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The Geography of Warscape

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The Geography of Warscape

BENEDIKT KORF, MICHELLE ENGELER & TOBIAS HAGMANN

Abstract

This article elaborates a heuristic approach to understanding the geography of warscape from a theoretically informed perspective. It argues that agency in protracted civil war emerges at the ambiguous interface of different, competing systems of power and authority. In order to account for the multiple trajectories of threat and opportunity that warscapes offer to different social actors and at different times and places, the article proposes the concept of ‘governable order’, which is derived from a critical review of the literature on ‘social navigation’ and ‘governable space(s)’. The usefulness of combining these three concepts is illustrated by two empirical vignettes. They demonstrate the dynamics of governable spaces in distinct phases of the Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka civil wars. The two cases highlight the temporal and territorial fluidity of governable spaces, which both constrain and enable warscape inhabitants’ agency.

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Introduction

In *Culture in Chaos*, Stephen Lubkemann suggests that most studies dealing with the ‘condition of war’ are split into two camps.¹ Either they emphasize how violence is organized or how warscape inhabitants – the anonymous heroes of ‘ordinary’ men and women – handle this violence.² ‘Warscape’, a concept originally proposed by Carolyn Nordstrom, are landscapes characterized by brutal violence, political volatility, physical insecurity and the disruptions and instabilities that exist in many civil war zones that different social actors navigate through.³ Warscapes are the site of a ‘complex and multi-dimensional agenda of social struggles (...) and life projects’ that take form in a context in which ‘the certainty of uncertainty has become a fundamental reality in the lives of social actors’.⁴ Lubkemann emphasizes that while violence punctuates the lives of warscape inhabitants, it does not continuously script it. Thus, war is not a matter of ‘all terror all the time’.⁵

In their 1995 publication *Fieldwork under fire*, Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom set out a research agenda to study ‘the everyday experiences of people who are victims and perpetrators of violence.’⁶ Nordstrom reminds us that ‘individuals do not make up a generic group of “combatants”, “civilians”, and “casualties” but an endlessly complex set of people and personalities, each of whom has a unique relationship to the war and a unique story to tell’.⁷ At the same time, she suggests, these actors construct ‘social order out of chaos’.⁸ Lubkemann adds that ‘the effects of violence [are] often contradictory, imposing new constraints while providing means for extending agency’.⁹ Inhabiting a warscape is thus not merely a matter of coping with violence, but is deeply entrenched in ‘the pursuit of a complex and multi-dimensional agenda of social struggles,

interpersonal negotiations and life projects'.¹⁰ It is therefore difficult to draw a clear line between the social conditions of war versus those of non-war as social actors continue to struggle throughout both conditions in a peace-to war continuum.¹¹

While we subscribe to Lubkemann's argument above that war is not a matter of 'all terror all the time', we suggest a further qualification: war is not a matter of 'all terror all the time' *all over the place*.¹² In other words, we propose an understanding of warscape that explicitly deals with its inherent geography. We posit that warscapes are not *per se* 'socially unstable places', but differentiated arenas, networks and connections of relational spaces in which distinct human trajectories co-exist.¹³ As social spaces warscapes are always under construction in the sense Doreen Massey alludes to: 'the real import of spatiality is the possibility of multiple narratives.'¹⁴ Indeed, violent conflict can be a threat or an opportunity for those immediately concerned, often at the same time. Whether violence is threatening or offers opportunities depends, however, on the specific spatial and temporal configuration of power, authority and economic flows, which open certain trajectories while foreclosing others.¹⁵ These trajectories may vary in different places and at different times in a given warscape. In other words: violence has ambiguous, often contradictory effects on agency at different times, in different places and for different individuals.

In this paper, we develop a heuristic approach for the study and interpretation of the geography of warscapes. The proposed heuristics are informed by our own fieldwork in conflict ridden parts of Sri Lanka, Guinea and Ethiopia. Our objective is a theoretically informed understanding of warscape inhabitants' strategies in contexts of multi-scalar, highly contested and spatially differentiated systems of authority and power. For this

purpose we combine two arguments that have so far been discussed separately; Michel de Certeau's distinction between tactics and strategies and its adoption in the study of warscapes by political anthropologists on the one hand, and geographer Michael Watts' work on governable spaces on the other hand. We argue that, in combination, the concepts of 'social navigation', 'governable spaces' and 'governable orders' are particularly well suited to scrutinize warscapes in which violent competition over authority creates multiple trajectories of threat and opportunity and makes these highly malleable in space and time. Our heuristic framework provides a starting point for understanding the spatial dimensions of war, which we consider both as a 'violent condition' and a 'social condition'.¹⁶ The article is divided into three sections. The following section critically reviews and (partly) reformulates the concepts that are at the core of our framework. Subsequently, two empirical vignettes from the Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka civil war illustrate the usefulness of our proposed heuristics in understanding the geography of warscape. Using own field material and other authors' ethnographies enables us to demonstrate the significance of these concepts in different settings. Finally, we conclude by drawing attention to the inherently *geographic* nature of protracted violent conflict and the agency of warscape inhabitants.

Understanding the geography of warscape

'No matter how brute the force applied to subjugate a people, local-level behaviours arise to subvert the hold violence exerts on a population' writes Nordstrom.¹⁷ This resonates with our starting proposition that actors, including the subaltern or the weak, have room for manoeuvre within warscapes. In order to understand this room for manoeuvre it is

helpful to adapt an actor-oriented perspective that accounts for how individuals navigate through difficult terrains of violence and conflict and to consider the different and flexible roles that these individuals adapt and display in their everyday practices *in different times and places*. But at the same time, this flexibility is constrained and refined by a system of authority and power that delimits the agency of warscape inhabitants. In this section, we develop a tentative heuristics that brings two sets of arguments into conceptual conversation: Michel de Certeau's tactic-strategy distinction and its adoption in study of warscapes and Michael Watts' work on governable spaces. Although we are critical of the dichotomy made between tactics and strategies, we employ Vigh's social navigation metaphor and fuse it with a spatially more explicit conceptualisation of Watts' governable spaces. The ensuing theoretical detour examines the genealogy of and the relations between the three concepts of 'social navigation', 'governable spaces' and 'governable orders', which we consider of critical importance for the study of the geography of a warscape.

From tactics/strategies to social navigation

De Certeau's sociology of the everyday and his distinction between strategies and tactics are a useful starting point for understanding individuals' room for manoeuvre in a warscape. De Certeau suggests that the everyday life of 'making do' is an art, an 'art of doing' by help of which individuals create, produce, and invent their lives. He particularly looks at how ordinary individuals operate within and yet against a dominant culture. In his words

‘the goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline”. Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of consumers compose the network of an antidiscipline which is the subject of this book’.¹⁸

De Certeau strongly rejects the passivity and determinism, which he discerns and criticizes in Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of the social actor. While the latter insists on the socially stratified character of cultural practices, de Certeau views cultural practices as largely gratuitous, a means of circumventing power rather than bidding for it.¹⁹

Analytically, de Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategies is problematic, though, as it bears the danger of reproducing a dichotomy between domination and resistance that appear fixed in space and time. Massey rightly criticizes that de Certeau conceives of power in society as a monolithic order, which the tactics of the weak try to circumvent.²⁰ Massey underlines that the coherence of ‘the powerful’ should not be overestimated and neither should the potential power of ‘the weak’ be minimized. She goes on to argue that de Certeau implicitly assimilates strategy with ‘place’ while tactics depend on ‘time’. In this reading, space appears as fixed, while time allows dynamism. Tactics allow navigating around the powers of place in order to come by over time. Massey’s alternative conception of space holds that space is an open and ongoing production; space is an event, not a static closure and therefore, open to change.²¹ In line with Massey’s suggestions, Nordstrom suggests in *Shadows of War* that we need to understand the convoluted networks of different actors in the context of violence and conflict and how they are reshuffled in space and time.²²

Most contemporary ethnographers of violence and conflict tend to consider the elbow room of ordinary people in warscapes as confined to tactical rather than strategic agency. Alcinda Honwana for example describes the tactical agency that child soldiers in Mozambique's former civil war disposed off.²³ Mats Utas makes a similar point in his analysis of a Liberian woman's civil war experiences when he suggests that 'tactic agency forms part of the trajectories of the weak'.²⁴ As people cope with and adjust to political disorder, violence and domination of the powerful, their agency is reduced to tactical moves. This argument mirrors James Scott's famous injunction of the 'weapons of the weak', the 'silent', 'hidden' strategies by Malaysian peasants who resist power, but do not transform it.²⁵ This kind of reasoning falls prey to the same criticism that Massey levelled against de Certeau; ethnographies that employ de Certeau's tactics/strategies distinction tend to 'romanticize' tactics as the 'weapons of the weak' who manage to cleverly navigate across and between conflict lines and actors characteristic of warscapes.

Henrik Vigh has criticized this dichotomization of powerful and weak in the warscape literature: 'seeing strategy as acts of the powerful and tactics as acts of the weak disregards the fact that a terrain is an intrinsically multilayered phenomenon containing a multitude of negotiations of power'.²⁶ Vigh proposes the concept of 'social navigation' that 'is able to encompass "instability" and movement in our understanding of action while building on an awareness of both individual will and social forces'.²⁷ Two aspects are central in Vigh's conceptualisation of social navigation. First, it underlines how actors concomitantly steer through their immediate and imagined lifeworld, both in relation to their current placing within a given order and to their imagined future placing. Second, the navigation metaphor grasps how actors behave in relation to other actors, to a given

predominant social order, and to intricate interactions between actors, events and the shifting constellations of these social orders. Social navigation in short ‘is praxis as motion within motion’.²⁸ Navigating in perilous and life-threatening warscapes demands actors to redraw trajectories, strategies and tactics of agency. With increasing navigation experience, these tactics and strategies also become ingrained in specific everyday praxis.

Governable space(s) and governable order(s)

Social navigation is, however, always situated in particular relations of domination and this is where we find Watts’ writings on ‘governable spaces’ useful as it adds the more structural dimension of social order to the question of social navigation and agency.²⁹ Watts’ concept of ‘governable space’ is inspired by Nikolas Rose’s discussion of the spatial dimension of government and authority in Michel Foucault’s writings.³⁰ Rose defines governable space(s) as the ‘modalities in which a real and material governable world is composed, terraformed, and populated’.³¹ Watts further operationalizes the idea of a governable space, which, in his interpretation, ‘necessitate[s] the territorializing of governmental thought and practice’, in short it is a ‘political thought territorialized’.³² In Watts’ reading, governable spaces expand and contract as the result of particular relations of domination that transcend formal spatial categories of the container type. Watts highlights the multiple, dynamic and interrelated forms of real-life power that co-exist at the same time. His account of governable spaces in Nigeria ‘reveals ragged, unstable, perhaps ungovernable, spaces and analytics of government that hardly correspond to the well-oiled machine of disciplinary and biopower’ that some of the Foucauldian derived analysis suggests.³³

While we concur with Watts' analysis of ragged, unstable spaces, we want to suggest that his conceptualization warrants further scrutiny of the inherent spatialities of governable spaces. Watts analyses social conditions and institutional logics as 'social spaces' rather than as the *geography* of violence. His usage of 'governable space(s)' in the Niger Delta conceptualises interrelated systems of power ('space of chieftaincy', 'space of indigeneity', 'space of nationalism') in terms of their simultaneous production, but labels and describes them largely independently in three separate sections that do not elaborate the intricate and convoluted connections between these spaces and their malleability in space and over time.³⁴ Indeed, our endeavour is to understand the configuration, the entanglement and interplay of these multiple 'governable spaces' in a given locality and at a given time, *i.e.* their specific spatialities, as rationales of rule territorialized.

While a social figuration transcends a given locality, the in situ practices of actors do not. We therefore suggest the notion of *governable order*, which is closer to Foucault's understanding of governmentality, to grasp the *rationale* of a system of authority.³⁵ To distinguish the analytics of governable order and governable space, we define a *governable order* as a non-territorial, social figuration of power, norms and rules that transcends spatial scales and whose working hinges on multiple spatial connections, both material and non-material. Governable orders sediment into a specific hierarchy of rules and authoritative powers, varying at different moments in time in a given place and in different places at the same moment in time. Such reading of governable space as an amalgam of multiple, overlapping governable orders resonates with Massey's concept of space as ongoing production.³⁶ In our heuristics, the concept *governable order* denotes

the social figuration of a system of power, norms and rules – i.e. the rationale of an order, while *governable space* describes the spatial configuration of different overlapping governable orders in a specific place and time, i.e. how these orders and their rationales become effective in a particular social condition, place and time.³⁷ In other words, governable spaces are territorialized regimes of co-existing governable orders and neither stable nor rigid. We think that this differentiation is useful to better grasp the dynamics of ‘ragged, unstable, perhaps ungovernable spaces’ that are a defining feature of warscapes.³⁸ This is where Vigh’s navigation metaphor links up with the logic of governable spaces: warscape inhabitants, faced with the ragged, unstable dynamics of multiple systems of authority, navigate through the perilous terrain of a given power topography and at the same time contribute to its re-shaping.

At a given time, different governable orders co-exist at a particular place, each with different sources of normativity, legitimation and coercion (e.g. the state’s order, the order imposed by security forces, the order coercively implemented by rebels or combatants, etc.). These governable orders are not equally formative as they create different moments of inclusion and exclusion of different groups and individuals. The realm of power of each of these orders depends on the degree of their legitimisation in everyday life, the relative political and coercive power of its representatives and their reproduction through social practices. These governable orders exert influence in particular places and moments and with varying specifications for different actors. They thereby act as nodal points of historically and spatially superimposed layers of political authority. Although often oppressive in the context of warscapes, governable orders may be considered as legitimate by certain segments of the population. As the accumulative

outcome of actor strategies and social practices, governable orders are highly sociable, relational and subject to transformation over time.

Empirical vignettes: Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka

We demonstrate the expediency of these three interrelated concepts by applying them to two distinct warscapes that we are familiar with. The first empirical vignette sketches the shifting dynamics of governable spaces in Sierra Leone's civil war that lasted from 1991, when rebels of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) entered the country from the Liberian border, until 2002, when President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah officially declared its end. It draws on a rich ethnographic literature of the Sierra Leone conflict and re-reads this literature in terms of the geography of warscape that it reveals. The Sierra Leone empirical vignette highlights the rise and fall of governable spaces over a longer time period, retracing the emergence and subsequent destabilization of the bush camps in the first half of the 1990s in the south-eastern part of the country. The second empirical vignette comes from Sri Lanka's civil war and here from a particular moment and place: the eastern part of Sri Lanka prior to the ceasefire agreement in 2002. The material from Sri Lanka comes from own field work conducted by one of the authors. This case illustrates the short-term dynamics of governable orders over space and time and how these dynamics produce highly volatile, but relatively stable governable spaces. We use these two empirical vignettes mostly for illustrative purposes: The empirical illustrations are not meant to provide a comprehensive account of either of the two warscapes, nor do we claim that these two short vignettes exhaust the empirical field that can be analysed with our suggested heuristics.

South-eastern Sierra Leone, ca. 1991-1996

In Sierra Leone's civil war, the geography of warscape was most visible in the shifting spatial figurations surrounding the bush camps of the rebel RUF. At the early stages of the civil war between 1991 and 1996, the RUF operated from these bush camps where it also trained and 'ideologized' its cadres and recruits.³⁹ The camps were concentrated in the southeast of Sierra Leone and became spaces of RUF's internal militarization. The bush based fighting was accompanied by the kidnapping of young men and women into sexual, domestic or military servitude. At the same time, the camps attracted civilians who were not considered as RUF recruits, but provided services to the rebels, their wives, husbands and children. The camps' social order was based on strong social and genealogical bonds, which made the distinction between combatant and non-combatant inhabitants highly malleable. Women, for example, could be part of the RUF cadre, become victims of sexual harassment or work successfully in the service sector – sometimes they would experience all of these at the same time. The forests surrounding the bush camps were marked by their own distinctive governable space: while these territories provided some kind of protection against harassment from government troops, they were confined to a regime of intimidation and expropriation that the RUF imposed on the camp inhabitants, which made it difficult to escape from either the camps or the surrounding bush.⁴⁰

But the governable space of the bush camps turned into turmoil when governmental forces started to successfully attack the bush camps after 1996 and penetrated the surrounding territories. The camps and the bush became spaces of risk and uncertainty.

Community organized hunter defence troops, the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) or *kamajor*, scoured the forests. They had been recruited by the government as vigilantes who were more familiar with the forest terrain than regular governmental troops.⁴¹ As a result of these military manoeuvres, a new governable order of violence, intimidation and expropriation emerged that made life for the forest inhabitants very troublesome. Had they accustomed themselves to the governable space that the RUF's bush camp presence had created and enjoyed relative protection from government troops, living in vicinity to RUF bush camps exposed them to risk and increased their vulnerability. The intrusion of the CDF fighters, and thereafter, of government troops into formerly rebel controlled territories created a much more ambivalent situation, resulting in the presence of different belligerent groups, each imposing its own governable order that shifted with their presence and absence in a particular place and time.

Non-combatants and other camp inhabitants who were not RUF cadres left the area in large numbers as they attempted to cut off their ties with the rebels in order to avoid harassment from CDF and government troops. This unsettled the fragile social coexistence that had emerged in the governable space of the camps and the bush prior to the government attacks. Steven Archibal and Paul Richards have argued that in the initial period of the war, the RUF was an insurgent group without strictly authoritarian rules and functioning. Cohesion was maintained through multiple social, ideological and economic bonds and obligations between RUF cadres and the amalgam of camp and nearby bush inhabitants. When the CDF and governmental forces penetrated their territory, RUF's internal unity was destabilized and the organization disintegrated into different factions. Commanders and the rank and file acted increasingly independently from their superiors,

plundering, looting and killing the inhabitants of the areas that they conquered.⁴² In this situation, a highly flexible governable space emerged as a function of the overlapping governable orders of various marauding belligerents that shifted according to their presence or absence. When one RUF group left an area, the next would come sooner or later and their presence was felt even in their absence. Interestingly, when the war ended in 2002, hardly any CDF fighters were demobilized. The hunter defence units seemed to have vanished into thin air.⁴³ Networks and connections that were forged in the civil war had become redundant in peace times and with them the specific ideologies and identities attached to them.

The analysis of the south-eastern Sierra Leonean warscape between 1991 and 1996 illustrates the shifting dynamics of governable spaces over longer time periods and how relatively stable governable orders are reshuffled and reconfigured, creating moments and periods of greater instability and uncertainty. The governable space that emerged around the RUF bush camps in the first phase of the war was a fragile equilibrium held together by the relations that the RUF cadres, the camp inhabitants and the forest dwellers had developed. But this governable space disintegrated into a more ambivalent, less predictable and more violent one with the onset of an 'oligopoly of violence' by belligerents plundering and looting the population.⁴⁴ These belligerents fashioned highly localized governable spaces of coercion, oppression and expropriation that made life for all warscape inhabitants a risky gamble of survival. Finally, the geography of the Sierra Leone civil war was also shaped by the physical terrain within which warscape inhabitants navigated. The bush as a complex terrain outside of the camps was

instrumental for different types of actors, RUF cadres, the CDF, bush inhabitants as a place of refuge, a source of threat and a manoeuvring space in times of instability.

Eastern Sri Lanka, ca. 1999-2002

In Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic east, fifteen years of civil war, inter-ethnic violence, guerrilla tactics and regimes of terror saturated in a political economy of violence and appropriation with multiple co-existing orders and systems of rules towards the end of the 1990s.⁴⁵ During this period, before the ceasefire agreement was signed in 2002, Sri Lanka's east experienced a regime of low-intensity warfare with some territorial pockets held by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), while other territory, mostly the coastal towns and major roads were under control of the government's security forces. Localized battles and small-scale attacks took place regularly. In this situation, one could broadly distinguish four co-existing governable orders: (1) the remnants of the authority of the state apparatus, (2) the LTTE rule, (3) the rulings of the Sri Lankan security forces (often operating outside formal legal rules), and (4) the customary norms of caste, religion and class. These four parallel governable orders were configured very differently in dissimilar places and times, resulting in specific spatial regimes of order, power and coercion or governable space(s).

Bargaining and fighting between combatants over their relative realms of power, both territorially and ideologically, defined the order of rules for peasants, fishermen, women, youngsters, bureaucrats and other people. The power differentials between the combatant groups fluctuated over time and space, and subsequently local governable spaces changed with these shifting power differentials. These variations occurred on

different time scales: for example, heavy fighting could shift the borderline or frontier between territory under government control and territory under LTTE control (in the Sri Lankan context, the former was called ‘cleared’, the latter ‘uncleared’, or not yet cleared, areas). But these frontiers were not fixed impermeable lines. Rather, the LTTE moved across those frontiers during night time when the rebels controlled most of the territory and the Sri Lankan security forces withdrew to their camps.

For a peasant or fisherman, for example, this implied that the rules did not only change with the shifting military battle lines, but the order of rules and the rulers were different during the day when the security forces were in charge and during the night when the LTTE ruled. However, this situation was not of the sort that the peasant could simply switch to two different modes of living and two distinct orders of rule – the day and the night rule. Rather, the predominant governable space consisted of an overlap of these governable orders. They coincided in space and time and their institutional logic persisted, in varying guises, throughout day and night. The rules did not just vanish, but the relative importance of some rules *vis-à-vis* others varied between day and night. When performing an action A during daytime, a peasant had to consider what the implications were for his or her life during night time, or the other way round. For example, if the peasant paid taxes to the LTTE during the night, this was a reasonable thing to do under the order of LTTE rule, but it was a dangerous thing under the order of the military’s rule during the day. When peasants moved to specific places, the governable space changed as well. When peasants living in an uncleared area under LTTE control wanted to sell their agricultural products, they needed to go to market

towns that were located in cleared areas. They passed the frontier line between LTTE rule and military rule, but both rulers interrogated the peasant with suspicion.

In this warscape, farmers, fishermen and local traders developed their own tactics at the interfaces of the different prevailing governable orders.⁴⁶ Muslim traders, for example, were able to navigate between the conflict lines. As they were neither Tamil nor Sinhalese, they could deal with both LTTE and Sinhalese army officers. In many places at the Sri Lankan east coast, Muslim traders gradually established a trade monopoly as they bought produce from Tamil farmers and fishermen, which they managed to transport through a large number of military checkpoints to the markets outside of the war zone. Tamil traders were handicapped in this trade, as they could easily get in trouble at a checkpoint for being suspected as an LTTE spy. But Tamil farmers could also pay back by informing the LTTE on malpractices and unequal market exchanges with Muslim traders who would then be taxed or intimidated by the LTTE at night.⁴⁷

These practices of everyday survival and entrepreneurial activities entailed small opportunisms, the pursuit of self-interest and struggles over resources. ‘Ordinary’ people and combatants each played their role in this everyday geography of the eastern Sri Lankan warscape. The ambiguity of multiple governable orders created uncertainty and fear, while at the same time opening space to resist subordination, oppression, forced deference and humiliation. But often, resistance against a dominant governable order produced new violence and opportunisms, mostly against the ethnic other. With the shifting military dynamics and territorial control, land markets in the patchwork of Tamil and Muslim paddy fields periodically developed patterns of forced sales and unequal exchange.⁴⁸ Sometimes, Muslims sold land at marginal prices to Tamil neighbours, when

they did not feel safe to go to their fields for cultivation (e.g. when the LTTE had the upper hand or when there were lots of fighting incidences). In other cases, Tamils sold land to Muslims. When Tamil-Muslim conflicts emerged, Tamil farmers would harvest the fields of their Muslim neighbours who were afraid to go to their fields and vice versa.

In other places, Sinhalese farmers used the protection by the military to block the flow of irrigation water to Tamil and Muslim tail-enders and used up the water at the expense of the latter. They did so at night time, when it was too dangerous for the irrigation engineers – mostly ethnic Tamils – to come to these places. The latter were also reluctant to stop Sinhalese farmers from blocking channels as Sinhalese army and politicians could easily exert pressure on the Tamil engineers who worked for a Sinhalese dominated state.⁴⁹ One can therefore posit that contrary to Scott's understanding of peasant resistance, where the categories 'good' and 'bad' echo the analytical lens of class struggle, the weapons of the weak in Sri Lanka's warscape of the east were muddier and opaque, located in a twilight of ambiguous and fluid governable spaces.⁵⁰

The Sri Lankan warscape was not confined to the territories of Sri Lanka, but extended into a transnational space of grievances, intimidation and taxation. Well known are the financial flows of Diaspora communities to both their extended families 'at home' and to rebel groups, a prominent example being the LTTE's extraction of war taxes from Tamils living abroad.⁵¹ But these connections also play out in more convoluted ways, influencing governable orders and collective subjectivities. Fear, for example, often results in acceptance of rules even if there is no imminent local threat. People follow rules even though the acts that have created this fear have been conducted in a remote place (and other people have been the victims of it). But their legacy has travelled to

other places and other minds that have not directly experienced it, but have heard about it. Communication, including mouth-to-mouth information, can trigger remote responses, thereby spatially expanding intimidation beyond the place of immediate direct violence or suppression.

The geography of warscape of this particular moment in Sri Lanka's troubled history of violent conflict indicates the high volatility and relative stability of governable spaces. Control was highly volatile over time (day or night), but in a given place the logic of these shifting realignments of power and authority over day and night remained relatively stable. And yet, this relative stability *and* volatility was the sort of configuration that offered warscape inhabitants room for manoeuvre, or navigation, and small opportunistic economic gains in pursuit of one's livelihoods. Arguably, this pattern of governable spaces that had emerged before 2002 did not survive the ceasefire agreement, when a major shift in relative positions among the major conflict parties occurred. The warscape in eastern Sri Lanka changed significantly, became ever more volatile and unstable when in 2004 a split within the LTTE led to competing Tamil militant groups, which eventually led to the expulsion of the LTTE from the east in 2007.⁵²

Conclusion

Watts once wrote that 'violence might be understood as "struggles over geography"' and alluded to 'a geographer's sensitivity to territory, location, to mapping and to the processes of confinement and exclusion'.⁵³ We have suggested in this article that in order to understand the 'condition of war' and the everyday practices of warscape inhabitants, an analysis of such struggles over geography is required. The geography of warscape

emerges out of the complex interplay of competing systems of authority and power that we have called governable orders. While governable orders are essentially rationales of rule, the ordering of these competing orders – how these different rules are hierarchically ordered and experienced in everyday situations – is malleable in different empirical time-spaces, which we have named governable spaces.

The two empirical vignettes that we have taken from Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka were suggestive in this respect. The Sierra Leonean warscape of the mid-1990s exemplifies the shifting dynamics of governable spaces over longer time periods and how the biophysical topography becomes an important parameter in defining places of relative insecurity and security. The bush as the outside space of the RUF camps that once provided some kind of stability became a prime source of threat when the power balance between the fighting parties and accompanying territorial control shifted. In the eastern Sri Lankan warscape before 2002, we illustrated the relative stability and concomitant fluidity of competing governable orders when the battlefield was relatively settled. And yet, such fragile equilibriums can quickly unravel as happened in Sri Lanka's east after the ceasefire agreement, and in particular when a split in the LTTE occurred in 2004.

A number of authors have suggested that civilian, non-combatant, ordinary, often marginalized actors – subsumed as 'the weak' – dispose of tactic agency in warscapes.⁵⁴ We have argued that agency emerges at the ambiguous interface of different governable orders and the territorial and temporal fluidity of governable spaces in warscapes. In other words, an individual's ability to navigate through governable spaces cannot be understood independently of time and place. Ambiguity creates both threats and opportunities, but the implications for navigation may be quite different for an individual

in a particular period and location.⁵⁵ The examples from Sri Lanka (Muslim traders, Sinhalese farmers) indicate this. What at one point is an opportunity, to make business, to pursue a livelihood, can also become a threat (of extortion, of becoming killed) at another point (place and time).

These struggles and life projects of warscape inhabitants take *place*; they are strongly embedded in governable spaces of a given time and in a given locality, they relate to, circumvent and reproduce competing governable orders, and they are part of (local and global) social networks that territorialize in the warscape itself. We have argued that it is useful to analyse the geography of warscape as it reveals the dynamics of ‘ragged, unstable, perhaps ungovernable, spaces’ and indicates the social mechanisms that produce agency, threat and opportunity, stability and instability, security and insecurity in the social condition of war.⁵⁶ In this sense, warscapes can be interpreted as struggles over geography. Indeed, as Edward Said wrote, ‘just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography.’⁵⁷

Notes

This article has navigated through turbulent intellectual terrain from its initial ideas to its final shape. Along the way Jutta Bakonyi, Christine Bichsel, Roland Bleiker, Bart Klem, Carolyn Nordstrom, Tania Murray Li and Lilith Schärer have provided us with critical, incisive and encouraging comments that have influenced our argument.

¹ S Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos. An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

² Important contemporary writings on the organization of violence include G Elwert, 'Markets of violence', in *Dynamics of Violence: Processes of Escalation and De-escalation in Violent Group Conflicts*, G Elwert, S Feuchtwang & D Neubert (eds), Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, pp 85-102; C Cramer, *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries*, Hurst, London, 2006; S Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006; D Keen, *The Economic Functions of Violence in Civil Wars*, London, International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1998; K Schlichte, *In the Shadow of Violence: The Politics of Armed Groups*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2009; C Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003; J Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006. Recent ethnographies of the everyday realities of contemporary civil wars include S Finnström, *Living with Bad Surroundings: War, History, and Everyday Moments in Northern Uganda*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008; A Honwana, *Child Soldiers in Africa*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005; C Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997; A Robben & C Nordstrom (eds), *Fieldwork under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995; M Utas, *Sweet Battlefields: Youth and the Liberian Civil War*. PhD

thesis, Department of Cultural Anthropology, Uppsala University Dissertations in Cultural Anthropology, 2003; H Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War: Youth and Soldering in Guinea-Bissau*, Oxford & New York, Berghahn Books, 2006.

³ Nordstrom attaches a rhizomic quality to warscapes. Nordstrom, *A Different Kind of War Story*, p 78. The ‘scape’ suffix was originally popularized by Arjun Appadurai who coined the terms ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, financescape and ideoscape. ‘Scape’ refers to ‘the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes’, which he conceptually construed to understand how ‘these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part form their own sense of what these landscapes offer’. A Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p 33.

⁴ Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos*, p 13. D Hoffman & S Lubkemann, ‘Warscape ethnography in West Africa and the anthropology of “events”’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78 (2), 2005, pp 315-327.

⁵ Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos*, p 13.

⁶ A Robben & C Nordstrom, ‘The anthropology and ethnography of violence and sociopolitical conflict’, in *Fieldwork under Fire*, p 4.

⁷ C Nordstrom, ‘War on the front lines’, in *Fieldwork under Fire*, p 137.

⁸ *Ibid*, p 145.

⁹ Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos*, p 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 13.

¹¹ P Richards (ed), *No Peace, No War: An Anthropology of Contemporary Armed Conflicts*, Athens, Ohio University Press, 2005.

¹² Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos*, p 13.

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- ¹³ C Greenhouse, 'Altered states, altered lives. Introduction', in *Ethnography in Unstable Places. Everyday Lives in Contexts of Dramatic Political Change*, C Greenhouse, E Mertz & K Warren (eds), Durham, Duke University Press, 2002, pp 1-34.
- ¹⁴ D Massey, *For Space*, London, Sage, 2005, p 7.
- ¹⁵ B Korf, 'War, livelihoods and vulnerability in Sri Lanka', *Development and Change*, 35 (2), 2004, pp 275–295; B Korf & M Engeler, 'Geographien der Gewalt', *Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsgeographie*, 51 (3-4), pp 221-237.
- ¹⁶ Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos*, pp 13-15.
- ¹⁷ Nordstrom, 'War on the front lines', p 143.
- ¹⁸ 'Ruses' are the tactics to which the less powerless resort to withstand domination. M de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984, p xv.
- ¹⁹ P Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990.
- ²⁰ Massey, *For Space*, p 45.
- ²¹ *Ibid*, p 55.
- ²² C Nordstrom, *Shadows of War: Violence, Power, and International Profiteering in the Twenty-First Century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004.
- ²³ A Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty. Child-Soldiers as Interstitial and Tactical Agents', in *Makers and Breakers. Children and Youth in Postcolonial Africa*, A Honwana & F de Boek (eds), Oxford, James Currey, 2005, pp 31-52.
- ²⁴ M Utas, 'Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering. Tactic agency in a young woman's social navigation of the Liberian war zone', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 78 (2), 2005, p 407.
- ²⁵ J Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.
- ²⁶ Vigh, *Navigating Terrains of War*, p 135.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p 237f.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p 236.

²⁹ M Watts, 'Development and governmentality', *Singapur Journal of Tropical Geography*, 24 (1), 2003, pp 6-34; M Watts, 'Antinomies of community: some thoughts on geography, resources and empire', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 29 (2), 2004, 195-216.

³⁰ N Rose, *Powers of Freedom. Reframing Political Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

³¹ *Ibid*, p 32.

³² Watts, 'Development and governmentality', p 15.

³³ *Ibid*, p 26.

³⁴ M Watts, 'Resource curse? governmentality, oil and power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria', *Geopolitics*, 9 (1), 2004, pp 50-80.

³⁵ M Foucault, 'Governmentality', in *The Foucault Effect*, G Burchell, C Gordon & P Miller (eds), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, pp 87-104.

³⁶ Massey, *For Space*.

³⁷ In other words, what Watts calls 'governable space' is in our heuristics a 'governable order' as it refers to the distinct logics of governing and ordering rather than their territorialization in a specific space-time.

³⁸ Watts, 'Development and governmentality', p 26.

³⁹ P Richards. 'Green book millenarians? The Sierra Leone war within the perspective of an anthropology of religion', in *Religion and African Civil Wars*, N Kastfelt (ed), London, Hurst, 2005, pp 119-146.

⁴⁰ S Archibald & P Richards 'Converts to human rights? Popular debate about war and justice in rural central Sierra Leone', *Africa*, 72 (2), 2002, pp 339-367; S Shepler, 'Les filles-soldats: trajectoires d'après-guerre en Sierra Leone', *Politique Africaine*, 88, 2002, pp 49-62; C Coulter,

Being a Bush Wife. Women's Lives through War and Peace in Northern Sierra Leone, PhD thesis, Uppsala, Uppsala University, 2006.

- ⁴¹ M Ferme, *The Underneath of Things. Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001.
- ⁴² Archibald & Richards, 'Converts to human rights?'; M Jackson, *In Sierra Leone*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2004.
- ⁴³ C Fithen & P Richards, 'Making war, crafting peace. Militias solidarities and demobilisation in Sierra Leone', in *No Peace, No War*, pp 117-136.
- ⁴⁴ A Mehler, *Oligopolies of Violence in Africa South of the Sahara*, Hamburg, Institut für Afrika-Kunde, 2004.
- ⁴⁵ B Korf & H Fünfgeld, 'War and the commons: assessing the changing politics of violence, access and entitlements in Sri Lanka', *Geoforum*, 37 (3), 2006, pp 391-403; B Korf, 'Rethinking the greed-grievance nexus: property rights and the political economy of war in Sri Lanka', *Journal of Peace Research*, 42 (2), 2005, pp 201-217.
- ⁴⁶ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.
- ⁴⁷ Korf, 'War, livelihoods and vulnerability in Sri Lanka'.
- ⁴⁸ Korf & Fünfgeld, 'War and the commons'.
- ⁴⁹ The Tamil grievances around a state-sponsored colonization of Sinhalese settlers in the east after independence has been widely discussed in the literature, see S Bastian, *Control of State Land: The Devolution Debate*, Colombo, International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1995; P Peebles, 'Colonization and ethnic conflict in the dry zone of Sri Lanka', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 49 (1), 1990, pp 30-55; S Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1986; Y Thangarajah, 'Ethnicization of the devolution debate and the militarization of civil society in North-Eastern Sri Lanka', in M

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⁵⁰ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

⁵¹ O Fuglerud, *Life on the Outside: Tamil Diaspora and Long Distance Nationalism*, Sterling, Pluto Press, 1999.

⁵² J Goodhand, B Klem & B Korf, 'Religion, conflict and boundary politics in Sri Lanka', *European Journal of Development Research*, 21 (5), 2009, pp 679-698; International Crisis Group, *Sri Lanka's Eastern Province: Land, Development, Conflict*, Asia Report No. 159, Colombo, International Crisis Group, 2008.

⁵³ M Watts, *Struggles over Geography: Violence, Freedom and Development at the Millennium*, Hettner Lecture No. 3, Heidelberg, University of Heidelberg, 2000, p 2 & 8 based on E Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, London, Vintage, 1993, p 7.

⁵⁴ Honwana, 'Innocent and Guilty'; Utas, 'Victimcy, girlfriending, soldiering'.

⁵⁵ Korf, 'War, livelihoods and vulnerability in Sri Lanka'.

⁵⁶ Watts, 'Development and governmentality', p 26.

⁵⁷ E Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p 7.

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