

Gellner, David N. (ed.): *Varieties of Activist Experience. Civil Society in South Asia.* Delhi: Sage Publications India, 2010. 291 pp. ISBN 978-81-321-0450-6. (Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action, 3) Price: £ 39.99

Very many anthropologists have, long since, turned their attention away from what David Gellner and M. B. Karki refer to in this book as “traditional aspects of culture,” to focus rather on matters of contemporary politics and social change. The book under review here, one of the products of a European Commission funded project on “The (Micro) Politics of Democratisation. European South-Asian Exchanges on Governance, Conflict, and Civic Action,” is a contribution to the mounting anthropological literature on the themes of democracy and civil society. Its focus is, exactly as the main title says, on those who are labeled – and who often label themselves – as “activists.” And the intention seems to have been to interrogate the relations, in South Asia, of “activism” and what may be designated as “civil society,” which are held by Gellner to “belong to the same social field, despite the fact that those who are happy with one kind of terminology may reject the other” (3). Gellner tells us in his introduction to this collection of essays that contributors were asked, in the invitation to the conference on which it is based, to address the questions of “whether activists were beginning to form a new class [which seems a distinctly odd question, prompting one to question the use here of the idea of “class”], whether there are particular patterns of recruitment to activist circles, and whether there were recognizable types of activists or stages of activist development” (2). What answers have the contributors given to these questions? The reader might reasonably expect that the book will have a certain thematic integrity arising from them.

The five chapters in the first half of the book are about political activists. Anne de Sales recounts “The Biography of a Magar Communist” from the hills of Nepal, and Sara Shneiderman the story of the politicization of two eastern districts of the country by communists. The two articles make for compelling reading and they stand as a significant contribution to the recent political history of Nepal. They are case studies, however, and such answers as they give to the key questions that Gellner laid out are consequently limited. Both articles raise the important question of the relationships between the political mobilizations of communists in Nepal, and of mobilizations around ethnicity. They point out that Nepal’s Maoists have succeeded in manipulating ethnic discourse in a way that Nepali communists specifically did not in the past – even if the Maoists still have in view the objective of establishing equal citizenship. It appears from the articles that with the exception of some Magars, like de Sales’ Barman Budha Magar, the leading left wing political activists of Nepal continue to come very largely from upper caste backgrounds. And Shneiderman’s principal theme is that communist cadres, influenced in part by “internalized class and caste prejudices ... saw themselves as part of a civilizing mission to create modern, national Nepalis” (48). Gellner, in his introduction, brings this point out as a central theme in the collection as a whole, point-

ing to activists’ common commitments to a developmentalist ideology and to their “role in moulding the conceptual framework of modernity” (8).

The third article on Nepal in the first section of the book, by Gellner himself with Karki, gives an account of a major survey that they undertook of activists in the country. Though it is methodologically quite interesting it seems unfortunate that, as the authors admit, “we have not been able to analyse the data with sufficient rigour” (142) to be able to conclude very much at all. The definition that they used of an “activist,” too, seems somewhat problematic, as Celayne Heaton Shrestha points out later in her chapter in the book. Gellner and Karki used the definition: “any person belonging either to the district-level or national-level committee of an organization dedicated to ends of a non-economic sort” (136) – which, as Heaton Shrestha says, can reasonably be claimed by many NGO workers who are seen by others as being no more than employees of service-delivery organizations.

The remaining two chapters on political activism are by Siripala Hettige on “Youth and Political Engagement in Sri Lanka,” and by Stefanie Strulik on the mobilization of women to participate in local political institutions in India. Hettige, more clearly than other contributors, addresses the framing questions about the recruitment and social backgrounds of political activists, concentrating on those who are active in the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which was responsible for insurgencies against the Sri Lankan government first in 1971 and then again in the 1980s. The cadres both of the JVP, and of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), are young people from relatively disadvantaged rural backgrounds, who have been educated, not very well, only in Sinhala or in Tamil, and who consequently find themselves excluded from the better jobs to which many of them aspire in the liberalized economy of Sri Lanka. Hettige tells us little, however, about the leadership of these organizations, that might have permitted a comparison with what Shneiderman has to say about communist leaders in Nepal. Strulik’s chapter is a thoughtful one that points to the conventional understanding of “mobilization” as a top down approach, and shows that “for the case of rural India there is no mobilization that can be disentangled from kinship or caste relations and their particularistic loyalties and identity politics” (123). This is hardly a surprising argument, of course, and it is one that resonates with the accounts given by de Sales and Shneiderman.

The second part of the book is mainly about NGOs. David Lewis, in what is analytically the most interesting chapter of the whole book, provides an account of what he calls a “troubled episode” in the relations of government and NGOs in Bangladesh, when the then Bangladesh Nationalist Party government acted against a group of NGOs including the well-known organization called Proshika. Based on his analysis of the episode, Lewis draws attention to the uses of the “Three Sector Model” – of “state,” “market,” and “civil society” – that underpins the “good governance” agenda of international development institutions, in defining and redefining boundaries as part of the “process of the overall organization of neo-liberal aid

and governance” (176). The key point that emerges from the chapter, however, in regard to the framing themes that Gellner laid out – though, again, an unsurprising one – is that “NGOs may act as organizational spaces for activism, but they also present spaces into which governmental power can be projected” (176). The same point seems to emerge from Heaton Shrestha’s account of NGOs in Nepal in the 1990s, even if the state in Nepal was less effective in regard to the disciplining of activism. Both articles emphasize the significance of the ways in which boundaries between different spheres are drawn, and of their permeability.

The other two chapters in the second part of the book are an interesting historical account by Arjun Guneratne of the conservation movement in Sri Lanka, and of the role of the urban middle class in it, and an article by William F. Fisher that draws particularly on his research experience amongst civil society organizations operating in transnational arenas such as that of the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004. Surprisingly, Fisher says that he finds the term “civil society” to carry very little analytical meaning – whereas I believe that many scholars would argue that though it is a very much contested term it is one that is analytically profound. Still, Fisher’s core argument that civil society “is best understood as a fragmented and politically contested realm” (250) is one that is widely accepted, and his focus on the networks and alliances between organizations operating at different levels opens up an important perspective.

The book is not only about about “varieties of activist experience” but also – as is so often the way with such edited collections – distinctly varied in substance and style. Gellner struggles in his “Introduction” to bring coherence to the whole. This perhaps reflects the possibility that the questions that were set to frame it are not, actually, very interesting ones. The chapters stand in themselves and will be found of value by those who are interested in, variously, the history of communism in Nepal, youth and politics in Sri Lanka, women’s roles in India’s panchayats, and the relations of South Asian states and NGOs. Broader arguments, however, about civil society in South Asia, and about the relations of modernizing projects and the particularistic loyalties on which they commonly draw, remain elusive.

John Harriss

Gokalp, Altan : *Têtes rouges et bouches noires et autres écrits.* Paris : CNRS Editions, 2011. 542 pp. ISBN 978-2-271-07158-3. Prix : € 29.00

Mit diesem Buch haben François Georgeon und Timour Muhidine dem im Jahre 2010 verstorbenen Ethnologen, Altan Gokalp, ein Denkmal setzen wollen, indem die Mehrheit seiner seit den 70er Jahren veröffentlichten Texte erstmals in einem Werk vereint und somit einem breiteren Publikum postum zugänglich gemacht wird. Dem Buch geht ein fundiertes Vorwort von Pierre Bonte voraus (ix–xxiii), in dem Gokalps Forschungsarbeiten zur Ethnologie der Türkei und des Nahen und Mittleren Ostens kontextualisiert und deren Relevanz für die heutige Forschung in der Region aufgezeigt wird. Auch in der kur-

zen Einleitung der beiden Herausgeber werden Gokalps Qualitäten als Wissenschaftler, Lehrer und Mensch noch einmal hervorgehoben.

Das Buch ist in drei Teile gegliedert. Den ersten Teil nimmt ein Wiederabdruck von Gokalps längst vergriffener Dissertation “*Têtes rouges et bouches noires*” ein, der auch der Titel des vorliegenden Bandes entlehnt ist. Hierbei handelt es sich um eine klassische Dorfstudie, bei der erstmals die in der Türkei lebende, zu den Aleviten gehörige turkmenische Gruppe der Çepni (Dorf Söfular) in den Blick genommen wird, die von sunnitischer Seite abwertend zu den sog. Kızılbaş, Rotschöpfen, gerechnet wurden.

Den Schwerpunkt von Gokalps Dissertation bildet eine Analyse der sozialen Organisation der Çepni, wobei der Autor aufzeigt, wie sich soziale Klassifikationen, segmentäre Strukturen, aber auch Heiratspräferenzen aufgrund historischer und politischer Veränderungen gewandelt haben. Ausgehend von der Annahme, dass die Verwandtschaftsterminologie der Çepni anatolischen Ursprungs sei, später jedoch von arabischen und persischen Begriffen durchdrungen wurde, geht es dem Autor um die Rekonstruktion dieses anatolischen Protosystems, das aus älteren anatolischen Quellen (Sammlung von Redewendungen, etc.) wie dem “*Söz Derleme Dergisi*” gewonnen wird (80). Im Kontext seiner Untersuchung des Heiratsystems geht es vor allem um eine Erklärung des Phänomens, das unter den Çepni gleich viele MBD- und FBD-Heiraten geschlossen werden. Gokalp kommt hierbei zu dem Schluss, dass die MBD-Heirat einem “turco-mongolischen Ideal” entspräche, welches jedoch im Zuge der Islamisierung und der damit verbundenen Idealisierung der Heirat zwischen Muhammads Tochter Fatima und Ali in den Hintergrund verdrängt und langfristig dem Wert einer “*mariage canonique musulman*” (117) untergeordnet wurde. Dieser letzte Begriff – obwohl in der Ethnologie des Nahen und Mittleren Ostens häufig verwendet (“islamische Heirat”, “arabische Heirat” etc.) – ist jedoch überaus problematisch, da die FBD-Heirat in den islamischen Hauptquellen nirgendwo explizit als ideale Heiratsform ausgewiesen wird. Hier deutet sich bereits ein Motiv an, das sich durch Gokalps gesamtes Schrifttum wie ein roter Faden zieht, eine Idealisierung der “ursprünglichen” turco-mongolischen Vergangenheit und Sprache (z. B. S. 80), der gegenüber das Osmanische Reich und der spätere türkische Nationalstaat, aber auch die damit einhergehende Formalisierung des Islam als kulturelles Verfallsgeschehen gedeutet werden. Im abschließenden Kapitel setzt sich Gokalp mit einigen religiösen Vorstellungen und Praktiken der Kızılbaş-Aleviten auseinander, darunter das *bâtin/zâhîr*-Konzept, die geheime Zahlenlehre (175–202), sowie das *ayîn-i cem*- und Initiationsritual (203–218). Vor allem die Daten im Bereich der Religion sind bis heute von hoher Relevanz.

Im zweiten Teil des Bandes finden sich mehrere bereits veröffentlichte Artikel, die Gokalp noch zu Lebzeiten ursprünglich zu einem Buch zusammenfügen wollte. Sie sind hier nunmehr unter dem Obertitel “*De l’animisme à l’Islam populaire. L’univers symbolique des Turcs*” versammelt und fokussieren auf dem Spannungsfeld zwi-