

## TURNING ETHNOGRAPHIC TABLES: THE POLITICS OF WAR ZONE WRITING

Darini Rajasingham – Senanayake

On 24 April 2005 Dharmaratnam Sivaram ('Taraki') editorial board member of the pro-Tamil website Tamilnet, was found dead from gunshot wounds to the head several hours after four unidentified persons had abducted him from a restaurant opposite a police station in Colombo. His murder, which followed weeks of threats, is as yet "unsolved."

Six years after his death, it is instructive to revisit his politics and draw lessons from a life lived amidst violence. Mark Whitaker's *Learning Politics from Sivaram: The Life and Death of a Revolutionary Tamil Journalist* (Pluto Press, 2006) is an extended and moving act of mourning and meditation for Sivaram, arguably the best and brightest of a generation of youth lost in Sri Lanka's interminable post-colonial conflicts. Here is a fine-grained, powerful reflection on war, violence, nationalism and their diminishing returns – not only in Sri Lanka. For those who start reading the book knowing the tragic end of its (anti) hero, this biography of the "life and death of a revolutionary Tamil journalist" is a celebration of a life lived to the full (if not always wisely).

*Learning Politics* from Sivaram is many things: biography, ethnography and intellectual history. At one level, the narrative constitutes an extended ethnographic encounter, initially between a Princeton anthropology graduate student and his informant, Sivaram, then a radical student of politics and philosophy, in Batticaloa, the picturesque, battle-scarred coastal town on Sri Lanka's east coast; their friendship begins with a chance meeting on the steps of the Batticaloa library. On another level, the book is an ethnography of Tamil nationalism and its riposte to post-colonial Sinhala nationalism, violence and displacement. It also touches on diaspora identity politics and the transnational networks that shaped and were shaped by Sivaram. *Learning Politics* is also about idealism and disillusionment, violence and anti-violence, among a lost generation of youth.

Whitaker's project gains considerable importance in the context of the creeping "Militarisation of anthropology" and

related social sciences in an era of the US-led 'global war on terror.' Recently, because of specialized knowledge of other cultures, peoples, histories, religions, languages, ways of being and doing, some anthropologists have been enlisted and embedded to teach cultural sensitivity and identity politics to self-styled forces of counter terrorism and liberal democracy. Social scientists, particularly anthropologists and psychologists, have also been called up to decode, translate, and help win the hearts and minds of Afghans, Iraqis and others. A few have been killed, sometimes by informants. At the same time, the ethics and politics of anthropologists in war zones have become cause for concern, and in 2008 the American and British anthropology associations devoted panels at their annual conferences to the ethics of anthropologists working in war zones, and have sought to review fieldwork codes of conduct – just when it seemed that the discipline had come to terms with its imperial history and complicity in the colonial enterprise.

In *Learning Politics from Sivaram*, however, Whitaker sets out, clearly and self-consciously, to reverse the traditional relationship between anthropologist and native informant and the power/knowledge hierarchies that structure the ethnographic encounter.

### Idealism and the 'making of terrorism'

There are few books that enable us to understand the forces that drive idealistic youth to join social movements that may morph into terror groups or war machines. *Learning Politics* goes some distance towards filling this lacuna. It is a political and intellectual history of the milieu and life worlds of a fractured generation of idealistic and radical Tamil, and to a lesser extent Sinhala, youth caught in Sri Lanka's long and intertwined conflict. It is about the politics of connection between Tamil and Sinhala radical youth allied with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in the early days when the collective struggle was for social transformation and economic justice, as much as the later ethnicization of the struggle for social transformation, identity politics, parting



of ways, fragmentation and killings. Sivaram, as Whitaker portrays him, was a Gramscian-style 'organic' intellectual, as well as a fighter and ideologue of the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE).

The Batticaloa Reading Circle contextualizes the larger strands of this book about Sivaram and his cohorts: intelligent, self-conscious and above all idealistic youth, inspired by world historical intellectual currents of revolutionary Marxism and post-colonial theory, caught in webs of violence, nationalism and civil war that sometimes they themselves had spun. After laying down the book one is struck by the fact that this is the story of a generation of youth lost in the island's two civil wars, the best and brightest of whom had left the island, died or were assassinated – as was Sivaram.

These were youth from communities at the margins of an over-centralized post-colony dominated by urban elites, disillusioned by the failed promise of independent Sri Lanka. Revolutionary Marxism and post-colonial nationalism included carrying guns for the struggle, as evident in the JVP insurrection in the south and Tamil nationalist struggle in the east and north. These young men (the book is silent on women in these movements) were to live and die for the cause of social justice and national liberation, unlike their urban elite counterparts that the book's protagonist tried to relate to in Colombo and the university of Peradeniya; he later gave up, dropping out of University. For these youth from the periphery of the nation-state, an inclusive post-colonial nationalism, civil and political rights and economic justice were integrally and consciously articulated, only to be undermined by militarism, ethno-nationalism and factionalism.

Whitaker chronicles Sivaram's milieu: moving from his home, family, kinship, social and intellectual milieu, to his relocation from Batticaloa to Colombo and later Peradeniya, his fighting years involved with the LTTE and later ambivalence (especially after the Karuna split), the years of journalism, human rights work, Tamilnet, and the end of Sivaram. It is also a biography and intellectual history of a fighter who refused to see flight overseas as an option. Whitaker's protagonist, Sivaram, had dropped out of university to advance the Tamil nationalist struggle, had worked with guns, and somewhere down the line decided that the pen is mightier than the sword.

The process of ethnographic disclosure takes the form of an extended debate, over many years between the two about the uses of violence and nonviolence, an argument inflected

with youthful revolutionary zeal, rhetorical flourishes and post-structuralist jargon that flows back and forth between Whitaker, the anthropologist, and Sivaram – the native informant – both equally versed in post-colonial theory, Wittgenstein, and culture critique. Fieldwork power relations are continuously reversed and reinstated, and finally the hierarchies fragmented in the understanding that the author comes to, that: "nationalism is a proximity issue." Finally, an apolitical US-trained anthropologist learns the ambivalent politics of (violent) engagement beyond the easy political posturing of armchair intellectuals and social science objectivism. A fighter's perspective is given voice and legitimacy. Sometimes Sivaram calls Whitaker "young man" though Whitaker was in fact the older of the two – signalling the constant recalibration of their relationship against the markers of identity, authority and ethnography in the war zone. At other times Whitaker would be fleeing with or saving Sivaram from the powers that be in Colombo.

Whitaker, the 'objective', slightly comic, self-deprecating, American anthropologist learns politics (kinship and kingship) from his informant, friend morphed into fictive kinsman, machang (friend, brother-in-law), Sivaram. In the course of the book anthropologist and informant, both versed in post-structuralism, (neo) Marxism, globalization and its discontents, constantly challenge each other, and Whitaker's notions of social scientific 'objectivity.' The two macangs drink together and work together (quite often in this order) to 'explode' traditional representational frames of the field informant, the anthropologist already attuned to the politics and poetics of representation is tutored in the real-life stakes of knowledge production in the war zone.

### The politics of representation

Even as the 'war on terror,' peace building, and post-war reconstruction (that increasingly look like the same thing these days) seemed to rewire a range of local wars in the global south, military research in contemporary culture wars has become a multibillion dollar knowledge industry. As Sharon Wienberger (2008) has noted: 'Last year, the Pentagon provided almost USD 60 million for the Human Terrain System, a Department of Defence program that represents the latest incarnation of the US military's long, troubled relationship with social science.'

Anthropologists may now teach cultural sensitivity to occupying forces and the finer points of ethno-religious, sectarian and tribal difference among native populations. The specialized ritual and cultural knowledge that they impart may also be used in counterterrorism operations aimed to govern,



divide and rule a population. Cross-cultural encounters wrought in terrorism's 'heart of darkness' have raised troubling spectres of the discipline's origins in the colonial encounter and debates on the role of social science and area studies research in the Cold War. After all, Orientalist modes of knowledge production in the age of empire were rife with power/ knowledge hierarchies that served to govern natives and legitimise colonialism. Has anthropology then come full circle?

The militarization of anthropology has not been without problems: two social scientists have been killed in the field, one in Afghanistan and one in Iraq. Critics fear that this sort of work poses ethical problems, particularly if it's telling the military who is, or isn't, a potential enemy. Last November, the executive board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) condemned the effort, saying it "creates conditions which are likely to place anthropologists in positions in which their work will be in violation of the AAA code of ethics" as well as endanger other anthropologists by bringing suspicion on their activities. The association is also proposing changes to its rules of ethics that would tighten restrictions on secret research.

In this context *Learning Politics from Sivaram* is a timely, relevant and insightful ethnography. In Whitaker's rendition, the war zone is a complex place, crammed with analysis and intellectuals, rather than a tabula rasa as projected in the colonial encounter and more recently in humanitarian and development circles that speak of the "absence of local capacity" social capital, etc. Thus Whitaker notes:

It is one of the peculiarities of Sri Lanka that a nation so lacking in effective political solutions has been nevertheless, so replete with subtle, heartfelt, and accurate analyses of its own failures. For we have already established that there is no shortage of able and eloquent Sri Lankan intellectuals and in fact they are obviously rather thicker on the ground than in my own, deeply anti-intellectual America.

A corrective to dominant representations of conflict zones, and dedicated to "Sri Lankan journalists who like Sivaram risk their lives everyday or have already lost them to keep the stories coming", this book should be mandatory reading for international development and peace-building consultants who fly into conflict-torn countries confident of the

superiority and objectivity of their international 'tool-kits' of and for knowledge production and the concomitant 'lack of local capacity,' imagining conflict-affected countries as peopled by noble savages, victims and brutes in need of aid and psycho-social interventions, aside from a thin layer of 'civil society'— a founding and funding myth of the international aid industry.

Rather, the anthropologist also learns politics from his key-informant, who, Cassandra-like, senses his approaching doom unable to change his fate. Seemingly atoning for past sins, and contributions to *divide et impera* (classifying, dividing and ruling the 'other' was imperialism's past and present), a new post-colonial, politically correct and reflexive anthropology would eschew using anthropological knowledge to exploit social cleavages, and rather explore the ties that bind diverse ethno-religious groups sharing the same land we hope. Whitaker tries to show how Sivaram and his mates sought to work with like-minded Marxists and other fellow travellers who shunned narrow ethnic nationalisms, but eventually gave up the struggle for a purer Marxism.

There is no nostalgia for violence or victimhood in *Learning Politics*. At once sympathetic and hard-headed, consciously avoids the soft-focus, violence-aestheticising and magnifying tropes that characterized over a decade of anthropological analysis of 'ethnic' conflict and stories of rumours of violence and victim-hood (that often legitimize renewed violence) in villages, troubled and untroubled, near and far in Sri Lanka, since the war's beginning and the discipline's interpretative turn. From Batticaloa, his primary fieldwork site in the heart of the conflict zone, the book moves well beyond attempts to tell stories of violence from the "native's point of view"; romances with others, their violence, victim-hood and suffering, with a stated purpose: to portray the agency and analysis of the informant/ 'terrorist' maccang, and learn from him, while locating him for the reader in his social and intellectual milieu.

Whitaker is in good intellectual company when turning ethnographic tables, learning from, rather than 'translating' the 'other' in Sri Lanka, an island favoured by anthropologists if not the gods. Finally, one wishes that Whitaker had followed the logic of Sivaram's later arguments on the transnational dimensions of violence in the island. That apart, this book may mark the coming of age of 'ethnic conflict' analysis and the 'anthropology of violence' on Sri Lanka. ■