Barman Budha could have never imagined this future. Born in 1930 in a poor family and raised as a sheep herder, he led a small peasant uprising in the summer of 1954 in Thabang village of Rolpa District, in western Nepal, against Khrishna Jhakri, a local tax collector (mukhiya) with allegiance to the feudal nobility that lay claim to the area. How was Budha to know that this isolated rebellion, far away from the seat of power in Kathmandu, would become the foundation, forty years later, for an armed Maoist insurgency that would eventually capture power in Nepal? Barman and his fellow villagers were fed up with the unceasing demands of Jhakri and his cronies to plough the mukhiya’s lands for free. Those who defied Jhakri were slapped with higher taxes. “We pounded him down,” says Barman. “He ordered all our pigs killed to ‘clean’ up the village. He thought we were dirty.”¹

Four years later, Jhakri fell. The rebels of Thabang replaced the mukhiya with a village council led by Barman Budha. The council abolished the feudal tax system and began redistributing land. Budha’s own life changed forever in that fateful year: the shepherd boy
became a rebel icon, who was to inspire many as the struggle against state officialdom expanded and intensified. The villagers of Thabang continued to battle local elites and state functionaries, and by the early 1970s were able to get rid of them entirely. Some surrendered, many fled. The immediate area around Thabang became a ‘liberated zone’, and was thrust into the state’s crosshairs.

In the years to come, Thabang was the target of police actions, army counter-insurgency operations, commercial ventures, and development programs, all aimed at quieting its rebellious inhabitants. Budha himself was arrested, interrogated and imprisoned multiple times. In the democratic upheavals of the 1990s he stood in parliamentary elections from Rolpa constituency, and was elected to Nepal’s parliament. Thabang itself became the nerve-centre of the Maoist insurgency that proliferated across the country from the mid-1990s.

Tul Kumari Budha, a rebel leader who was at the forefront of numerous uprisings in Thabang, is also an icon. Now 60 years of age, Tul Kumari was elected as the Pradhanpanch (village council head) of Thabang in 1981, the first woman ever to occupy that office. From the early 1970s, the area around Thabang was wracked by a wave of second generation mutinies led by women. The issues varied. There was an anti-brewery campaign, a struggle against government restrictions on hemp production and sale, an anti-gambling crusade, a fight to institute literacy classes for women, and to foreground their lack of social security. “We wanted to run our families smoothly and for that we fought against those who came to disturb us,” remembers Tul Kumari.² A compatriot of Tul Kumari’s recalls that: “We did what we did
not because we knew what a communist should do, but in order to protect our dignity and means of life.”

Samjhana Magar represents a third generation of peasant rebels in Thabang. She is 35 now, but was barely out of her teens when she became active in a district level cultural campaign called the *Jan Sanskritik Abhiyan* (People’s Cultural Campaign) that was indirectly underwritten by the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN). The campaign encompassed a range of cultural activities but revolved around public performances of popular songs that remembered a history of oppression by various political regimes and sought to commemorate local resistance to them. Such initiatives, while not explicitly informed by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, nevertheless bear testament to the painstaking ideological work that helped consolidate diverse peasant uprisings into a more or less cohesive “Maoist” movement by the early 1990s, a pivotal moment when the Nepali state was busy mobilizing for a massive police invasion to crush popular dissent in Rolpa district. Samjhana recalls the euphoria of that dangerous time:

We travelled village to village for months, singing and dancing with the people, popularizing the necessity of a people’s revolt [*bidroha ka sworharu*], using our melodies and drums. We learned stories of struggles [*sangharsa ka katha haru*] of different villages and we were able to tell them of similar stories from other villages that we had visited. Tens of thousands of people attended the program, which lasted for more than a year. As a result, United People’s Front won both seats in Parliament and most of the local councils in Rolpa district in 1992. As
soon as the [Nepali] Congress Party lost its control in the district we were repressed by the state, using special police force... People started to protest against the brutality of the operation, which later sparked armed resistance in Thabang and many other villages in Rolpa.  

The stories of Barman Budha, Tul Kumari Budha and Samjhana Magar are a window into the ill-known prehistory of Nepal’s Maoist revolution. The revolution began as an armed rebellion in 1996. It lasted for ten years, culminating in the capture of state power in 2006. More than 14,000 people died and at least 200,000 were displaced in that fateful period. By the time a peace agreement was negotiated the Maoist movement effectively controlled 70% of Nepal’s territory. The rapid spread and popularity of the Maoist cause surprised even its leaders, and is all the more remarkable given a geopolitical conjuncture that saw the defeat of ‘socialist’ regimes globally and the absence of ideological or material support for Nepali Maoists from an ostensibly ‘natural ally’, China.

This begs two interlinked question that are yet to be satisfactorily answered by the burgeoning academic and non-academic literature on Nepal’s Maoist movement: What were the conditions of possibility for the Maoist revolt and how did it evolve into a self-sustaining movement?

Existing analyses largely focus on the movement’s recent history within Nepal’s political firmament. With few notable exceptions, they also tend to treat the term “Maoist” as self-evident and fail to delve into its emergence. Our objective here is to correct this oversight by offering a preliminary account of the making of Nepal’s Maoist movement. We find Antonio
Gramsci’s writings on politics, philosophy, popular consciousness, and vernacular culture extraordinarily germane to this task, although, as we make clear, our intent is not merely to ‘use’ Gramsci but to also show how his insights bear modification and extension. This involves, among other things, interceding in his work through geography.

Our argument is as follows: “Maoist” is a retrospective description of heterogeneous peasant uprisings that contingently articulated as a movement in the mid-1990s. Condensing this heterogeneity under the label “Maoist” risks obscuring the long histories of local struggles as well the diverse conditions and unanticipated events that made the Maoist movement possible. Mobilizing Gramsci’s rich writings on peasant life we reveal how ordinary people’s ‘conceptions of the world’ modify and are modified by ‘the whole complex of relationships’ of which each ‘is the nexus’ (Gramsci 1957: 77). Central here is the practical transformation of a pre-existing, fragmented ‘common sense’ (senso comune) into a ‘critical consciousness of self’, or ‘good sense’ (senso buon). Thus, Guido Liguori’s remark: ‘Revolutionary theory is born against existing common sense.’

The area around Thabang in Rolpa district is widely acknowledged within Nepali Maoist circles as the gravitational and pedagogic locus of the movement. Our narrative examines how a cumulation of events from the early 1950s disrupted the everyday lives of Thabang’s residents, unexpectedly catalyzing a revolution in their common sense, a transformation that was aided by the pedagogic work of organic intellectuals and transmitted inter-generationally via extended family and kinship networks.
Three aspects of this process are either understated or entirely absent in Gramsci’s writings: first, the role of extended family and kin networks as ideological apparatuses of organizing and political consolidation; second, the work of memory as a modality of ideological transmission and reproduction; and third, the disruption of spatiotemporal routines that throws the common sense of ‘everydayness’ (what Henri Lefebvre calls la quotidianeté) into crisis, opening a breach for the ‘everyday’ (le quotidien) as a space of transformation and critique. To summarize, our undertaking here wants to convey the relevance of Gramsci and South Asian Subaltern Studies in understanding the Maoist uprising in Nepal, and to put this phenomenon in perspective by evoking its long history. One of the more noteworthy elements of our account is the formative role of peasant women in making the movement possible.

1. A micro-history of rebellion

The village of Thabang in Rolpa district of western Nepal sits in a vast landscape of valleys, gorges, river basins and forest slopes. Magar and Dalit communities predominate in human settlements encircled by soaring mountains of 4,500 meters or more. Magars, the community from which the famous Gorkha warriors hail, describe themselves hunter-gatherers who arrived several hundred years ago from mountain regions to the north to strike roots in the fertile river valley of Thabang. Magars have a reputation as an independent and insubordinate community that is militant and resistant to rule. Such characterizations have seeped into Magar folk culture and common sense.
But its historical roots lie in the early 18th century, when the Magar erupted in open rebellion against the efforts of Thakuri kings from the south to consolidate control over Thabang by establishing permanent garrisons in Magar settlements. The uprising lasted several years. The uprising was so fierce that the Thakuri kings were forced to retreat from their plans and exempt the Magar from taxes. In the decades that followed mutually debilitating wars around territory and commerce eroded the power of Thakuri chiefs, paving the way for Prithvi Narayan Shah of the house of Gorkha to emerge as a new regional power by the middle of the 18th century. By the 1760s, Shah had managed to unify various hill-states into the political entity we now know as Nepal. For the people of Thabang the rule of Shah meant restoration of tax and corveé labour. But Shah rule was supplanted by the Rana dynasty of Kathmandu less than a hundred years later.

The Rana regime introduced a system of patronage called *birta*, under which members of the royal family were granted tax-exempt tracts of land. Between 1920 and 1940 the Ranas also implemented a nation-wide land survey intended to demarcate private property rights for *birtas*. In Magar communities that practiced common ownership the land survey, coupled with the Rana policy of appointing village heads (*mukhiyas*) as tax collectors, created new forms of division. Mukhiyas and their relatives, who were allowed to keep a percentage of the tax collected, became loyal to the Rana rulers. These emergent elites were favoured in the land survey and routinely granted larger shares of ancestrally common land as private holdings. The end result was an ownership pattern consisting of large landowners and smallholders. The mukhiya, a tax collector who doubled up as local enforcer, became the
bastion of Rana feudalism. Discontent in Thabang against Rana rule was constant because of historically unprecedented tax demands, and because peasants chafed at the mukhiya’s autocratic reign.

Gramsci notes that the history of subaltern social groups is always intertwined with the “history of States and groups of States” and as such it is necessary to study “their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation” (Gramsci Q25, §5; 1971, 52). Elsewhere Gramsci points out that the common sense of the masses, no matter how fragmentary or even incoherent in its “intuitions of life and the world”, is a living record of their accreted experience of being underclass. Thus a political tradition of dissent and of resisting State power came to be woven into the popular consciousness of Thabang’s peasants. This tradition of dissent, a ‘spontaneous philosophy of the multitude’ in Gramsci’s words, foreshadowed the uprisings of the 20th century. It also furnished the raw material from Thabang’s masses were able to fabricate a ‘new common sense’, a critical consciousness that found its political apogee in the Maoist revolution.

**MOMENT 1  The kernel of a different commonsense**

The shoots of that new common sense sprouted, with no foreboding of the history that lay ahead, in 1954. That summer Barman Budha led a group of peasants and shepherders in an attack on Thabang’s mukhiya, Krishna Jhakri. They accused him of nepotism, of collecting
onerous taxes from poor peasants, for ordering the mass slaughter pigs and dogs in Thabang (claiming that it would make the village cleaner), and for forcing peasants to work in his field without pay.

Thabang’s peasants battled Jhakri and his allies for three years. In the interim a number of Thabang’s rebels were arrested and imprisoned, sometimes for months. During one such period of incarceration Barman Budha and his fellow inmates came into contact with a young prisoner, Mohan Bikram Singh. Singh, a political activist associated with Nepal’s fledgling communist party, was an early inspiration for Thabang’s peasants. At his urging and with his organizational acumen, the peasants, soon after their release from prison, formed the *Thabang Kisan Sangh* (Thabang Peasant Association) under the leadership of Barman Budha.

By 1958 the peasant association had overthrown Jhakri and taken control of the village. Harsh memories of feudal tyranny did not fade easily, and when Nepal held its first-ever parliamentary election the next year the villagers of Thabang voted for the Communist Party candidate. His call for land redistribution, guaranteeing equal access to all, resonated loudly. Following the election, Thabang’s residents made a renewed and successful push to drive out the village’s remaining landlords, put an end to the practice of untouchability (caste discrimination against dalits), and extended their autonomy over lands and forests in the area.

Barman Budha’s recollections of that time are a signal reminder of how the language of a new common sense can recode the past. He now remembers those “old days” as a time when “the *jana yudha* [people’s war]” established its sway in Thabang. Ruj Bahadur Roka, a 70-year old veteran of the movement from Thabang, similarly notes that: “Our village was a
mukta chhetra [liberated zone] forty years ago. What we are learning now is new vocabularies, but in terms of jana bidroh [people’s revolt] I am realizing now that we were far ahead.”

MOMENT 2  A new commonsense is fabricated

In the 1970s Thabang was wracked by a second wave of uprisings, prompted variously by the arrival of a large development project; a brewery; and fears of ecological degradation wrought by commercialization. These events disrupted everyday routines and rhythms of life, particularly of women, who took the lead in organizing resistance to them.

The most incendiary of these events was the establishment of a brewery in 1974 by a Kathmandu-based trader. The brewery was pitched as a civilizing venture that would curb the production of illicit, homemade alcohol while creating economic opportunity. The government banned home-based production of alcohol and urged residents to buy modern, mass-produced alcohol from the brewery. Magar women were incensed. The ban on home alcohol jeopardized a customary staple of Magar diet and social ritual, and a supplemental source of household income.³ Within a year they formed a group and initiated action against the brewery, first stoning it and eventually burning it down. The women’s deed was a classic illustration of what Ranajit Guha, in the context of colonial India, describes as the ‘modality of inversion’, ‘a political struggle in which the rebel...destroyed the insignia of his enemy’s power and hoped thus to abolish the mark of his own subalternity’ (1983: 75).

The brewery’s owner was forced to leave Thabang. But he sought revenge, utilizing his political connections to organize violent retaliation by the police and by filing false cases
against his opponents alleging attempted killing, looting, beating, and conspiracy against King and state. The police arrested several residents. Some were convicted of the trumped-up charges while others were ensnared in unending legal inquiries. Despite these setbacks the women came to see their action as a victory, and validation of their combined political agency. As Guha, citing Gramsci, observes, the glimmers of a new conception of the world – not yet a ‘mature and fully evolved class consciousness’ – arises first ‘via a series of negations’, ‘as the basic negative, polemical attitude’ (ibid: 19).

The women’s incipient politicalness was put to test numerous times in those formative years. Much of their anger against the brewery lay in what had transpired previously: the brewery itself was the final insult. In 1973, the government announced a ban on the cultivation of hemp (Cannabis spp). The government claimed it was to stop the production and distribution of the narcotic, hashish, that is derived from gum gathered from the young leaves and shoots of the hemp plant. There was some truth here. In the early 1970s, as urban demand for hashish grew – captured vividly in the hit Bollywood film, Hare Rama, Hare Krishna (1971), which depicts the hashish-driven hippie subculture that had sprouted in Kathmandu – middlemen flocked to hemp-growing areas like Thabang, offering villagers unprecedented prices for young hemp plants. The state ban on hemp cultivation, symbolized by the village police post that was set up to enforce it, jeopardized this newfound source of income.

The significance of hemp far exceeded its value for hashish. Locals read the state ban as nothing less than an attempt to undermine their livelihoods and autonomy. Hemp, an extraordinarily versatile crop, is woven into Thabang’s way of life: its seeds are used in cooking
and pressed for cooking oil; its bark for textile; its stem for firewood; the living hemp plant shelters cereal crops as mulch and manure within intercrop agriculture; and because hemp flourishes in poor to moderate soils, it stabilizes hill slopes. Furthermore, hemp seeds and textile were mainstays in centuries old trade circuits extending into Tibet and other parts of Nepal, in several instances accounting for 60% of implicit household income and, key to acquiring locally scarce necessities such as salt, sugar, shoes, and later, kerosene.

Thus, the ban on hemp cultivation struck at the heart of Thabang’s economy, reinforcing the prevalent commonsense of an unresponsive and predatory state. Women mobilized by defying the ban, engaging in ‘underground’ cultivation of hemp. Hemp’s natural properties aided their resistance: able to survive on marginal lands and immune to grazing by cattle, hemp could be grown in adjoining forests, in gullies, on slopes, or intercropped with corn, wheat, potatoes and millets, thereby evading the efforts of the state to snuff it out. In the years to come, as uprisings in Thabang and other areas joined force to become an armed insurgency against the Nepali state, hemp furnished a crucial source of income for households as well as tax revenue for the Maoist movement. The ban on hemp became an emblem of state injustice, nourishing anti-state consciousness over several generations and an alternative development imaginary.

To understand how we turn to an instance of Cold War geopolitics in South Asia that boomeranged in unexpected ways. In the late 1960s USAID with the sanction of Nepal’s government unrolled a major initiative, the Rapti Integrated Rural Development Project (RIDP), to modernize agriculture and generate employment opportunities in Thabang and other
villages in the watershed of the Rapti River. At the height of the Cold War and debacles in Vietnam, integrated development came to be viewed as a broad-spectrum antibiotic against the popular dissemination of socialist ideas from both China and Soviet-allied India. RIDP’s lasting legacy was its effort to commercialize agriculture, a push that embraced the crusade against hemp.

RIDP offered loans, skill development training and infrastructural support such as schools, irrigation channels and roads to villagers, promoted apple orchards, cash-oriented vegetable farming, commercialization of potatoes and handicrafts such as woollen blankets, and collection and trade in medicinal plants. Yet none successfully dislodged hemp; rather RIDP initiatives became lightning rods of conflict, none more so than the apple orchards, which were established on private as well as common forestlands, threatening open access to them.

Lack of adequate marketing infrastructure compounded the misery: unable to sell perishable products like apples and vegetables many were forced to default on loans. Episodes of massive landslides and flooding in western Nepal in the 1970s, popularized in dire environmental narratives such as Erik Eckholm’s Losing Ground (1976), were blamed – rightly or wrongly – by the people of Thabang on RIDP’s agricultural modernization schemes.

RIDP was an unqualified success in one deeply ironic sense: its ritual genuflection to ‘rural empowerment’ transformed the ‘negative consciousness’ of Thabang’s residents into something different and far sharper: a critique of patriarchy and state-led development. Women, who felt the brunt of RIDP’s intrusion into household economies, were again the vanguard of change. They agitated for adult literacy classes, invoking the banner of
“empowerment”; and by the mid-1980s had managed torid Thabang of polygamy and put in place protocols that guaranteed women an equal share in property after divorce. Thus, leadership roles assumed by women in the second wave of uprisings fundamentally transformed social and economic relations within family and kin networks.

In a public address in February 2011, to commemorate the 16th anniversary of the Maoist War, Comrade Prachanda, the Chairperson of Nepal’s Maoist Party, acknowledged how vital Thabang’s women were to the movement: “In the revolution’s early days I have witnessed in Thabang how women used to tell their husbands that they would not stay with them if the men defected from the movement. Many would assume the opposite about the role of women in revolution.”

MOMENT 3 Consolidation of a new commonsense

The period between 1980 and the early 1990s saw the fragmentary, negative consciousness of Thabang’s residents congeal into a more or less ‘theoretical consciousness’ aimed at replacing the elite-controlled Nepali state by a people’s state. Guided by organic intellectuals like Mohan Bikram Singh, Barman Budha, Tul Kumari Budha, and others, Thabang’s rebels began reaching out to other, smaller, peasant uprisings in the region. In the 1981 referendum on Nepal’s monarchy Thabang stood firmly against the King. The next year they boycotted elections and refused to volunteer labour for a road construction project.

Predictably, the village came under renewed state surveillance and repression. In November 1982, Thabang was the target of a massive military operation – the first time ever in
Nepal’s history that the country’s armed forces were deployed against its own people – that led to the arrest of 200 villagers, widespread destruction of property, and imprisonment of many for two or more years. Several fled the village, and some among these initiated contact with the Communist Party of Nepal (Mashal), requesting solidarity and material support for their resistance. Disappointed by the CPN’s response, they eventually returned to Thabang and started rebuilding village groups that could more adequately respond to state repression.

In 1990 Nepal’s urban centres witnessed a groundswell of discontent against the King. Various factions of the Communist Party converged to form the United Left Front (ULF), which partnered with the Nepali Congress and other smaller parties to launch a Jana Andolan (People’s Movement) that brought an end to absolute monarchy and the beginnings of constitutional democracy. In the national election that followed Barman Budha, standing as United People’s Front (UPF) candidate, was elected to Nepal’s parliamentary chamber (Pratinidhi Sabha) from Rolpa constituency (which included Thabang). His election campaign was propelled by a cultural group, which performed Thabang’s history of struggles through song, dance, and street theatre. Santosh Budha, a leader of that campaign, says the idea was to demonstrate why “such struggles were important to the dignity of people and protecting their means of livelihoods.”

Local elections held in 1992 resulted in a clean sweep for the UPF in Rolpa. Alarmed, the Nepali Congress Party, which held a comfortable majority of 110 seats out of 205 in the parliamentary chamber (in contrast to the Left Front’s 82), denied central government
financing for development programs in Thabang and filed a slew of false cases against local activists in an attempt to undercut popular support for the communists.

Recognizing the importance of an effective response to the Nepali Congress Party’s political tactics and building on the success of Barman Budha’s parliamentary election campaign, activists in Thabang and other villages joined hands to form the Jana Sanskritik Abhiyan (People’s Cultural Campaign) in 1995. The campaign emerged as a vital ideological instrument for unifying geographically scattered uprisings and popular mobilizations across western Nepal under the Maoist banner. The Nepali state retaliated violently with Operation Romeo, unleashing armed force on Rolpa’s inhabitants. The military operation was the proverbial last straw. Peasants, angry and fearful, joined as rank-and-file in the newly constituted Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which then proceeded to organize coordinated armed attacks across the region against various figureheads of state power: landlords, moneylenders, police posts, and government offices. In February 1996, the Maoists formally declared war on the Nepali state.

2. Gramsci and the prehistory of the Maoist revolution

Shaped by his experiences as a communist organizer in Turin and his wide reading of philosophy, politics and history, Gramsci came to be an avid student of political strategy and “how the ideological structure of a dominant class is actually organized: namely the material organization aimed at maintaining, defending and developing the theoretical or ideological ‘front’” (Gramsci Q3, §49; Forgacs 2000: 380). While Gramsci’s persistent inquiries into the
question of hegemony and the ideologies that form and sustain it are remarkable – and
germane to this day – his writings on the modes, materials, and mechanisms by which popular
mentalities and behavior are transformed into critical self-consciousness (senso buon) are
more uneven. Notebooks 4, 8, 11, and 12, for example, contain acute observations on the
functions of various types of intellectuals, foregrounding the distinctively pedagogic
relationship of ‘organic intellectuals’ – “intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of
the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the
corset” (Gramsci Q11, §12; 1971, 340). Gramsci also offers striking insights on the role of
schooling and education (Notebook 12), language and normative grammar (Notebook 29),
popular literature (Notebook 21), literary criticism (Notebooks 15 and 23), art (Notebook 23),
theatre (Notebook 4 and pre-prison writings), and journalism (Notebooks 14 and 24) (see, for
example, Gramsci 1985; Fontana 1992).

But as Ranajit Guha suggests in Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial
India, his seminal examination of rural rebellions, jacqueries, and revolts under British rule,
Gramsci’s ideas, while immensely fertile, must be extended if they are to supply an adequate
explanatory framework for understanding how and why popular uprisings unfolded in the
manner they did. Here we argue for a further extension not only of Gramsci, but also Guha.
Specifically, we contend that it is impossible to explain the long history of uprisings in Thabang
and the success of the Maoist insurgency that followed without close attention to the vital
ideological function of extended family and kin structures, and to the political work of memory
these enabled. While such peasant structures have generally been viewed by suspicion in the
Left\textsuperscript{14}, as conservative historical forms that impede the development of revolutionary consciousness, in Nepal they served as networks of transmission for an emerging, counter-historical, commonsense.\textsuperscript{15}

Family and kin networks in Thabang operated as political conduits \textit{first as circuits of intra-generational solidarity lubricated by the social rituals and relations of affect that accompany gatherings of extended families; and second, as inter-generational mechanisms of interpellation that ensured, in one instance after another, that several generations of the same family were ideologically aligned:} son and daughter to father and mother, niece and nephew to uncle and aunt, grandchild to grandfather, and so on.

\textbf{EXAMPLE 1.} Purna Bahadur Roka, 57 years of age, has been active in Thabang politics since the 1970s when he joined a political group led by Barman Budha, along with close and extended kin. His interest in Barman’s group sparked “when my parents explained to us about their hard lives and daily struggles.” Purna now lives with three generations of rebels: his father and mother who rebelled against Thabang’s mukhiya, Khrishna Jhakri, in the 1950s; his own generation that fought against the brewery and other forms of imposition from the 1970s onward; and a third generation comprising his children, his siblings’ children, as well as the children of cousin brothers and sisters, who became young fighters in the Maoist insurgency.

Their histories of involvement are illuminating. Purna’s parents, now in their late 80s, were sheepherders, who came to understand their exploitation by the mukhiya via Barman Budha and his compatriots. Barman, it turns out, is related to Purna who has two brothers, both active in the Communist Party, and imprisoned multiple times. The brothers’ wives
belong to women’s groups loosely affiliated to the Party, and their children are active in their 
school’s student union. Purna’s son teaches in a local school and his daughter is a trainer for a 
local literacy program. “I grew up hearing about movements in Thabang from the time I was in 
the lap of my parents,” laughs Purna’s daughter. Purna’s sister led numerous women’s 
agitations in Thabang in the 1980s. She was shot dead by the police in 1996.

**EXAMPLE 2.** Sisters and their respective families maintain close ties in Magar 
communities. Purna’s mother had two sisters, who in turn had five and seven children 
respectively, all residents of Thabang. Of these twelve children, five assumed active leadership 
roles in various uprisings and one of them – Santosh Budha – became Member of Parliament 
in 2008. The remaining seven children were varyingly active in local organizing. Now their 
children (Purna’s aunts’ grandchildren) are all active members of the People’s Liberation Army 
(PLA), the armed wing of the Maoist Party. According to Santosh: “Family was the backbone of 
our organizing and the most practical place to discuss ideas, what makes sense to us and 
where we should be heading… Due to our extended family structure and cohesiveness I never 
had to face famine or shortages of help in running family matters while I was in the 
movement. There were always some family members available to produce grain and look after 
household matters even though many of us were in and out frequently.”

Santosh’s extended family consists of 17 members. Three of the children are in the PLA 
and three sisters are members of Jana Commune, a cooperative settlement in Thabang 
established by the Maoist Party. Santosh’s entire family is connected to Barman and Purna: 
Barman is uncle to Santosh’s mother and Purna is his maternal first cousin.
Comrade Lal is the husband of Purna’s sister-in-law. He fits the description of a peasant intellectual, and has been working with the Maoists on rural infrastructure development plans for Thabang. He confesses that, “I was never in contact with people who are organizers before I got married. After marriage I came in contact with this family...and in a few years time, without knowing how, I was already a part of movements in Thabang. I come from another village, but later migrated here for this reason.”

Gramsci recurrently invokes geographic fragmentation as a factor that impedes political unification of peasants. Ranajit Guha, acutely cognizant of this issue, attempts to circumvent it by highlighting the ‘verbal and nonverbal means’ by which peasant and tribal insurgencies spread. His analysis poignantly depicts the drum, the flute, and the buffalo horn as ‘instruments most used for the aural transmission of insurgency,’ their effectiveness rooted in their capacity to establish ‘semiotic correspondence... between labour and insurgency’ (Guha 1983: 228-229). He also highlights the use of visuals signs as ‘nonverbal transmitters used for the propagation of insurgency” (ibid: 233). Guha’s perceptive analysis of varied modes of transmission allows him to debunk elite representations of peasant uprisings as ‘spontaneous’, ‘contagious’, ‘infectious’ or ‘preconcerted’.

Even so, neither Guha nor Gramsci substantively examine family and kin networks as material apparatuses of organizing and ideological transmission in peasant societies. The thickness of these networks and their imperative organizational function is evident from the case of Purna Bahadur Roka’s family. Purna recalls that, “Extended family members used to bring their sheep to high altitude pastures jointly, and every evening we would discuss new
ideas, stories about revolution in China, peasant movements in India and possibilities of doing new things in Thabang. And that was the case in every big family because families were connected with other families. That was the best way to spread what was happening within and beyond the family.” He also pointed out that, “When something happens in the community all members of the family gather in the mulghar [the house of the head of the family, usually the eldest person: in Purna’s case, his parents’ house] to decide how we should get involved in the situation. This could happen every day or sometimes every month, but family gatherings at every festival were mandatory.”

How did these kin and extended family structures function politically in Thabang’s uprisings? Most obviously, they furnished secure channels of communication that were able to evade state surveillance and mitigate the physical barriers of geography. They were sites of interpellation. Less visibly, they provided a way to be-in-common by connecting particular disruptions, humiliations, livelihood struggles, and sentiments of individual family members into a shared narrative of state tyranny. By reinforcing an ethos of mutuality and collective provisioning at regular intervals they supplied the material substrate for “organic cohesion in which feeling-passion becomes understanding and thence knowledge (not mechanically but in a way that is alive)” (Gramsci Q11, §67; 1971: 418). Finally, they joined history, matter and individuals into an empirical whole, giving concrete bases to new ideas – a far more effective catalyst for the different commonsense that was to emerge in Thabang than the pieties of Marxist orthodoxy, which were common to some Left intellectuals in Kathmandu. The
revolution in commonsense formed in activity and chiselled by years of political praxis, arrived for Thabang’s rebels clothed in familiar idioms rather than foreign abstractions.

Memory did important work in this regard, linking the present to the past – or more exactly, rendering the past for the present as repetition with difference. In its retelling memory gathered force as the cement of society, binding generations vertically and horizontally,. The contemporary history of Thabang is of uprisings stacked one top of the other like geologic deposits and stretched across four generations, a story – even more, a place identity – that is ever alive for its rebels. Purna Bahadur Roka displays acute awareness of memory-work when he says: “We learned what happened to our families and communities in the past from our ancestors, and now we do the same for our siblings. We recite events constantly, every day, every month. Whenever we are together we talk about our history and our responsibility for the future.” The memorialized past insinuates itself into everyday tasks such as feeding cattle and pigs, taking sheep to pasture, weeding, collecting fodder, cooking, and washing. It seeps into after dinner conversations, school functions, cultural festivals, and bazaar gossip. It is the silent guest when visitors from Kathmandu and elsewhere are invited to dinner, joining Thabang to events in the outside world and hurling its lore into a wider universe of revolutionary discourse.

**Conclusion**

Once described by Eric Hobsbawm as ‘par excellence the philosopher of political praxis’, Gramsci was deeply mindful of the ‘peasant question’ – which was, in Friedrich Engels’
paradigmatic formulation, how to enrol a conservative peasantry for a proletarian revolution led by urban working-classes. Like V.I. Lenin before him, Gramsci recognized that a politically effective class alliance cantered about working-class radicalism and unity could not be taken for granted merely because a certain deterministic Marxist orthodoxy proclaimed it. Neither the class alliance, nor working-class radicalism, nor working-class unity was preordained. It was the task of political praxis to produce these, which meant that Marxist intellectuals would have to understand and engage, rather than dismiss or be diffident toward, peasant culture and consciousness.

Politically, this implies that popular consciousness is the lived ideology of the masses that any group or party must accept as a point of departure if it is to forge a ‘historical bloc’ and achieve ‘ethico-political hegemony’ in civil society and state. Intellectually, it prods scholars and activists to recognize spaces of subaltern politics whose forms of mobilization, organization and operation differ from and are relatively independent of elite modes of politics. Critical to note here is the grammar of geography that saturates terms like ‘subaltern’ and ‘hegemony,’ keywords in Gramsci’s political arsenal.

The themes pioneered by Gramsci and extended by English cultural Marxism were repeated with difference in the first volume of Subaltern Studies, in Ranajit Guha’s now-canonical essay on subaltern historiography. In staking out as this alternative historiography’s point of departure the ‘structural dichotomy’ that has differentiated elite politics from subaltern politics Guha declared that there “were vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into [the colonial or nationalist bourgeoisie’s]
hegemony.... Such dichotomy did not, however, mean that these two domains were
ermetically sealed off from each and there was no contact between them. On the contrary,
there was a great deal of overlap arising precisely from the effort made from time to time by
the more advanced elements among the indigenous elite, especially the bourgeoisie, to
integrate them” (Guha 1982: 5). Guha’s manifesto anticipates the many theoretical and
methodological challenges of bringing Gramsci to the margins. Via forays into the micro-
history of Thabang, one of the formative sites of Nepal’s Maoist revolution, we have
attempted to show how Gramsci’s ideas remain deeply relevant to understanding political
transformations at the margin; but also how interceding with geography can extend their
analytical purchase.

We suggest that Nepal’s Maoist revolution is a retrospective unity, composed of and
enabled by diverse agrarian uprisings with deep histories. Most important among these are
the wave of uprisings in the village of Thabang, in Rolpa district of western Nepal. Held
together by vertical and horizontal affiliations of family and kinship, Thabang’s rebellions show
how peasant movements can overcome the constraints of geography. And more powerfully,
how geography can be mobilized for politics, with high pastures and humble kitchens
becoming birthplaces of solidarity and struggle.
References


Notes

1 Interviewed by Dinesh Paudel on June 12, 2010 in Thabang.

2 Interviewed by Dinesh Paudel on January 19, 2011 in Dang district.


9 Although men are nominally the heads of households in the Magar community, women occupy a powerful role in overseeing household-level economic activities.

11 From a speech by Comrade Prachanda, Chairperson, CPN (Maoist), at a public event in Thabang on February 16, 2011 to mark the 16th anniversary of the start of the Maoist revolutionary war in Nepal.

12 Interviewed by Dinesh Paudel on February 15, 2011.


15 We desist from terming the new commonsense “counter-hegemonic” because we believe that Ranajit Guha’s diagnosis of British rule in India as a case of “dominance without hegemony” applies equally well to the history of Thakuri, Shah and then Rana rule in Nepal.