The separatist conflict in Sri Lanka: Terrorism, ethnicity, political economy, and The identity politics of peacebuilding: Civil society in war-torn Sri Lanka

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Identity politics, peacebuilding and foreign involvement in Sri Lanka


Paradoxically, attempts to transform the ethno-nationalism associated with many armed conflicts may inadvertently strengthen rather than accommodate exclusivist identities. That is the pivotal dilemma of the two books reviewed here. In line with the dominant literature, both authors debunk the ‘ethnic’ conceptualisation of the conflict in Sri Lanka; ethnic identities are seen as a product of contestation, rather than a cause. Peacebuilding efforts typically try to nurture coexistence between Sri Lanka’s main ethnic groups – Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim – and address the grievances of each group, but by doing so, they reify and reinforce these categories. Similarly, political solutions that divide the land according to where people ‘belong’ risk buying into the ‘primordial logic’ of ‘given’ ethnic identities as well as the traditional homeland claims and rights discourses that come along with it.

Both Camilla Orjuela and Asoka Bandarage place particular emphasis on foreign involvement with identity politics. This raises numerous problems, including questions around sovereignty and the fact that foreign support to local organisations may in fact de-legitimize rather than bolster their interventions. Moreover, peacebuilding programmes run the risk of displacing responsibility from those who generate injustice and insecurity to the people suffering the consequences: the poor farmers who are to be instructed on inter-ethnic
understanding and non-violence.

Both publications are very timely. Questions of identity politics and foreign engagement with it are acutely relevant and controversial in Sri Lanka today. With the demise of the Norwegian facilitated peace process between the government and the Tamil separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the subsequent military offensive, a humanitarian tragedy unfolded. At the time of writing, the government emerged victorious, but future prospects are as volatile as ever. The government has accused foreign actors that do not adhere to its version of peace-through-war – be they NGOs, the UN, or foreign states – of terrorist sympathies and interference with sovereign affairs. It presented its operations as a ‘humanitarian’ offensive and congratulated itself with rooting out ‘terrorism’ and releasing Tamil civilians from ‘LTTE clutches’. And it does not fail to underline, somewhat triumphantly, that Western powers have failed to do just that, elsewhere in the world.

However successful in military terms, the government offensive has compromised future prospects in major ways. The humanitarian tragedy has further alienated large groups of people, nationalist propaganda has gridlocked the government against political compromise, and the ever unruly electorate is expected to remind the government of the deplorable state of the economy soon. How will the government manage to resolve the identity issues and ethnic nationalisms now that the smoke of the battlefield starts to clear? And what role will there be for foreign involvement in peacebuilding and reconstruction when the government needs the support of the donors and organisations it has treated with hostility?

Both Orjuela and Bandarage look back, rather than forward, but their analyses help us anticipate and understand what may come, by underlining the fundamental problems of the ‘peacebuilding industry’. Bandarage’s *Separatist conflict in Sri Lanka* comprises a detailed historical review of the conflict with a particular focus on the forces that shaped the form and
content of ethnicity. Her perusal of primary and secondary literature highlights the interaction between domestic, regional and international factors and she argues that scholars and peacebuilders have reinforced the ethnic logic of the conflict. The Indian intervention in the 1980s, the Norwegian facilitated talks from 2002 onwards and NGO interventions throughout have propagated solutions based on self-determination, relative autonomy and federalism. And these, Bandarage contends, embrace the false idea of a Tamil ethnic genealogy and a traditional Tamil homeland. The book accuses the liberal discourse that informs international conduct of appeasing terrorism and ethnic polarization in the name of reconciliation. She criticises academic analysis for apportioning the primary blame of the conflict to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, whilst being apologetic towards Tamil nationalism. Bandarage’s book thus reads like a tribute to the imaginary, even nonsensical, nature of ethno-nationalism in general, but Tamil nationalism in particular.

She adequately highlights the flaws in the ethnic discourse: the major divisions within each ethnic group, the selective reading of history, and the fact that it was the anxiety of privileged elites, rather than animosity between ordinary Tamils and Sinhalese, that gave rise to the militancy. None of this will really surprise the reader, however, and that brings us to a major weakness of Bandarage’s account. She barely acknowledges the existing literature on identity politics in Sri Lanka. The rationale of the book hinges on her repeated claim that scholars have conceptualised the war either as a terrorist problem or a product of primordial ethnic hatreds. This observation remains largely un referenced, however, and ignores a rather large number of publications by both Sri Lankan and foreign authors that highlight the constructed nature of identity and its connections to discursive power, political dynamics and state pathologies. Purely primordial or terrorist interpretations of the conflict are in fact rarely found in internationally published books and journals. The author thus appears to be fighting a self-made straw man.
Bandarage grapples with the common challenges of discursive analysis: when one argues ethno-nationalist interpretations are in fact constructed interpretations, how does one’s own analysis escape the judgement of being just another discourse? She introduces her argument as a ‘historically-based social structure analysis’ (7), as if the political and archaeological battlefield that Sri Lanka’s history is provides some sort of neutral empirical ground for understanding the conflict. Whilst her review of modern Sri Lankan history is rich and worthwhile reading, it is obviously not a ‘view from nowhere’ and it does not substantiate her conclusion that a unitary state and ‘democratic politics’ are the solution. Self-determination, she argues, is a right of states, not of peoples and it is through the state that ethno-nationalism should be prevented from threatening the ‘inherent ecological unity and integrity of the resplendent island of Sri Lanka’ (223).

Logically, the book is highly critical of ‘the responsibility to protect’ and foreign involvement with Sri Lanka. In one of her more critical passages, she acknowledges that ‘there is legitimate concern that the government’s war on terror is begetting state terror’ (209), but she discards foreign criticism along the same lines as disingenuous and self-interested. What those interests precisely are remains somewhat ambiguous, however. The section discussing Norwegian involvement with the peace talks mentions Norway’s own separatist struggle from Sweden, theories that Norway is an agent of the Washington Consensus and allegations that the Norwegian military provided secret support to the LTTE. Bandarage tacitly mentions the various criticisms, but a plausible and coherent story of why Norway did what it did remains absent. The NGO sector is reduced to a biased elite that is infiltrated by the LTTE. Meanwhile, she argues the entire international community is driven by particularistic economic interests. Again, the author elaborately cites the various critics, without taking a clear stance herself. Without explicitly endorsing the claims made, she simply posits: ‘The argument here is that political disintegration creates more markets,
thereby allowing greater external political control of local societies.’ (205) In the last pages, where Bandarage presents a glimmer of her own ideas on resolving the conflict, she confirms her allegiance to these critics. She argues for a ‘transformation of the dominant model of economic growth and its leading sector, the arms trade.’ (222)

There is ample reason for a critical review of international involvement with a country like Sri Lanka, but while Bandarage asks the right questions, she tends to overstate her answers. Unfounded allegations and documented critiques concerning international dogmas, policies and practices are not distinguished. It is thus questionable whether her book will bolster or ridicule critical reflection. In fact, in view of the numerous unsubstantiated arguments and disconnects with the existing literature – both on Sri Lanka and more widely on international involvement with armed conflict – it is surprising that the book passed the critical scrutiny of Routledge’s review process.

The second book, Orjuela’s *Identity politics of peacebuilding*, consolidates the author’s work on Sri Lankan civil society in relation to the conflict. It builds on an overview of Sri Lanka’s colonial and post-colonial civil society to interrogate the ways in which the various non-state organisations mirror society’s fault lines, ethnically, politically, regionally, class-wise and so on. With reference to wider debates on identity politics in asymmetric situations – she mentions feminism and the black power movement – Orjuela critically questions the conceptual foundations of the peace movement. Cross-ethnic coexistence and multi-culturalism either reconfirm existing categories, or create a new divide: between the wealthy cosmopolitans who transcend communal rifts and the ‘hard line’ ethno-nationalists. Both the peace movement and the hardliners, she candidly observes, propagate peace; the difference lies in the kind of peace and the extent to which violence is accepted as a means to produce it. Grappling with the numerous loopholes of evaluating the impact of the peace movement, she concludes it has failed to address the underlying structures of the war, but has
succeeded in providing alternative discourses and possibilities for political resolution of the conflict.

Orjuela’s book is not revolutionary, but adds a useful and detailed book to the literature on civil society and peacebuilding. It helps adjust the balance towards critical, empirically founded studies and away from the volumes with inspiring anecdotes and reports with the latest policy buzzwords. She highlights the need for detailed contextualised analysis and partially succeeds in providing just that with many detailed field observations and quotes from practitioners. Much of her discussion remains quite generic, though. A detailed study of how ethnic identities are reproduced in various localities and how the peace movement engages with that would have strengthened her argument. Her review of the history of Sri Lankan civil society and the organisations that she studies in detail – the National Peace Council, the Centre for Performing Arts and a cluster of organisations of victimised soldiers and their families – are thorough, but as a result she emphasizes civil society and their activities more strongly than the people and the processes they try to influence.

The two books have been overtaken by developments on the ground, but their relevance carries on into the present. The dramatic shift in the configuration of power heralds a new era for Sri Lanka. Rather than peace and quiet, however, war to peace transitions tend to release additional anxieties and tensions, so-called ‘spoiler’ violence and inflated expectations that are hard to meet. Orjuela’s diagnosis of the peace movement has only become more severe. The lack of political space, the cosmopolitan content of its message and the problems of receiving foreign aid can only be expected to become more problematic. With the alleged collapse of the LTTE, a political power vacuum emerges in Tamil society, but it is more likely to be filled by state-sponsored Tamil paramilitaries like Karuna, Pillayan and Devenanda than by independent civil society organisations. Bandarage on the other hand sees much of her plea met. The revolution of the global political economy she proposes may
not be on the cards, but within Sri Lanka we witness the victory of the unitary state she
vehemently defends. Rather than power sharing or some form of autonomy on the basis of
ethnicity, she applauds democratic politics as the adequate moderator of ethno-
nationalisms. Her plea thus favours the powers that be and bolsters the present government
strategy of military victory and consolidation of political domination. How such a strategy,
let alone the long track record of majoritarian rule, alienation of minority groups, and
continued human rights abuses will dilute ethno-nationalism and promote a sustainable peace
remains a big question however.

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