Title
Left Perspectives of the Sri Lankan Conflict: The Role of Ethnicity in the Governments of the United Front (1970-77) and the People's Alliance (1994-2001)

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Left Perspectives of the Sri Lankan Conflict:
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A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Anthropology

by

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This paper examines the role of ethnicity in the Sri Lankan governments of the United Front (1970-77) and the People's Alliance (1994-2001). In particular, it examines the way in which the category of ethnicity was redeployed by Left theorists associated with these specific regimes. The paper looks at several key texts of each period in order to identify the major positions. It finds that whereas in the United Front ethnicity was reduced to class, in the People's Alliance ethnicity was operationalized as an autonomous variable of research and policy. These two contrasting positions were implicated with shifts in the wider political economy of Sri Lanka.
The thesis of Devaka Ramesh Gunawardena is approved.

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Funding for research pertaining to this thesis was received from

the UCLA Department of Anthropology.
There is a tendency to measure successes and failures purely in electoral terms, overlooking the influential role played by pro-left elements in the social, economic and cultural life of the people, and in shaping the thinking of the intelligentsia.

–Santasilan Kadirgamar

I. Introduction

During and after my initial visits to Sri Lanka in the late 2000s, I understood the country according to a popular journalistic narrative. According to this story, the Sri Lankan government was in the process of overcoming Tamil separatists in a brutal civil war. This war took place against the wider background of political conflict between the Sinhala majority and various ethnic minorities, particularly the Tamils. The separatists had earlier achieved prominence in the politico-military field after the 1983 riots of “Black July.” During these riots, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Tamil civilians were killed by Sinhala mobs organized through ruling United National Party (UNP)-affiliated underground networks. After the riots, armed militancy began to dominate Tamil politics. Depending on one’s sympathies, one could then take either of two political positions: 1) the militants, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in particular, were trying merely to achieve justice for Tamils, or 2) later governments have attempted to assuage minority grievances while fighting a ruthless terrorist organization. After various people directed me to Sri Lankan writings in political science and other academic analyses of the conflict, however, I found other stories.

These stories, produced by Sri Lankan Leftists, amounted to an entire reconceptualization of the conflict. One set of texts, produced primarily in the 1970s, tries to explain the volatile politics of Sri Lankan ethnicity as a consequence of elite manipulation. Following this narrative,

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1 Quote from “The Left Tradition in Sri Lankan Tamil Politics” (Kadirgamar 2001: 272).
2 My thanks to Jayadeva Uyangoda, Pradeep Jeganathan, and Thushara Hewage for pointing me to this literature. Additionally, I owe Cenan Pirani for his crucial help with the structure and organization of this essay.
throughout Sri Lanka’s postcolonial history, Sinhala and Tamil elites used the idea of ethnicity to gather votes for their respective power blocs. Accordingly, Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms obscured the real motor of conflict in society, the class conflict between workers and capitalists. One dominant author in this tendency, V. Karalasingham (1978), goes so far as to argue that the democratic rights of the minorities (not just Tamil, but Muslim as well) will necessarily be secured through the advance of socialist revolution. Karalasingham advanced this position under the wider umbrella of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), a Trotskyist organization of which he was a member.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, another set of texts emerged to contest this position. Jayadeva Uyangoda argues that the Leftists of the 1970s ignored ethnicity as an autonomous political variable in society. According to Uyangoda, a veteran Leftist and former member of a Sinhala Marxist youth group, ethnicity requires explicit acknowledgment and an institutionally-mandated solution. He explicitly argues against Karalasingham’s position that an adequate solution to the ethnic conflict would merely “‘democratize capitalist political structures’” (Uyangoda 1994). Essentially, whereas Karalasingham denies that ethnicity has a real existence of its own, Uyangoda argues precisely for its recognition and validation. Upon encountering these two sets of texts, I realized I had stumbled into a vigorous debate. The popular narrative described at the beginning simply does not capture this kind of complexity.

While continuing to read these texts and appreciate their subtleties, however, I found I was becoming frustrated. Karalasingham and Uyangoda—I will use them as proper names for two contrasting political problematics—both rely on static ideas of ethnicity. Whether they argue ethnicity is x or y, they do not problematize the very mode of thought that allows them to theorize ethnicity. To put it simply, they are both talking past each other by using two entirely
distinct concepts of ethnicity. My frustration as a reader is a result of the fact that no matter how nuanced their arguments, neither Karalasingham nor Uyangoda can actually make explicit how they arrive at their concepts of ethnicity. Thus, their seemingly intractable opposition. This essay then is an attempt to produce a genealogy of ethnicity as a way to move past this impasse and reinvigorate the Left debates.

I wish to resurrect the debates not because they are of esoteric interest for the academic, but because I genuinely believe they illuminate the key paradoxes and contradictions of the ethnic conflict. In the current moment, when the government has officially defeated the Tigers and gloats with the victor’s spoils, I believe it is important to remain critical. Has ethnicity as a language of society and politics really disappeared? Have we truly abolished the distinction between the Sinhala majority and Tamil, Muslim, and other minorities? If on the contrary ethnicity is able to evade banishment by a few sanctifying phrases, how has ethnicized political power been reconstituted in Sri Lanka?

As I have hinted, I won’t be taking these questions head on. Instead, I will examine the ways in which ethnicity has been used in the debates among Sri Lankan Leftists. To reiterate, my goal is not to theorize ethnicity itself. I do not aim to produce, for example, a political science theory of ethnic competition through state institutions. While I appreciate the value of such literature, my own goal is more conceptual. Thus, I want to understand the discursive shifts in debates about ethnicity. So, in order to get at the meaning behind these debates, I will pose the question of this essay: how has “ethnicity” as a conceptual category been employed by different Left groups, including political parties and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs)?

To begin, I will argue that ethnicity, or the “question of minorities,” rose to conceptual prominence in Left literature beginning in the late 1950s and 1960s. A key reason for its
appearance in the polemical literature of the period is the victory of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the elections of 1956. Sri Lanka had been a British colony during the 19th and first half of the 20th century. It gained its independence in 1948. For many Sri Lankans, however, the election victory of 1956 represented “real” independence from the cultural political domination of Anglophone elites. The SLFP rose to prominence by promoting “indigenous,” and in particular Sinhala, cultural and linguistic policies. The sectional coloration of this victory and its aggressive rhetoric of majority mobilization, however, provoked minority parties such as the Tamil-dominated Federal Party (FP). Thus, by the late 1950s, ethnicity had become a visible issue of political conflict in society. Leftists, as part of this society, were forced to engage.

Initial Left formulations of ethnicity were sympathetic to Tamil demands for parity of official status among Sinhala and Tamil languages, which had been denied by the SLFP regime. The Left denied ethnicity’s real weight, however, as the motor of conflict in society. Thus, depending on the practical political context, including coalitions and convenient alliances with “bourgeois” parties such as the SLFP, the Left position could shift. It lacked a theory to formulate a coherent response to the tactical shifts in different Sinhala attitudes to ethnicity. Regardless, the standard Left response, particularly as it became refined in the 1970s, argued that socialist revolution was the key to any resolution of the ethnic question. The Left, represented by the Communist Party (CP) and LSSP, consolidated this position by entering into alliance with the SLFP in the socialist-oriented United Front (UF) government (1970-77).

As the conflict heated up, however, Leftists were forced to take into account the continuing salience of ethnicity. The safe language of class could no longer protect them from the passing licks of ethnic violence. As a response, some Leftists began to explicitly acknowledge ethnicity. It almost seemed as if they were saying, “Yes, we get it. Ethnicity is an
issue. Let’s identify ourselves then as ‘progressive’ based on our response to the ethnic situation.” The sociologist Newton Gunasinghe (1996), for example, famously argues in an essay originally written in 1984 that the riots of July 1983 fundamentally changed what it means to be “Left” in Sri Lanka. The stance one takes with regard to the ethnic conflict now determines one’s positioning on the Left (Ismail 2005). This position was refined throughout the 1980s and became entangled with the goals of the SLFP-led People’s Alliance (PA) government (1994-2001) that emerged victorious in the 1990s. Though the PA itself was not Leftist, Leftists oriented themselves toward it. They recognized its potential solution to the ethnic conflict based on constitutional measures for devolution of political power to provinces with large minority constituencies, particularly the North-East Provincial Council.

Having sketched the above problematics, the reader may have noticed that I identify them with specific regimes. On the one hand, we have a figure like Karalasingham, who we could associate with the UF regime. On the other hand, we have someone like Uyangoda, who was a prominent intellectual in the PA regime. My goal in making these connections is to pose two levels of explanation: that of 1) political critique, and that of 2) political rationality. The debates among the Left do not merely have a polemical cash value, so to speak; they illuminate as well the very objects of governance in these different periods. During the time of the UF, for example, the regime voided ethnicity of any substantive political content. This move shaped the proposal for the Republican Constitution of 1972, which removed legal protections for minorities. In contrast, the Left intellectuals associated with the PA regime sought to operationalize ethnicity as a political variable. This way of thinking revealed itself in the PA’s attempts to devolve political power to the provinces through acts such as the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution. My focus is on the contrast between these two rationalities of rule. In this essay, I will briefly gesture
toward, without dwelling upon, why the Left shifted between two contrasting problematics of ethnicity. On the other hand, I will spend significantly more time examining how these two problematics are functions of two distinct political rationalities. These rationalities are generally associated with the UF and PA regimes.

I embed the concept of political rationality within a wider theoretical framework. It emerges from my attempt to link the Sri Lankan political debates to Western academic discussions. In the case of Marxism and nationalism, for example, Western academics have struggled with the relationship between the two. They wish to avoid reducing nations to classes, a “reductionist” approach. Here I employ for analytic purposes the concept of political rationality in order to get at the practical functions of ethnicity in shaping class relations without reducing it to an automatic outcome of class itself. In the case of the anthropological and sociological literature on ethnicity itself, academics have attempted to understand the uses, meanings, and functions of ethnicity in a wider social context. They have done so to avoid reproducing the emic perspective of participants in ethnic conflict. My framework draws from both the critical dialogues in Marxism and ethnicity-oriented literature, in order to understand the different modalities of ethnicity in Sri Lanka.

In terms of the structure of this essay, I will tie each academic discussion to a given political moment. After discussing the UF problematic, I will broach the wider academic question of the relationship between class and ethnicity. This draws me into attempts to explode social contingency out of Marxism, particularly the “post-Marxism” of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001). Engaging their work will help me develop my own analytic framework in order to grasp ethnicity in a non-reductive way. After discussing the PA problematic, I will gesture toward the wider social scientific literature on ethnicity, including anthropology and
sociology (Barth 1969; Brass 1985; Eriksen 1993; Brubaker 2002). This literature will help me further theorize the different modes, meanings, and functions of ethnicity. The overarching goal in my use of both these literatures is to build a theoretical apparatus to better understand the problematics and political rationalities of both the UF and PA.

Finally, this essay as a whole is intended as a theoretical contribution to the burgeoning literature on anthropology of the state. As I understand it, this theoretical subfield enables us to get at the question of the state without reifying it as a self-subsistent entity. Thus, authors in the field often talk about the dispersed state-like techniques and procedures that are bundled in “languages of stateness” (Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001). I have found this literature very useful, since it links poststructuralist and Marxist analyses to the ethnographic framework of cultural constructions of the state. My own work will hopefully build on and contribute to this literature by examining the ethnic dimension of political power. The debates of the Sri Lankan Left on ethnicity are a useful point of departure for identifying transitions between rationalities of government. This approach helps us further approximate the shifting boundaries and provisional nature of the postcolonial state.

II. Defining the Left

I begin this essay with a brief discussion of historical background in order to distinguish the Left from Sinhala nationalism. This relationship has been historically ambiguous given the alleged “progressive” content of Sinhala nationalism in terms of class issues. Kumari Jayawardena (2003; 2004) identifies the rise of the Left with labor movements in the capital of Colombo during the early part of the 20th century. As Jayawardena notes, however, these agitations became increasingly overdetermined by nationalist forms of exclusion. Proto-Sinhala nationalists associated with the movement pilloried workers of Indian descent along with traders
who were believed to be exploiting the Sinhala “sons of the soil.” Perhaps even more striking, AE Goonesinhe, the leader of the Ceylon Labor Party, railed against Malayali immigrant workers from India, whom he accused of being “blacklegs,” or strike breakers. Jayawardena notes the following about this political attack:

The anti-Malayali campaign of the 1930s brought chauvinism right to the forefront of the working-class movement, when large sections of the Sinhala working-class were made to respond to the idea that the main enemy was Malayali…In this context, the opportunism of the petty bourgeois leadership of the working class was also exposed. As a class, the petty bourgeoisie in Sri Lanka had shown (and still shows) a remarkable agility in moving from radical political stances to racist positions within a short space of time. AE Goonesinha—who had been a close associate of Anagarika Dharmapala, and was himself a product of the Buddhist education and temperance movement—abandoned his militant policies of the 1930s, ending up finally on the side of the employers. (Jayawardena 2003: 38-39)

Most authors have defined the loose class of “petty bourgeois” as the smallholding peasantry and vernacular intelligentsia, such as monks and schoolteachers. In another period, Marx might have referred to them collectively as a “sack of potatoes,” traditional fractions associated with the countryside. Jayawardena attributes certain ingrained political views to this class, which controlled the leadership of unions. She argues that while it contains some progressive

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3 The Sinhala are generally characterized as Buddhist, though there are Sinhala Christians as well. Generally speaking, Sinhala nationalism contains Buddhist religious valences, though there are Christian Sinhala nationalists as well. The relationship between ethnicity and religion is a complicated one, which I will not discuss in this essay. For those who are interested though, a collection edited by Tessa Bartholomeusz and Chandra de Silva (1998) analyzes this issue at length.

4 This term has received a theoretical update in less polemical literature (Shastri 1983; Stokke and Uyangoda 2011). The class fractions with which it has been associated are referred to as “intermediate classes,” including small manufacturers.
tendencies, it is ultimately Sinhala nationalist. According to Jayawardena, such nationalism undermined the progressive possibilities inherent in early attempts to mobilize labor. I will question the causal connection Jayawardena establishes between this class and the persistence of Sinhala nationalism later in this essay. For now, however, her account is sufficient in describing the general contours of Sinhala nationalism.

The petty bourgeois achieved its major political victory in 1956, shortly after independence. The SLFP came into power as part of the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP). The SLFP primarily agitated on the grounds of a continuing transition from colonial rule, attacking the cultural legacy of colonialism. It posed the question of independence as a valorization of \textit{swabasha} (indigenous) language and Sinhala Buddhist culture. As most Sri Lankanists have noted, it relied on the political mobilization of Sinhala vernacular intelligentsia, including teachers, monks, and ayurvedic physicians. The critique of colonial rule, however, quickly merged into a critique of alleged minority “privilege” (Stokke and Uyangoda 2011). Sinhala nationalists considered minorities the beneficiaries of colonial rule, given their proportionally higher representation in education and administrative services. Additionally, earlier attempts to secure fundamental rights for minorities in arrangements at the center, such as communal seating, were seen as attempts to eviscerate the political strength of the majority. 1956 then has come to symbolize the condensation of Sinhala nationalism in both its cultural and political aspects.

My goal in setting out the above first and foremost is to distinguish between Sinhala nationalism and the Left movement as such. While the former may contain superficially Left attitudes with regard to questions such as social welfare and workers’ rights, it is not part of the Left. There has been some confusion distinguishing between the Left and Sinhala nationalism,
given the role of socialist-sounding ideas in various “petty bourgeois” governments and parties.

We could turn to a contemporary example, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sinhala Marxist youth group generally composed of the rural underemployed. The JVP considers itself Marxist, but throughout most of its political history it has spent its energies organizing against minority demands. Thus, I classify it, and similar groups and regimes, as Sinhala nationalist rather than Left as such. The boundary is occasionally hazy, but I must make an attempt to distinguish at a conceptual level between the two. I define the Left as those groups and organizations that have truly tried to either disavow or acknowledge ethnicity. I contrast these two orientations with the Sinhala nationalist. The latter commits the bad faith act of denying both that ethnicity exists and requires an adequate political mechanism for the redistribution of political power, in order to affirm the strength of the majority. In the following section then, I tarry instead with the Left in their divergent yet sincere attempts to resolve the ethnic question.

Here I must also acknowledge that while I have posed this essay as a general discussion of the “Sri Lankan Left,” I generally refer throughout to the southern political formation. The southern Left has had to engage Sinhala nationalism, which has provoked its soul searching with regard to the validity of minority demands. I will get to this tension later, in the transition from Karalasingham’s to Uyangoda’s problematic. In the following section, I will focus on the emergence of the former.

III. The United Front

Turning to the Left properly speaking, I argue that it emerged as a distinct social force with the rise of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) in 1935. Initially arising out of several currents of independent agitation, including the famed “Suriya Mal” campaign, the LSSP later formalized itself as a Trotskyite political party. As opposed to the inchoate politics of the early
labor movements, the LSSP officially abstained from Sinhala nationalism. Instead, it sought a free Sri Lanka (or Ceylon, as it was then called) for all. It recognized the injustice, for example, of the UNP-led disenfranchisement in 1948 of Upcountry Tamils. The Upcountry Tamils had migrated from India throughout the 1800s and early 1900s. They worked primarily on the tea plantations, but were struck from voter rolls with the loss of their citizenship. The LSSP opposed this act. Even in the late 1950s, the Left’s initial response to Sinhala nationalist attitudes was direct. The LSSP famously argued, for example, that the policy of “one language” (The “Sinhala Only” Act of 1956) would lead to two nations, or separation. Authors such as Jayawarden (2003) have associated the initial phase of the LSSP with a principled stand against Sinhala nationalism.

Throughout its career, however, the LSSP framed ethnic issues in orthodox Marxist terms. Colvin de Silva (2007) writes the following, for example, on the relationship between Tamil and Sinhala workers:

It is a melancholy fact of history that the general working class movement of Sri Lanka failed to espouse the cause of the plantation workers when they received this cruel racialist blow...The legacy of suspicion of their Sinhalese brothers still lingers among the plantation workers. (229)

In this quote, de Silva argues that the real crime here is not the form of racial exclusion itself, but the fact that it divided the working class. I argue that the lack of a theoretical framework to explain ethnicity in terms of its own contradictions enabled the Left’s attitude to shift tactically toward ethnic-related policies. 5 It is this paradox that Jayawarden, Uyangoda and others have

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5 This argument is different, however, from the claim that parliamentary coalition politics as such leads to compromise in Left politics. I argue instead that the lack of a *theory* for ethnicity as such encouraged tactical shifts, and thus an overall inconsistent attitude toward ethnic issues.
attempted to engage. First, what enabled de Silva and the LSSP to move from a “principled stand against minority oppression,” to one that saw no contradiction in participating with the SLFP-led nationalist government in 1970? Second, how did the Left manage to explain this shift in its own thinking?

Leftists found themselves explicitly allied with Sinhala nationalism during the period of the UF. The SLFP offered a chance to implement the goals of socialist development. The UF characterized itself as socialist by implementing import substitution and expanding the nationalization of industries, including the plantations. On this basis, the LSSP rationalized its involvement in the UF by stating that the UF contained trends that were inherently radical, despite its Sinhala nationalism. In this instance, class was posed against ethnicity, and won. The effect of this position was to strengthen majoritarian attitudes, but, paradoxically, from a Left perspective that did not base itself on Sinhala nationalism as such. Instead, the LSSP emphasized the socialist overtones of the Sinhala nationalist regime. The alliance reshaped the Left’s attitude toward the history of the SLFP itself. Hector Abhayavardhana argued, for example, that 1956 represented a victory of the “national” SLFP-led over the “comprador” UNP-led bourgeoisie. In a fascinating paragraph written in 1975, he writes:

What began in 1956 as a breakthrough in the parliamentary arena of a belated national liberation movement with many confusions and limitations, has continued since then with ups and downs, advances and retreats…Even so, with all the hesitancy and circumspection and even politicking, enough damage was done to the structure of imperialism-capitalism in Sri Lanka. In the first place, the political weakness of the propertied classes had been exposed. Secondly, the masses had shown enough political

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6 These overtones included the UF’s continued use of the rhetoric of Sinhala Buddhist mobilization. In a famous example, it gave Buddhism symbolic pride of place among other religions in the 1972 Republican Constitution.
consciousness to turn the processes of parliamentary democracy into a developing offensive on the bourgeois character of the state. Thirdly, the MEP government was able to take steps, even in a purely formal way, towards non-dependent relationships with the external world, and to invade property rights in certain crucial sectors of the economy.

(Abhayavardhana 2001: 238)

According to his account, though the victory of 1956 is incomplete because of its “sectional” implications, the Left can capitalize on it to promote the nation’s development on a socialist path. In this astounding rhetorical feat, the aggressive Sinhala nationalism of 1956 is converted into a partial victory for the working class. I stress, however, that this defense is coming from the Left itself, not Sinhala nationalism. In this regard, the goals of socialism were identified as the real core of political activity and position-taking. The UF’s commitment to “socialism” trumped other issues. The LSSP’s background theory that class stands over and above ethnicity enabled it to shift its tactical stance toward Sinhala nationalism.

In order to advance my argument, however, I must displace what has been the most prominent explanation for the LSSP’s shifts. Kumari Jayawardena contrasts the LSSP’s early positions on ethnic issues, such as the 1948 disenfranchisement of the Upcountry Tamils, with later ones, such as its involvement in the UF. She condemns this shift as a result of “compromise with chauvinism.” Jayawardena (2003) writes:

Up to the early 1960s, both the LSSP and CP took up non-chauvinist positions on all issues and made this an important concern of their politics. But by the mid-sixties, the tide had turned and racism not only gripped important sections of the masses, but also found its way into the main Left parties.
This reversal of Left policies on the ethnic issue was to have serious consequences...The resort to chauvinism by the Left was a betrayal of basic socialist principles (84). Jayawardena goes on to argue that the “petty bourgeois” weakness of the Left’s leaders led to its practical acceptance of Sinhala nationalism. In Jayawardena’s theory, ethnicity maintains a separate existence apart from class, and can potentially interrupt the latter. The goal is to minimize the effects of ethnicity and ethnic nationalism in order to promote working class unity. According to her account, the LSSP and CP, because of the fundamental weakness of their petty bourgeois leadership, allowed ethnicity to encroach upon the domain of class politics proper. They thus failed to secure working class unity.

The goal of unity, however, indicates that Jayawardena is working within a given “problem space” in which the Left had a clear goal toward resolving the ethnic question. David Scott has termed this the “Bandung moment” in Third World politics, when non-aligned socialism was a viable political horizon. In the current post-Cold War period, however, her narrative critique of “compromise” does not have the same illocutionary effect. It is not clear what substantively “Left” political position emerges from the critique of the Left’s practical acceptance of Sinhala nationalism. This is especially true now that there are neoliberal alternatives that offer an institutional framework to resolve the ethnic question. In order to clear a conceptual space then for the current moment, I argue simply that the Left lacked a theoretical framework to explain ethnicity on its own terms. In its framework, class encompassed ethnicity; ethnicity did not have a real existence of its own. I doubt, for example, that the LSSP would even think of producing a document called “The History of the LSSP’s Stance on Ethnic Issues,” at least during the 1970s. This argument implies a blindspot in Left thinking, rather than the failed
pursuit of a political truth with regard to the ethnic question, which in Jayawardena’s framework naturally “exists” and must be dealt with.

Let’s return to the LSSP’s own framework. In order to explain the development of ethnic contradictions, LSSP theorists in the 1960s and 1970s such as Karalasingham argued that minority self-segregation was the real source of blame. According to Karalasingham (1978), minorities must participate in socialist coalitions in order to force the ruling bloc to go beyond its “self-imposed limits,” particularly Sinhala nationalism (41-42). The Left explained the nature of the regime according to the constituencies it mobilized. If minorities did not like the Sinhala coloring of the regime, they had to participate in order to change it. The UF of course was known for its discrimination against minorities in bureaucracy and education. Education policies promoted “standardization,” which was a weighted form of discrimination in favor of the majority. Nationalization of industries enabled the extension of networks of patronage to the regime’s (Sinhala) supporters (Stokke and Uyangoda 2011). The LSSP nevertheless did not formally address the logic of ethnicized political power behind these structures of inequality. Instead, it called for minority constituencies to enter into a political contract with the regime. It called for their participation in a regime implicitly, and occasionally explicitly, directed against minority interests. My criticism is not new. It has been advanced by other scholars such as Sunil Bastian, Jayadeva Uyangoda, Amita Shastri, and others. My point though is to ask why the Left failed to see this apparent contradiction.

Within the Left’s own theory, it had to offer an alternative explanation as to why minorities kept their distance from the UF regime. Authors pointed to the rise of Sinhala and Tamil nationalism as tools of elite manipulation that maintained the fragmentation of the working class. According to authors such as Karalasingham and Abhayavardhana, both Sinhala
and Tamil nationalists were intent on using ethnicity to gather votes for their respective class blocs. This divided the working class. Leftists accordingly attempted to poke holes in claims to Sinhala or Tamil representativeness. Abhayavardhana (2001) writing in the 1990s argues, for example, that Tamil elites abandoned sections of their community. He writes:

What, nevertheless, needs to be explained is what kind of Tamil consciousness it was that felt greater identity with the Sinhalese ruling class than with the Tamil plantation workers who were being oppressed by them. At least until the disenfranchisement of Indian [sic] in 1948/49 there was no consciousness among the Tamils of the North and East that there were Tamils also in other parts of the country, especially in the hill country.

(Abhayavardhana 2001: 365)

Abhayavardhana goes on to argue that this discriminatory consciousness arose from the issue of caste. Upcountry Tamils are predominantly from oppressed castes such as Pallans and Paraiyars. The “Jaffna” or Northern Tamils contained more members from the higher ranking Vellalar caste. Abhayavardhana did not see any need to fashion a framework for ethnic demands as such. Rather, the issue was communal elites that were fragmenting the working class.

Similarly, Colvin de Silva (1987) argues that the 1972 Constitution, which removed the Soulbury protections for religious and ethnic minority groups’ rights, was an attempt to overcome inequalities. He argues that under the guise of group rights, an ethnic group can mask internal inequalities such as caste. Any attempt to legislate against these inequalities could be struck down by the claim to protect group, in this case ethnic, rights. To de Silva’s credit, he, like Abhayavardhana, doesn’t simply focus on internal discrimination in the Tamil community. Instead, he mentions the case of a depressed caste, the Rodiyas, in Sinhala society. He argues that the 1972 Constitution enables the government to legislate for the uplift of this oppressed
group by doing away with religious and ethnic group rights. Overall, both de Silva and
Abhayavardhana establish a framework of equivalence between the Sinhala and Tamil
nationalisms, which distinguishes these two thinkers from Sinhala nationalism as such. To
reiterate a point made earlier in this essay, the latter argues from the perspective of rightful
dominance of the majority, as opposed to the principle of political equality in the sincere liberal-
Left sense. Regardless, both the LSSP and Sinhala nationalism’s positions aligned in their
effects, engaging in the mutual erasure of ethnicity as a determining political factor in society.

Beyond identifying the theoretical equivalence between Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms,
however, the Left actively attributed a historically progressive content to Sinhala nationalism as
opposed to Tamil nationalism. They did so because of the former’s historical (meaning,
contingent) association with otherwise “progressive” political goals, and its relationship to
poorer constituencies. This is obvious in the case of the UF, which advanced the nationalization
of industries under the program of non aligned socialism. Again, since class is what mattered, the
nationalist bloc that articulated socialist sentiment won out, even if in this case it was Sinhala
nationalist. This again supersedes the alternative explanation Jayawardena offers, that this
tactical identification was a result of a suppressed atavistic politics linked to the Left leadership’s
class background in the Sinhala petty bourgeois. I am restricting myself to the level of ideas, and
what concerns the Left explicitly acknowledged. For the Left, the identification of a progressive
content in Sinhala nationalism shaped the Left’s shifting tactical attitude toward ethnicity.

Ultimately, the Left mode of engaging with ethnicity was authorized and secured by the
Marxist narrative of how society should be reshaped in the long term. Leftists relied on the
traditional Marxist notion that there are stages of development through which a country must
pass. Karalasingham argues in Trotskyist fashion that the democratic revolution will be
telescoped within the working class revolution. The former contains the demands of minority rights. He goes so far as to argue that the Left must necessarily defend minority rights as the “very axis of its own immanent development” (Karalasingham 1978: 33). This teleology of course did not save the Left from participating with the very same regime that continued to promote Sinhala nationalism. In this case, the goals of socialist development ran roughshod over minority demands insofar as the latter constituted an autonomous political program outside of the Left teleology. Karalasingham explicitly argues that class comes before anything else. He writes:

There, in the United Front, is the caravan of history marching along, somewhat broken down, perhaps, barakaratha style, may be, and, not at the speed of a modern jet, which we so desire. But that is the forward movement of history, in the specific context of Ceylon today (Karalasingham 1978: 81)

This quote is remarkable for its sheer confidence in an “end point.” After the socialist revolution has begun, Karalasingham argues, we can worry about unresolved minority issues. The rhetoric of deferral has eerie parallels with the current government’s claim that development will automatically resolve remaining ethnic contradictions after the war’s end. In the Leftist narrative of socialist development, minority demands would be resolved automatically or else dispensed with if they impeded socialism. Progressivism enabled the Left to ignore ethnicity as an enduring feature of society that might require a distinctive political solution beyond the program of class politics. It did not feel a pressing need to come up with a dedicated “solution.”

IV. Theorizing the Left and Government

To many Western academics, the overall position described above may seem anachronistic, given the sophisticated critiques of Marxism’s relationship to “difference”—sexual, ethnic, gender, etc.—launched within and outside the tradition. My goal in dwelling in
the specificity of the Left position above has not been to return to these theoretical debates by starting at ground zero: the claim that “class determines ethnicity.” It is simply to expose the assumptions of the Sri Lankan Left and the overall theoretical consistency of their “reductionist” attitude toward ethnicity in a given historical moment. This will come in handy when we discuss the latter specifically as a political rationality in Sri Lanka.

In order to have such a discussion, however, I must set up my theoretical framework. To do so, I will begin by addressing Western academic debates on the relationship between Marxism and difference. These debates have led to the position of absolute contingency in the social field epitomized by Laclau and Mouffe’s post-Marxism. After addressing this argument, I will elaborate my own theoretical framework for analyzing the Sri Lankan Left position. Let me first begin by sketching the contours of the Western debate in relation to the question of nationalism specifically.

Many authors have noted that ethnic nationalism has proved a continuing bugbear for Marxism. The progressive splitting up of the world into two camps, workers and bourgeois, has clearly failed, as evidenced by the World Wars and, when the main critiques were launched in the 1970s and 1980s, the “fraternal wars” among communist states in Indochina. In a seminal essay, Tom Nairn (1975) employs the modified Leninist framework of combined and uneven development to theorize these occurrences. According to this reading, nationalism and the forces of progressive modernity were born in the West but were quickly disseminated elsewhere through colonialism and other world-historical processes. The non-synchronous nature of this transition (the “unevenness”) provoked nationalist attempts in the periphery to build up their states without having fully developed the political economic base. This characterizes Third

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7 I thank Sherry Ortner for helping me clarify my analytic purpose here, and for pointing me to several important literatures associated with these questions.
World and fascist nationalisms, though both have different political effects. Other authors have criticized this view, including JM Blaut (1982), who argues that Nairn simply dresses up modernization theory in Marxist rhetoric.

Ephraim Nimni (1991), however, sees a deeper issue behind these attempts to identify the specificity of nationalism in places such as the Third World using various modified Marxist frameworks. According to him, these attempts are based on the three “parameters of the Marxist resolution of the national question”: 1) theories of evolutionism, 2) class reductionism, and 3) Eurocentrism. According to Nimni, the Marxist teleology splits the world into two halves, the workers and the bourgeois (a combination of points one and two). Such a move illegitimately extrapolates to the whole world analytic categories born out of the distinctive sociohistorical formations of modern Europe (producing point number three). Even Leninist theories of nationalism, though opposed to the immediate reduction of nation to class, still attempt to explain the nation according to class forces. This means that though they attempt to set up mediating factors between class and its political expression, they rely ultimately on the contradictions of the “global economic machinery,” to use Nairn’s own phrase, and class forces to explain nationalism. They thus continue to reduce nationalism as an effect of political economic processes, however mediated. Out of this critique, Nimni outlines a non-reductionist response to nationalism in the work of Otto Bauer, an Austrian Marxist writing in the early 20th century. Nimni argues that Bauer attempted to take nationalism seriously as a historical phenomenon in its own right, meaning without reducing it to the workings of class.

Rather than digress through Bauer’s work—we can move away from nationalism now and approach the general question of Marxism and difference—I want to take up the fact that Nimni’s work is self-consciously situated in the wider opening created by Ernesto Laclau and
Chantal Mouffe’s post-Marxism. Essentially, Laclau and Mouffe follow a trajectory similar to that of Nimni, rereading classics in the Western Marxist canon in order to grasp the fundamentally contingent character of political identity in its various forms—class, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. In particular, they detach the concept of hegemony from class-based approaches. Hegemony originally refers in its leading thinker, Gramsci, to the process by which a class generalizes its interests to society as a whole. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe use it as a general way of explaining the process of constructing any sort of political identity. They argue that hegemony names the generic process through which various political identities temporarily fix themselves in constitutive opposition to each other. They refer to this outcome as the “articulation” of political identity. Laclau and Mouffe argue that political identity is not mediated by class structures (“political economy” for our purposes). It emerges out of a rhetorical matrix that constitutes the social. Put simply, there is no ground beneath any given political identity.

Laclau and Mouffe’s work leaves open, however, the question of social scientific analysis. If the social is never “sutured”—rendered as the transparent positivity of a self-enclosed “society”—how nevertheless do we analyze it? Thomas Blom Hansen (1999) has pointed to a brief remark by Laclau that articulations of political identity can become sedimented as historical rationalities and logics. Thus, the political becomes frozen in various institutional and representative frameworks that are susceptible to analysis. Elsewhere Laclau and Mouffe (2001) have commented similarly that:

In the case of the strategy of construction of a new order, the changes which it is possible to introduce in social positivity will depend not only on the more or less democratic character of the forces that pursue that strategy, but also upon a set of structural limits established by other logics—at the level of state apparatuses, economy, and so on. (190;
Unfortunately, the rich possibility in the above remarks has not been theorized in their work. I believe doing so may in fact reconcile their approach with political economy. The framework of this essay is a provisional attempt toward this end, building off of other works such as those of Bob Jessop. Such an approach constitutes a triangular relationship among the theories of Laclau and Mouffe, Foucault, and Marxist political economy. The overall perspective that emerges is that while there is no ultimate foundation of the social, it becomes frozen and sedimented in ways that can be analyzed from Foucauldian and Marxist perspectives. In the rest of this section then, I will first foreground the analytic of political rationality, with specific reference to the Sri Lankan Left’s relationship to the UF. I will conclude by looking at the connections we can establish at the level of political economy in order to further analyze ethnicized political power.

Though I discussed the tactical realignments and shifts in the Left’s attitude in the previous section, my underlying point has been to emphasize the Left’s theoretical framework. This framework doesn’t just manifest at the level of pragmatic political tendencies. It indicates a deeper understanding of and orientation toward potential objects of government. Focusing on this dimension, we might examine the different ways in which ethnicity operates as a rationality of government, and the function of the LSSP’s problematic in governing the social. As I mentioned earlier in the introduction, these ideas did not just remain at the level of political critique. Rather, they indicate a pattern of government as well. At a functional level then, Left thinking was implicated with Sinhala nationalism. Both contain their own separate logics, and I will get to their intersection in a moment. First, I will discuss what a political rationality is.

David Scott has introduced the idea of a political rationality in order to understand different modes of colonial and postcolonial power. Addressing colonial power specifically, he
says that he is less interested in the exclusion of the colonized from political structures, and more how their very desires, dispositions, and orientations have been positively reshaped. Scott (1999a) writes:

"A colonial political rationality characterizes those ways in which colonial power is organized as an activity designed to produce effects of rule. More specifically, what I mean to illuminate are the targets of colonial power (the point or points of power's application; the object or objects it aims at; and the means and instrumentalities it deploys in search of these targets, points, and objects) and the field of its operation (the zone that it actively constructs for its functionality." (25)

Scott uses this argument to describe the "governing effects" of the liberal-progressive colonial political rationality. He uses the historical example of Sri Lanka’s transformation as a British colony in the 1800s, particularly with the advent of the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms of 1832. These reforms established certain liberal principles of government, such as the abolishment of corvee labor, known as rajakariya. Scott argues, however, that colonial government did not simply transport the native "from darkness to light." The colonial narrative and its embodiment in distinctive institutions such as those associated with civil society, introduced new techniques of liberal self-government in the constitution of colonized subjectivity. Thus, colonial "improvement" did not abolish power. It transformed its operation through a new set of techniques and ways of acting on the world, orienting the subject toward “freedom.” I wish to use Scott's notion of "political rationality" to understand in a similar way a different topic. I am interested in the "objects" that socialist polemic produced in conjunction with the practical policies of the UF regime, creating things that could then be acted upon. If ethnicity was posed as an object, it was simultaneously emptied of all content. Its rationality was found elsewhere in
the social, in relations between classes and castes. The socialist political rationality sought to work on those relations, ignoring ethnicity.

Nevertheless, we are missing part of the equation if we simply discuss socialism’s eclipse of ethnicity in order to understand Sinhala domination. In a different essay, David Scott (1999b) argues that the political rationality of democracy authorizes Sinhala majority domination by relying on an “abstract egalitarian ratio” (175). He writes:

[Radhika Coomaraswamy's] suspicion is precisely that this seeming democratic priority of abstract number masks the operations of an ethnic dominance, and that insofar as we continue to take this priority as a transparent principle in the determination of political community we will be trapped within a terrain of politico-epistemic assumptions that cannot but reproduce the subordination of the Tamils. (Scott 1999b: 176)

Scott, however, does not fully elucidate why it should be the case that we can't approximate ourselves to an "abstract egalitarian ratio." Meaning, why can’t we create a community of individuals that don’t identify with any particular group, thus ensuring the smooth operation of democracy? While Scott is deft at pointing out the assumptions of this way of thinking, he doesn't discuss why it should produce a contradiction in society. In order to supplement Scott, I argue that there is a contradiction because this rationality is not the only one operating in society. The political rationality of ethnicity exists as well. Scott does mention ethnicity but he doesn't theorize separately its rationale for constituting "difference." Ethnicity was not a mere "fact" of difference but was reconfigured through colonial technologies of representation (Blom Hansen 1999; Appadurai 1993). It remained present in the social, even with the official abolition of communal representation, and other explicitly “ethnic” features of the state during the colonial
Thus, when the political rationality of democracy intersects with that of ethnicity, it produces Sinhala domination.

These rationalities intersected with the belief in socialist development. I have argued that the socialist teleology obscures ethnicity. In reality, it simply didn’t “recognize” it. The result is that socialist development concealed and invigorated aspects of “majority rule” by claiming that eventually, class will dissolve ethnic difference. The temporal deferral of a utopian horizon thus authorized the continuing domination of the Sinhala majority in the present. This rationality combined with that of democracy to generate a particular trajectory of political development. Socialist developmentalism and majority rule, however, were not alone in society. They clashed with competing rationalities, such as those marshaled by Tamil organizations demanding an ethnic “homeland” in the 1950s and beyond. This struggle developed contradictions in the Sri Lankan state and the wider political field.

The reader may have noticed something curious. How did these contradictions develop? Do rationalities simply “bump” into each other? What agency is associated with their development? Here I must turn to the Greek Marxist theorist Nicos Poulantzas and his British interpreter, Bob Jessop, in order to theorize this gap in Scott’s and other Foucault-inspired accounts of social transformation. Jessop (1991) combines Poulantzas with Foucault in order to theorize mobile "state projects." This concept allows him to talk about the state in a vein similar to Foucault’s definition of it as a "function of changes in practices of government" (Burchell, et al. 1991: 4). In contrast to Foucault, however, he situates these state projects in a wider political

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8 In the early 1900s, Britain installed communal representation for different groups in the Legislative Council. This format was abolished with the advent of universal franchise under the Donoughmore Constitution in 1931. Special provisions for minority rights were added later under the Soulbury Constitution, which was implemented at the time of independence in 1948.
economy. Jessop has shown that political economy as an analytic framework can reveal the global strategies of different class forces. These strategies fix the state as a relatively coherent entity in the reproduction of social inequalities. The political rationality is the form-condensed set of procedures and techniques that shapes such state projects and their class selectivity. So, to use the example of the UF, the intersection of ethnic, democratic and socialist political rationalities produced a certain class selectivity that promoted the interests of the Sinhala petty bourgeois, or “intermediate classes.” Amita Shastri (1983) has referred to this type of state project as the "intermediate regime." It contains its own tensions and conflicts of course between classes that form part of the bloc, which prevent aspects of its radicalization into a fully socialist regime. The point though is that this combination, of Poulantzas with Foucault, enables us to understand how and why rationalities are mobilized within different projects. Thus, how history moves along, and why political conflict in Sri Lanka developed primarily as an ethnic one.

V. The People’s Alliance

I now return to this history in order to discuss the transition from the UF to a new Left position and its associated political rationality. By the late 1970s and 1980s, new realities had forced themselves into the Left debates. Tamil militancy grew in strength as parliamentary politics subsided, while the state responded with coercion. Full-blown civil war began in 1983, after the July riots against Tamils. A new set of organizations took up the political space previously occupied by parties such as the LSSP. These included NGOs, such as the Movement for Inter Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE) and the Social Scientists’ Association (SSA). The transition to a new Left problematic of ethnicity coincided with the introduction of an

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9 Foucault of course negates political economy’s analytic value. He attempts to reduce political economy to a set of disciplinary practices that produce certain objects of government. He and his interpreters, such as Pasquale Pasquino, periodize it in the historical literature of the 19th century. To reiterate, Foucault is not interested in employing political economy as an analytic framework. Rather, he is interested in understanding its role as a rationality of government.
increasingly transnational dimension to Sri Lanka’s ethnic conflict. NGOs rose to prominence, while the state’s functions were being dispersed and reconfigured under new regimes of neoliberal rule. John Harriss, Kristian Stokke, and Olle Tornquist (2005), following Bob Jessop, link the rise of this “global civil society” with the political economic “hollowing out” of the nation-state. They specify the latter process as the displacement of regulatory capacities to the level of the global market, embodied in powerful institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. This tendency is paralleled by the “localization of politics,” and a neoliberal emphasis on decentralization, streamlining, and cutting the mass of the state, including social welfare policies. It is against this political economic background that the debates among the Left continued to develop. I will return to the neoliberal context at the end of the section.

In this conjuncture, a Left-oriented political science literature began to emerge that dealt with questions concerning the ethnic nature of the state. This filled the previous gap in a non-class reductive approach to ethnicity. Authors such as Uyangoda alleged that the main issue of the conflict was the intractable politics of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the main Tamil militant group, and Sinhala nationalism. On the one hand, the LTTE contained an inner logic of militarization that extended beyond the original context of minority grievances. On the other hand, the Sinhala nationalists continued to ignore the salience of minority grievances. Both sides thus put pressures on the space for a provisional set of political structures that could acknowledge legitimate questions of minority rights and end the civil war. Uyangoda (2003), a senior member at the SSA, writes:

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10 Uyangoda (2001) has responded to various criticisms on the Left that NGOs are complicit with a new politics of neoliberal dispossession. I agree with his general argument that we should not automatically malign NGOs, especially considering their potentially transformative political role. I do still believe, however, that they arise in a specific political economic context that must remain visible in order to avoid an easy narrative of the new emancipatory possibilities they offer.
What it also means is that the question of minority rights has moved beyond the sphere of political competition conducted through democratic means. Its terms are shaped by the dynamics and consequences of the war between the Sri Lankan state and sovereignty-seeking Tamil nationalists. (247)

According to his argument, ethnicity maintains a separate existence over and above society. The lack of a solution to the former threatens the latter with collapse. The goal then is to fashion a set of institutions responsive to ethnic concerns. These concerns and grievances are defined according to the notion of competitive advantage among ethnic groups in obtaining state resources. Uyangoda and others thus operationalized ethnicity as an autonomous variable. Sunil Bastian (1994), for example, approaches ethnicity from the angle of competitive advantage and identity. While wisely rejecting the idea that ethnicity is an ahistorical expression of psychic unity among group members, Bastian defines ethnicity according to a static set of criteria. He argues that ethnicity can be approached as both group-related interest and as an organizational form of identity (Bastian 1994: 148). Leftists such as Uyangoda and political scientists such as Bastian offered a narrow and occasionally static idea of ethnicity that an institutionally mandated resolution could accommodate.

In developing a new concept of ethnicity, these authors explicitly opposed themselves to the previous Left problematic of ethnicity. In this regard, they contributed a valuable enlargement to the discourse, finally acknowledging ethnicity in its own right. Bastian (1994) sums up this critique:

There are parallels between the modernization approach and the orthodox Marxist view at a theoretical level. As with the modernization approach, the latter relegates ethnicity to the past. Orthodox Marxist analysis expected ethnicity to be replaced by the concept of
class. Again we see the replacement of one category by another…Another feature of this economism is to explain away ethnicity as a ‘manipulation of the ruling class’, or ‘false consciousness’…But what has been most damaging as a result of these theories has been the refusal to analyse ethnicity and ethnic phenomena as categories that shape societies and history. This has left a big lacuna in certain forms of Marxist analysis.” (146)

Clearly, this is not a superficial engagement with previous interpretations of ethnicity. Nevertheless, it replaces a reductive Marxist understanding of ethnicity with a positivism that defines ethnicity according to a mechanical set of attributes. For this reason, Leftists influenced by the political science way of thinking were unable to dialectically link ethnicity to the wider social totality.

Furthermore, by treating ethnicity as a bounded category, these authors ran the risk of making invisible tensions in its use by different groups for different purposes, which could help disaggregate it. The Left-oriented political science created a framework for a static set of actors, such as the government and the LTTE, which erased alternative articulations of political identity within and across these communities. Uyangoda, for example, maps ingrained political views directly onto ethnic groups. This move is similar to Jayawardena’s attempt to identify the petty bourgeois with Sinhala nationalism as such. Uyangoda expands this way of thinking to ethnic groups as a whole. Uyangoda (1994) argues that, “The state itself is located in a social formation which is differentiated and fragmented along the non-class cleavage of ethnicity” (89). He refers in particular to the “Sinhalese ideological construction” of ape rata, or “our land,” the territorial possessionist idiom that shaped Sinhala conceptions of the unitary state. The problem with this theoretical description is that it leaves little room for the historical agency of actors that do not identify with the stereotyped positions of their respective ethnic groups. Strangely then, this
leaves Uyangoda himself out of the picture! Thus, his melancholic attitude in general toward the possibility of a positive, internally generated outcome to the conflict:

It is with this background that an external agency had to intervene in the 1980s in order to redefine the terms of Sri Lanka’s constitutional debate so that the principle of ethnicity-based power sharing would become acceptable in the constitutional discourse. That external agency was the Indian state, and the instrument through which that intervention was made was the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987. The Indian intervention accomplished two important things that have some implication for minority rights in Sri Lanka. The first is the acknowledgment of the idea that Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic nation, and the second is the recognition that a multi-ethnic society needed new political institutions to give effect to minority claims for sharing state power. …The post-1994 constitutional thinking of the People’s Alliance Government is basically framed within that structure. (Uyangoda 2003: 305)

While at the very least associating the intervention of India with a regime on the ground, he fails to theorize the latter’s social base. It merely exists on the fragile structure of warring society, threatening to implode at any moment. More dangerously though, this position led Uyangoda and others to ignore the contradictions within the LTTE, particularly its claim to “sole representative status” of the Tamil people. By reifying political actors within the constitutional and legal-oriented framework of the peace process, the Left failed to provide an adequate critique of the LTTE’s monopolization of the “voice of the Tamil community.”

At the same time, in the early days of Left rethinking the problematic of ethnicity, there were attempts to create a more dynamic class-oriented framework. I am thinking in particular of Newton Gunasinghe’s attempt (1987) to map ideological “crystallizations” onto distinct Sinhala
social and political formations. Ahilan Kadirgamar (2012) has referred to this as the “Lankan Marxist” tradition of engaged analysis during the early to mid 1980s. These theorists tried to connect distinct political positions on ethnicity to social forces on the ground, perhaps to identify bases for progressive mobilization. This orientation culminated in the pivotal edited collections, *Ethnicity and Social Change* (1984) and *Facets of Ethnicity in Sri Lanka* (1987). According to Kadirgamar, this way of theorizing ethnicity, however, was submerged eventually by the push to define ethnicity in a singular way for an administered, legalistic “solution,” and according to the knowledge practices of NGO research. Nevertheless, I think that even this form of research failed to adequately theorize ethnicity itself.\(^{11}\) It invested its theoretical energies in the category of class, though in a highly nuanced framework. In contrast, I have attempted to employ the concept of “political rationality” throughout this essay in order to understand the flexible meanings and functions of ethnicity on its own terms.

Generally speaking, the above uses of ethnicity during the PA regime have been tied to either modified Marxist frameworks or political science. Anthropologists and sociologists, however, have also tried to frame issues of ethnic identity in ways that may help us better understand the flexibility of ethnicity and its relationship to political power and the state (Brass 1985). Employing Fredrik Barth’s (1969) foundational approach to the study of ethnicity, authors such as Thomas Eriksen (1993) have attempted to define ethnicity not by any static cultural content but by active processes of self-ascription. In particular, ethnicity can refer to a general group of people, or to a more tight-knit ethnic “association,” depending on the political and social situation. Both Eriksen and Barth stress that ethnicity is not derived from a determinate cultural or political content, but is the symbolic product of ascribing boundaries. This approach is

\(^{11}\) Akhil Gupta helped me with this point.
useful because it avoids a purely instrumental understanding of ethnicity, which, in the PA-oriented political science literature, allegedly operates within the narrow parameters of competitive institutional politics. The anthropological approach recognizes instead the potential multiplicity of ways in which ethnicity is activated in a variety of social settings.

Rogers Brubaker (2002) further develops this mode of inquiry, by looking into the different actors within ethnic groups as well. To do so, he theorizes ethnicity as a category, as opposed to a substantial attribute of groups. He refers to the latter as the phenomenon of “groupness,” which the analyst should avoid, since they may otherwise unwittingly accept participants’ self-descriptions as the actual picture of a given field of political action. Brubaker provides the example of the Kosovo Liberation Army. He refers to this group as a set of “ethnopolitical entrepreneurs” that provoked Serbian regime reprisals against Bosnian civilians during the Yugoslav civil war. This group thus provoked the further consolidation of ethnic identity. Brubaker’s point is that we can’t simply accept the KLA’s self-description of Bosnian ethnicity. A clear parallel in this essay is the LTTE, which arrogated to itself the status of “sole representative” of the Tamil community. The danger inherent to the PA-oriented political science approach described in this section is that it doesn’t sufficiently distinguish actors within communities and the modalities of ethnicity they employ. This may flatten these communities and unwittingly accept as an analytic description the self-portrait of a political interest group within a given community.

Having underlined briefly the sociological and anthropological attempts to disaggregate and pluralize our understanding of ethnicity, I end this section by examining the political rationality specific to the PA regime. This rationality instrumentalized ethnicity in ways that were susceptible to its recuperation within a broader neoliberal framework. This is most apparent
in various authors’ attempts to apply ethnicity as an administrative category as such. They did the practical policy-oriented work of attempting to craft new institutional frameworks. These frameworks, however, could potentially intersect with the neoliberal political rationality. By the latter I mean a rationality that emphasizes “streamlining the state” while market mechanisms take up the abandoned space, a process I briefly described at the beginning of this section. The depoliticization of ethnicity could result in an ever expanding set of bureaucratically decentralized “solutions.” This might involve merely expanding the list of objects of government to a new set of issues that could eventually be decoupled from their initial basis in ethnic criteria.

Sumanasiri Liyanage (1996) argues, for example, that:

Territorial delimitation [under the Thirteenth Amendment] may be worked out taking three principles into consideration. These principles are: (i) the existence of boundaries for a long period even by chance; (ii) administrative rationality; and (iii) ethnicity…When the ethnic tension subsides, the rationality factor may be considered.

(50)

Such a move evacuates ethnic issues of any transformative political content, meaning any substantive link to other issues on the ground, such as class inequality. The Thirteenth Amendment itself does not contain any explicit mention of ethnicity. It proposes only a series of regional Provincial Councils in order to distribute power away from the center. It was only posed as a solution to the ethnic conflict specifically in the Indo-Lanka Agreement (1987), a contingent agreement between two countries. Several authors such as Bastian (1994) and Wickramasinghe (2001) thus anticipated that this form of devolution could be interpreted merely as a name for bureaucratic decentralization. Their attempt to make distinctions, between devolution of

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12 See *The Devolution Debate* (1996), which contains several important essays by leading members of the PA regime.
ethnically-oriented “political power” and decentralization, however, lacked a more convincing theoretical basis. Ethnicity was already defined by a static set of criteria. The ultimate ground of this problematic—operationalizing ethnicity as a narrowly defined variable—thus lent ethnicity to an administrative rationality. This occurred regardless of ad hoc measures by Bastian and other Left-oriented intellectuals to modify the theoretical apparatus by introducing new distinctions.

VI. Conclusion

Let me conclude this essay with a brief narrative of events in the aftermath of the last major engagement by the Left with ethnicity. During the PA regime in the 1990s, the Thirteenth Amendment to devolve power to the provinces and other measures stalled. War and peace produced a mutually contradictory state of “no war, no peace.” By 2002, a peace agreement was signed, known as the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) that acknowledged “parity of status” among the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. By 2003, the agreement was in shreds. In this conjuncture, Sinhala nationalist and Left forces mobilized in order to defeat the LTTE once and for all.

Once again, the tensions among emergent rationalities and existing ones such as majority rule produced contradictions engaged by different social groups. All of this has taken place in an uneven political economic context of intensifying neoliberal capitalism, which has thrown up new challenges. Opposed to the PA-based principles of ethnic distribution, Sinhala nationalists challenged the ethnic framework by basing their argument on the “equal distribution” of the population. A popular rejoinder was the claim, “Why should Tamils or any other minority have a separate place to live, when they can live anywhere else in the country?” This problematic,
manifested at the level of common sense, was propelled forward by different social and political groups. The Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and JVP challenged the peace process in the south.

Additionally, the Left itself tired of the LTTE’s never-ending campaign of assassinations and suppression of the Tamil people. Most prominently, this included the assassinations of liberal and Left figures such as Neelan Tiruchelvam and Ketheswaran Loganathan—noted Tamil intellectuals involved with the government peace process. On the back of these grievances, the new SLFP-led United People’s Freedom Alliance (UPFA) came into power in 2005. These tensions were condensed in key events, now shaped by politico-military contingencies. The government faced the LTTE again on the battlefield. In 2009, with international backing, it won. The meaning of victory, however, seems to have been all but captured by Sinhala nationalists. The Left stands in disarray, while the government claims ethnicity was never even an issue. Sinhala constituencies have linked to a new hegemonic bloc that has come to dominate the postwar moment.

Nevertheless, the UPFA regime’s dominance is not complete. As with any hegemony, it is unstable and contested. As various authors have noted, traditional Sinhala peasant constituencies have a weakened link with the regime (Venugopal 2011; Hewage and Kadirgamar 2008). Despite the regime’s nationalist attempt to insulate itself from global contradictions, its overarching commitment to neoliberal capitalism erodes its social bases. New voices have emerged to critique it, including a splinter faction from the JVP that has disavowed the party’s previous racialism. The political movement created under the umbrella of these Left groups may yet inject new meanings into ethnicity. As I have said throughout this essay, discourses of

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13 This faction has been officially christened as the Peratugami Samajawadi Pakshaya (“Frontline Socialist Party”).
ethnicity will persist. A new Left might conceive new modes of engagement that do not reduce it to another object, nor reify it as a “thing” that stands above the social.

My overarching goal has been to read the Left’s attempts to theorize ethnicity as they were linked to two different rationalities of government, represented by the UF and PA regimes. In so doing, I have refrained from providing a single answer regarding the ways in which ethnicity might be re-envisioned and re-purposed for the present political moment. My goal in this essay is more modest. I have simply proposed that any new Left politics should take into account the genealogy of ideas that have come to form the at times conflicting notions of what ethnicity is. We cannot freely use the term ethnicity and still believe we are necessarily talking about the same thing. Additionally, ethnicity on the ground may very well take new forms, especially in the present postwar moment in which the UPFA regime has peremptorily banished official discussion about ethnicity. It should be our goal—those of us who seek a more critical engagement—to tease out the new forms and idioms of ethnicity in people’s everyday experiences. Brubaker (2002), for example, has proposed that we analyze the contingent events and “practical idioms” of people’s everyday engagements with ethnicity. This mode of analysis enables us to assess potential re-deployments of ethnicity, including those within new political rationalities. For now, when the architecture of the PA has long since decayed and crumbled, only fragments of the Left remain. My hope, however, is that piecing together these fragments may yet reveal the contours of the present moment.
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