutrition was widespread, indeed it was the norm amongst children, with 64% of children aged 6-36 months being stunted and 6% suffering from wasting.

Little surprise that increasing agricultural production and land reform are both priorities for the rebels...

In areas controlled by the Maoists, landlords have had their lands expropriated and redistributed to the peasants. Bonded labourers (i.e. slaves) have been freed and their former employers forced to provide them with land or money (Onesto 66). The land tax has been abolished, a "People's Production Bank" has been established so that people can take out loans without having to pay exorbitant interest (*under the monarchy interest is often over 100% a year!*), and ponds have been built to make fish available year-round.

Private property has not been abolished – peasants have their separate plots of land, and keep their own personal belongings – but the CPN(M) encourages co-operative farming methods where peasants help each other farm, each keeping what is grown on their own plot. This combined with agricultural education classes has resulted in a 10-15% increase in productivity.

When people are going hungry, 10-15% more food is no trivial matter!

Healthcare

The [1996 Nepal Living Standard Survey](#) found that less than half of all households had access to a health facility within walking distance of 30 minutes or less. To remedy this situation, the CPN(M) has tried to set up clinics throughout the countryside, so that people can receive quality healthcare.

The Party has also set about training both "barefoot doctors" (described as being "half way between a nurse and a doctor, and able to take care of everyday health matters") and midwives. Although Thibault didn't spend much time discussing the midwives, one would imagine that they must be especially important, as under the monarchy every year an estimated 6,000 women have died from complications during pregnancy and childbirth. [According to the BBC](#), women have a 1-in-24 chance of dying of such complications in Nepal! (*by way of comparison, in Canada the rate is 1-in-20,000...*)

Women's Oppression

Nepal is apparently the only country in the world where the female life expectancy is actually lower than the male, testimony to the particularly harsh form of patriarchal oppression there. Traditionally women are not even supposed to speak in public, girls are forced into arranged marriages with no possibility of divorce, and women do most of the hardest work (according to Marilyn Waring, when she visited the county in the 1980s 70% of agricultural work was being done by women), while men legally own whatever property the family holds.

Most of us have an image of classes being half-male half-female, all members of the same family having the same class position – men, women and children combined. Yet after reading *Dispatches from the People's War in Nepal* one might consider that women peasants form a distinct class, more oppressed and more exploited even than their

husbands and brothers. ***Indeed, often exploited also by their husbands and brothers!*** As such, they constitute a particular class within the revolutionary struggle.

To quote Onesto:

Young peasant women – illiterate, facing nothing but a back-breaking future – leaving their villages, taking up arms, learning to read and write, and studying politics [...] women who grew up angry about the way feudal society oppresses women and who had jumped at the chance to join the People’s Army. This is clearly another element fueling this revolution.

[...]

[W]hen the armed struggle started in 1996, it was like opening a prison gate – thousands of women rushed forward to claim an equal place in the war. Some had to defy fathers and brothers. Some had to leave backward-thinking husbands, Others ran away from arranged marriages where parents had decided their fate. They all had to rebel against feudal traditions that treat women as inferior and make women feel like their ideas don’t matter. (p.166)

In this vein, Comrade Parvati (a senior member of the Central Committee and head of the Women’s Department) has suggested that women constitute a “basic revolutionary class” and that “you can virtually say that women are running [the] peasant’s economy in Nepal.” (“[Interview with Com. Parvati](#)”, *People’s March: Voice of the Indian Revolution* October 2004)

So it is not surprising that Thibault and the other Brigade members were really struck by the radical gains women were making within the revolution. He explained that when an area is liberated by the CPN(M) there are no more arranged marriages, women have the right to divorce – and very importantly, the right to take one half of the family’s property with them if they do so. In the liberated areas he claimed to see no sexual division of labour and that men and women worked an equal number of hours.

He also noted that the CPN(M) has made a priority to suppress trafficking in women, rape, and male alcoholism (often a factor in violence against women).

Hearing Thibault talk about all of the positive developments in areas liberated by the Maoist rebels provoked some mixed feelings for me. On the one hand, what he was describing sounded great... and yet he mentioned none of those things that i would expect in such a situation – i.e. contradictions amongst the people, the tensions between military necessities and popular freedoms, male resistance to losing power over women. If, as Comrade Parvati argues, women have specific class interests, then such radical moves to defend and promote these interests should encounter some resistance, no? Every revolution has to grapple with contradictions like these, but from last week’s talk one would get the impression that it’s all smooth sailing.

As an example of this, when describing how young boys were friendly to the Brigade members but some girls were too shy to talk to them, Thibault explained that “Even

though women are now liberated in the base areas, over two hundred years of backwards traditions have left traces.”

Let’s just say that to me this seems to be a pretty mechanistic view of revolution, one where now (because the CPN(M) holds the area) patriarchy is now a thing of the past, and any lingering symptoms are mere “traces.” This contrasts with the more sober, yet still very optimistic, picture painted by Onesto:

In the areas controlled by the Maoists there is a struggle against institutions and ideas that prevent women from equal participation in society. Entrenched feudal tradition and ideology – like the view that women should not inherit or own land or that women should be restricted to particular jobs - still exert a very powerful force, including among the revolutionaries themselves. Parvati says that there is sometimes covert or even overt pressure on women cadres to get married; unmarried women are treated with suspicion by men as well as women. As a result, some women marry against their wishes or before they are really ready to get married. And there is still a tendency for people to look down on women who are single, divorced, or have been married more than once. (p. 180)

Perhaps the more simplistic picture painted by Thibault resulted from the nature of the “International Brigade” – which clearly saw its mission as promoting the CPN(M) – or perhaps it came from the fact that he was in Nepal for only a little over a week, or perhaps it has to do with his being a man and Onesto being a women...

Because of its role in maintaining patriarchal relations in various “real existing socialist societies” i was interested in what Thibault had to say about women’s work, and how this is viewed by the Maoists. He stated that there was no longer any sexual division of labour, and in liberated communities men and women worked the same number of hours. i was curious about this, and asked him afterwards how it was decided what counted as work and what did not – this often being a key stumbling block in getting rid of sexist double-standards. Is childcare “work”? breastfeeding? cooking? gathering fuel for the fire? mending clothes?

To this question, Thibault answered that now that women have a right to divorce, and to claim half of the family’s property, any man who does not carry his weight in the home may find himself without a wife. In other words, the Party itself does not take a pro-active stand on this issue, but has created conditions in which women can take matters into their own hands.

Now i appreciate the honesty in this answer, but it is a lot less rosy and utopian, and much less precise, than “there is no longer a sexist division of labour.” It leaves untouched the question of what the CPN(M) considers to be “work,” and suggests that women in Nepal now have options similar to those in imperialist countries who find themselves in unfair marriages – i.e. the right to divorce. But (*so far*) going to the Village Development Committee to complain about your husband not doing enough childcare does not seem to be what is happening.

(I should note that Onesto repeatedly quotes different women – both in the People’s Liberation Army and sympathetic villagers – who she interviewed in 1999 and who stated that men were doing far more housework since the people’s war began ...)

When i asked Thibault about access to abortion and contraception in the rural clinics i was told that the CPN(M) supports women’s reproductive freedom, but due to poverty and a lack of medical supplies it has been unable to make these widely available.

i was surprised, as access to abortion has been a burning issue in Nepal for years, and around the world women have experimented with ways of terminating a pregnancy without having to depend on hospitals or expensive technology. Likewise, at the very least i would imagine that things like sex education classes could teach about the rhythm and cervical mucus methods and other low-tech/no-tech forms of birth control if that’s really all that can be managed at this point. Remember, this is a country with one of the highest mortality rates due to complications arising from pregnancy and childbirth, so women’s reproductive health is a pressing concern.

(Onesto does refer to the CPN(M)’s women’s organizations carrying out sex education campaigns in 1999... this may be a case of the situation on the ground being better than Thibault realized... or it may not!)

Omens Good...

The CPN(M) has set up two “model communes” in areas where the class struggle had been particularly advanced even prior to the Maoists launching their people’s war. One imagines that these model communes are meant as examples/experiments to see how far communist practice can go in the here and now. Jaljala was established in 2001 and currently has 155 people living in it, and Ajambri was established in 2003 and currently has 93 members, all of whom are either Party cadre or the families of PLA soldiers and martyrs.

In the model communes there is absolutely no sexual division of labour, and this extends even to housework, which is organized collectively. Furthermore, all the lands are held in common, the harvest is redistributed according to people’s needs, and there is no private property – “not even a thread or a needle.” *(We were told that initially private belonging had been accepted, but this led to “contradictions” between the commune members...)* There are literacy classes, running water, and in Ajambri there is a library with 500 books – a rarity in rural Nepal.

I was curious as to how decisions were made, not only in the model communes but also in the villages liberated by the rebels. Thibault explained that when the Maoists seize control of an area they set up their own Village Development Committees, the members of which are elected by people living in the area. There are positions set aside for women and members of different oppressed nationalities and social classes. As for the politics of VDC representatives, Thibault insisted that there were no restrictions - in fact, he said

that even monarchists could run in the elections, though he added that in fact there were no monarchists in the Maoist-controlled areas!

(Onesto only mentions Village Development Committees in the context of the monarchy's government system. As for the people in liberated zones, she refers to 3-in-1 Committees which seemed to be significantly different in their make-up... one is left to assume that there have been changes in the six years since Onesto was in Nepal...)

If true, this willingness to accept political pluralism strikes me as a positive indication of the way this revolution might go. CPN(M) leaders have expressed their desire to establish a Constituent Assembly to govern the country, one in which other political parties would be allowed to participate. One wonders how the Maoists plan to resist the monarchy and fight for the interests of the most oppressed while also establishing and defending a State which may include representatives of exploiter classes. Yet given the track record of certain Leninist revolutions, i admit to being encouraged that the CPN(M) seems to be willing to err on the side of tolerance...

Indeed, the CPN(M) seems much more sophisticated than most Maoists i have encountered. *(Hey, i said most, not all!)* They have engaged in public self-criticism, and have acknowledged what many of us would consider to be the key weakness in the whole "MLM tradition." To quote from Parvati's article [People Power in Nepal](#):

...the question of continuous democratization of the state power leading to the withering away of the state is a thousand times more difficult and complex than capturing state power. Thus the key question is how to combine the dictatorship of proletariat with elements of continuous revolution in running the state. This can only be done by putting politics in command and subjecting the state to the control, supervision, and intervention of the masses so that the people's front goes on expanding while reactionaries' base continues to shrink.

So let's be clear: these ain't exactly cartoon cut-out Maoists!

...And Bad

After the talk, i asked about the CPN(M)'s position on queers... and i was told that - "regrettably" - the CPN(M) "opposes homosexuality"!!!

Thibault was quick to reiterate that the RCP(OC) supports equal rights for gays and lesbians, and tried to explain the CPN(M)'s position by referring to the "backwards" and feudal society in which they are operating... *not an explanation i accept!*

I thought such homophobia was a possibility (*coz it always is!*) but i wasn't really expecting this - a couple of months ago i had tried to look up the CPN(M)'s position of queers after a [discussion about police harassment of transsexual prostitutes in Katmandu](#), and i had found nothing on the subject except this cryptic entry on [Wikipedia's Socialism and Sexual Orientation](#) page that "The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) claim to be recruiting homosexuals to their guerrilla forces."

As for Onesto, she does not mention homosexuality even once in her 256 page book. (*As a possible explanation, shall i mention the fact that the RCP-USA with which she seems to be affiliated held a similar anti-queer position until [2001](#) – two years after the trip to Nepal on which she bases her book? Yes i think i shall...*) What she does mention, which may not bode well for how the CPN(M) would deal with queers, was that the Party has censured men who cheat on their wives – arranging for their public humiliation – and is waging a campaign against polygamy, at times compelling the “second wife” to leave the marriage. (Onesto 175)

While both polygamy and adultery may be ways in which men enjoy unfair power or privilege, i can’t help but feel squeamish at the idea of revolutionaries intervening to forcibly promote monogamy. (*Please don’t wash that glass, as A.K. might say...*)

I asked Thibault what would happen if two fighters in the People’s Liberation Army were found having queer sex, and his answer was that in Nepal affection between members of the same sex is considered so normal that he imagines any queers in the PLA would be able to hide their affair. ***Not exactly a clear answer!***

Thibault suggested that queers were so invisible in Nepal that homophobia may be an academic question – as he put it, with the Maoists poised to take power it’s not the principal contradiction right now. When i pointed out that there is a queer community in Katmandu, and the position of the CPN(M) will not be academic to those people the day after a succesful insurrection, he agreed and conceded that this was something the members of the Brigade should have questioned their hosts about more.

I must say that i found Thibault’s answers to be honest and forthright, and in the context of a public discussion that’s the most i could expect from him. But given the mixed experience of queers in socialist societies, i was disappointed that the Brigade members had not made a point of “getting to the bottom” of this question while they were in Nepal. One wonders how important Brigade members take such homophobia – after all it is not mentioned once in their [official report on their trip](#). Not dealing with such questions, or only dealing with them superficially or in passing, is not respectful of the oppressed classes in Nepal, some of whom are certainly queer. Furthermore, it is disrespectful towards the CPN(M), who are clearly serious revolutionaries, and as such should be taken seriously.

Finally, while i am just a relatively ignorant white guy from an imperialist country who has never seen a revolution unfolding in real-time, i can’t help but think there is potential for common ground between some of the discussions going on within the CPN(M) – especially Comrade Parvati’s excellent critique of marriage and the family, and her [complaint](#) that the Party has “a tendency to take sexual offenses more seriously than political offenses” – and a radical argument in favour of sexual freedom. (*Let those thousand flowers bloom!*)

And in the interim, before “struggling with” and “getting to the bottom of” this important question, serious revolutionaries would also do well to find out exactly what “opposing homosexuality” means. Is this an internal code for the PLA or CPN(M)? Is this something likely to be imposed in a socialist Nepal by the criminalization of homosexuality? How does the CPN(M) relate to LGBT groups in Nepal (like the [Blue Diamond Society](#)) – with indifference, tolerance, or hostility?

These are life and death questions.

Summing Up

The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) may seize State power in the near future. If it does, this will be the first left-wing revolution to occur anywhere in the world for over twenty years!

Already in the areas it has liberated from the monarchy, the CPN(M) has facilitated real improvements in the lives of the most oppressed. In terms of world revolution, the Nepalese Maoists seem to be trying to innovate with models that promote political pluralism while struggling against class oppression. These seem like positive developments within the Marxist-Leninist tradition. Finally, like many other Maoist organizations in the Third World, the CPN(M) seems to be reacting to the increasing levels of global patriarchal violence by reaffirming the relationship between women’s liberation and communism.

All of these are good things.

As for the Leninist model of revolution, in the past seizing State power has allowed revolutionaries to do some good, but has not provided a *sustainable* vehicle for radical change. Eventually, every single State run by revolutionaries has ended up becoming a fetter on the forces of liberation. Socialist revolutionaries have often used women’s energies in their march to power, but have proved far less eager to combat patriarchal relations after the revolution. In some cases Marxist-Leninist victory has arguably constituted a *defeat* for the most oppressed, as the new “socialist” State has been even more vicious and exploitative than the old!

These historic limitations of Statist revolutions must be dealt with on a case by case basis – i am neither an anarchist nor a Leninist, and i am willing to concede that some socialist revolutions have made things much better. There is much cause to hope that this will be the case in Nepal, for at least so far the CPN(M) seems to be taking questions of democracy and pluralism seriously.

However, i doubt a new post-revolutionary Nepalese government would be an unambiguous step along a straight path to communism. As a best case scenario, i would hope that the revolution would radically improve people’s lives and give them a vantage point from which to struggle for even more, but eventually i would expect that struggle to separate from and then turn against the State itself.

That the CPN(M) seems more open to radical democracy gives one hope that elements amongst the Maoists would continue to struggle on the side of the people even when this struggle may involve combatting the Party itself. If enough do so, this process need not disintegrate into just another authoritarian nightmare.

More precisely, and less optimistically, the CPN(M) seems to have a serious weakness when it comes to sexual freedom, and this could become a serious problem. As past experience has shown, a “real existing socialist” State which embraces homophobia simply creates new classes of oppressed people, and in doing so weakens the revolution itself. “Patriarchal liberation” is a contradiction in terms, and there can be no communism without sexual freedom.

Just as important, and far less abstract: there are many queers in Nepal, especially in the urban areas still controlled by the monarchy, who may needlessly suffer as a result of this error on the part of their “liberators”. These are people who may have every material reason to support a struggle against the ultrapatriarchal monarchy, and yet they may find themselves in a position of not knowing where the lesser of two evils lies.

Where to Now?

For myself, i will be staying tuned to the Revolution in Nepal. A lot more is happening there than i would have ever guessed...

...and I encourage you all – ***and not just you Maoists*** – to keep abreast of the situation there too. If you live in Quebec, you can hear François Thibault speak about the Brigade’s visit to Nepal and the revolution there at the following times and places in the weeks to come:

- Wednesday, March 29th in Sherbrooke, QC, at 7:00 p.m., at the CEGEP de Sherbrooke, 475, rue du Parc, room 2-53-570
- Thursday, March 30th in Montréal, QC at 7:00 p.m., at the Université du Québec à Montréal (pavillon des Sciences de la gestion) 315, rue Sainte-Catherine Est, room R-R150
- Thursday, April 6th in Trois-Rivières, QC, at 7:00 p.m., at the CEGEP de Trois-Rivières (pavillon des Humanités), 3175, boul. Laviolette, room HA-1323 (the "loft"). (Presented in collaboration with the *Groupe d’actions sociopolitiques et environnementales*)
- Tuesday, April 11th in Montréal, QC, at 7:00 p.m., at the CEGEP du Vieux-Montréal, 255, rue Ontario Est (look for the *café étudiant l’Exode*)

If you want to organize a talk about Nepal in your city (in your school, workplace or elsewhere), François Thibault speaks english, and can be contacted at the following address: francois_thibault1982@yahoo.ca