

**Amanda Thérèse Snellinger, *Making New Nepal: From Student Activism to Mainstream Politics***

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In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Nepal turned into a secular republic from previously being the only Hindu kingdom in the world. Various structural and political actors were instrumental in bringing about such momentous change. Nepali student activists were at the forefront of this change, as they have been at the forefront of Nepal's democratic movements since the mid-twentieth century. Unfortunately, anthropologists of Nepal have not paid much attention to this important constituency. Amanda Snellinger's ethnography of Nepali student politics, therefore, is a welcome contribution not just to the field of Nepal and South Asian studies but also youth studies and political anthropology. *Making New Nepal* is the outcome of long-term research among political activists during the period of massive upheavals in Nepali politics. The author invested a total of thirty-four months of fieldwork from 2003 to 2015 in the course of this sustained ethnography that relied heavily on participant observation and conversation with student leaders.

Snellinger's work is a top-down project and she pitches her work as "a non-biased exploration of Nepali student politics and their role in mainstream politics" (x). However, she offers a caveat that neutrality is hard to maintain when one's topic of study is contentious politics, and particularly when the scholar is invested in the political and sometimes personal lives of her interlocutors. The book focuses on a cohort of student leaders from various parties, and in the author's words the study "is a snapshot of a generation's political coming-of-age during a decade of civil war (1996–2006) and ongoing democratic street protests (2003–2006), which finally culminated in ousting the monarchy and establishing a democratic, secular republic" (4). She follows the trajectories of five student leaders as they transitioned from student activism to mainstream politics. These leaders entered the political stage when Nepal's Hindu monarchy was on its way out, and therefore they centered their activism on liberal

political values such as democracy, secularism, human rights, and the republic. The author makes it clear in the introduction that the concept of political regeneration is at the heart of her study. She argues that democracy/democratization is an ongoing struggle in Nepal, and also a continual, generative process of “dissensus” (187).

The first chapter offers a brief history of the Nepali state and student politics. Here, the author’s observation that Nepali politics is a constantly changing terrain of cooperation, collaboration, and competition is accurate. Most of the time, it’s the ruling and oppositional elite who are engaged in these processes, even though they both claim to represent the people. The author focuses on elite contestations of power rather than on grassroots movements or class analysis, and argues that education has been an elite and exclusive enterprise in Nepal, pointing out a historical correlation between education and political power. She sees Nepali student politics as a mix of idealism and opportunism, where each new generation builds a movement championing idealism and critiquing the opportunism of the previous generation.

The dichotomous relationship between service and profession in politics is explored in Chapter 2. Here, the author sheds light on how student activists make sense of their own political lives. Snellinger does well to highlight the interrelationship between service and opportunity in Nepali politics and how the discourse of *seva* (service) is integral to infusing idealism into youth politics. Narratives of sacrifice and suffering provide political identity to student leaders and allow them to locate themselves in the country’s political history.

Next, Snellinger discusses the political category of youth. In Nepali politics, “youth takes a particular cultural form that is a mixture of modernity-grounded in the cultural tenets of Hindu life cycle, traditional age-set structure, and generational interaction—as well as postmodernity, a contested category of being and becoming defined by global, rights-based discourse” (75). Youth is also a condition of deferment and waiting for things to come. Youth politics, therefore, is oriented towards tomorrow and the category of youth encapsulates the concept of regeneration that is structurally facilitated by the relationship between student bodies and mainstream political parties. The idea that successive generations propel political change over time is integral to the practical operation of political regeneration.

Chapter 4 shifts readers’ attention to the significance of organization—both as a noun and a verb in student politics. Snellinger argues that in order to understand the relationship between the idea of politics and its everyday enactments, it is necessary to understand how organizational practices create a shared institutional and political culture between the parties and student bodies. Central to students’ understanding of their organization and its culture is a need to find a balance between party discipline and individual freedom. Depending on whether the party is of leftist or liberal orientation, the relative importance given to ideology and personality varies.

As politics in Nepal has been an elite enterprise until recently, Chapter 5 tackles the thorny subject of the relationship between socio-political changes and maintenance of the status quo. Through two elections for the Constituent Assembly, the 2015 earthquake, and the fast-tracked constitution that followed immediately after the earthquake, recent political developments have replicated old patterns of exclusion in Nepali politics at the cost of the minorities and women. Snellinger foregrounds her interlocutors’ political coming of age, showing how their discourse has shifted from transformation to governance. For the author, student leaders’ mainstreaming result-

ed in their assimilation into the status quo and the reproduction of the social order. One student leader interpreted their changes in perspective as resulting from “their shift from demand-side of politics to the supply-side of politics” (149). Nonetheless, Snellinger asserts that these student leaders were instrumental in achieving major changes and that not all of them have seen equal success in mainstream politics. She uses this empirical evidence to argue that democratic struggle is a generative process. However, the author also uncritically shares her interlocutors’ faith in the generative and progressive form of democratic politics. Nepal’s rising tide of religious and/or nationalist right-wing politics belies a liberal take on the historical process and hints that regeneration may not always be in the progressive or democratic direction.

Scalar politics is the theme of the final chapter. In the context of Snellinger’s study, scalar politics refers to leveraging “associations at the local, domestic, regional, and the international levels either to secure the reproduction of socio-political relations or alter them” (152). According to the author, student leaders carefully deploy scalar politics to develop networks beyond their parties and earn recognition and support. Leveraging scale has a long history in Nepali politics, as the opposition forces have almost always leveraged external support, mostly India’s, to enforce political change. Curiously, even while discussing scalar politics, the author ignores India’s role in the 2015 border blockade and presents it as solely dissidents-driven act of protest. The author also uses the Nepali case to critique liberal political theory’s assumption that the domestic and foreign politics can be neatly separated, and posits scalar politics as evidence of political regeneration rather than political vernacularization because Nepali student leaders aren’t merely translating universal political concepts and values into a vernacular context. Instead, they represent a dialogical relationship between local idioms and the so-called universal political concepts.

For the conclusion, Snellinger returns to her fundamental point that dissensus is the key to political regeneration and also that democratic movement is a generational process. She identifies political dissent and social movements in the southern plains in response to the discriminatory Constitution of 2015 as a contemporary site of political regeneration in Nepali politics. Furthermore, she also sees a generative process at work in southern Nepal, a process that seeks to make Nepal more inclusive of its minorities.

Despite being a useful contribution to the field of political anthropology and South Asian studies, the fact that the book is replete with factual errors, primarily when it comes to dates, personalities, and institutions, makes for a jarring read particularly for someone familiar with Nepali politics. Some errors that need to be addressed in the second editions of the book are as follows: Madan Bhandari, not Krishna Bhattarai (72); 2004, not 2002 (79); Democracy Day is in February, not December (83); the Rana regime fell in 1951, not 1949 (100); “long-term vision” should be translated as *duradarshita*, not *paradarshita*, which means transparency (108); the 1990 constitution, not 1991 (141); Yubaraj Gimire was the Editor of *Kantipur* daily, not its managing director (167) and the mentioned incident took place before the declaration of the state of emergency in November 2001. Also, *Rastriya Prajatantra Party* is incorrectly called *Rastriya Prajatantra Parishad* throughout the book.

Such factual errors can be easily rectified, but the author’s almost total exclusion of sources in languages of Nepal raises a more serious question. Only three sources in the book with an eighteen page bibliography are in languages of Nepal. It does not help that the author tells us in the introduction that one of her interlocutors himself

has written more than four books on Nepali politics. However, the author does not use those books as her “sources.” Such exclusion of Nepali language sources points towards constant unwillingness on the part of foreign anthropologists working in Nepal to engage with materials written in languages of Nepal. It is also worth pointing out that the five interlocutors whose political trajectory she carefully follows in the book are familiar figures in Nepali politics. The author herself notes that “their identity will be known to those familiar with Nepali politics” (196). However, she chooses pseudonyms for these easily identifiable political personalities. Any reader can reasonably expect at least a methodological explanation for this interesting choice but the author does not provide any.

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