

Call for Papers: “1977 and After - 40 Years of the Open Economy in Sri Lanka”

1977 was a turning point in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The right-wing United National Party returned to government in a landslide victory after seven fractious years in opposition. The components of the previous left-wing coalition government were politically discredited and electorally crushed. J.R. Jayewardene and his Cabinet of Ministers embarked on deregulation, globalisation and privatisation of the economy, in parallel with the Thatcher-Reagan era and fifteen years in advance of India. The Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme; establishment of Free Trade Zones (initially in Katunayake and Biyagama); and Colombo Master Plan were flagship infrastructure projects. Women were visible in export manufacturing, in services, and as transnational migrants. Another kind of structural adjustment, to the administrative, governmental (including later electoral) and constitutional system locked-in economic and political regime changes in the avowed interests of ‘stability’ and ‘development’. Critics complained that ‘opening’ the economy was coupled with ‘closing’ the polity, as authoritarianism muscled out a beleaguered democracy. Anti-Tamil riots, including in plantation districts, in August of 1977 signalled an increase in frequency of communal violence (1981 and 1982). As ‘ethnic conflict’ exploded after July 1983 into terror, militarisation, displacement and occupation, causal connections were drawn between the economic drivers of war, and its ‘hidden economies’. There was ferment in society as a new middle class emerged with different social, spatial and ethnic features. Amidst spiralling unemployment, the conspicuous consumption of a small minority provoked social discontent when austerity economics prescribed the withdrawal of food stamps and diminution of social welfare benefits for the poor. The disciplining of labour to create an environment friendly to capital investment was attempted initially through legislation but realised extra-legally. The debacle of the July ’80 strike was the beginning of the slow death of organised labour. In contrast, the disintegration and disorientation of the Party and non-Party Left was swift; and more or less finalised in the aftermath of the implosion of the Soviet Union and transition to the market in China and the former Socialist bloc.

The elements of this narrative, indeed the critique itself, have long ceased to stimulate fresh enquiry. Why this is so, is a problem that looms large in any reconstruction of the intellectual history of this period; and forecast for the contours of critical thought in the near future. To invite renewed engagement on the political economy of Sri Lanka and its categories of analysis, expressions of interest are solicited for

articles, notes, reflections, works-in-progress of between 2000 and 5000 words, on the theme ‘1977 and After: 40 Years of the Open Economy in Sri Lanka’. Expressions of interest should be emailed to polity@ssalanka.org no later than the 15th of November, 2016. Final papers must reach the editors no later than December 31st, 2016. The next issue will be published in March 2017.

Some topics for investigation may include, but are not restricted to, the following:

1. How to gauge the long arc of post-’77 economic policies: neoliberal, mixed, pragmatic or confused, and to what ends?
2. How to evaluate the significance of the new political economy for the timbre and trajectory of capitalism in Sri Lanka?
3. Where to plot new sites of capital accumulation, and how to trace patterns of class formation since 1977?
4. How has the consciousness of dominant and subaltern classes been mediated by social identities of ethnicity, religion, caste, and region, etc.?
5. How to grasp the weakening, and/or strengthening, and/or production of gendered inequalities in the home, the community and the workplace between men and women of diverse classes in this era?
6. How to reconcile women’s waged work in industry and services and the apparent rigidity of gender norms and roles?
7. How to track the evolution and consolidation of the ‘common sense’ desirability of the open economy across ideological, party, and class divides, and the tensions and negotiations that have punctuated its making over the past four decades?
8. How to chart the correspondence between the rush to religiosity and its militant expression in political and social life, the challenges to traditional religious orders/practices, and the local and global circuits of ‘new capitalism’?
9. What shapes do reaction and resistance, of progressive and regressive varieties, to the new dispensation take? How does it manifest in intra-party conflicts; in political organisation and alignment; in the production of ‘civil society’ and its discourse(s); in extra-constitutional movements; in arts and culture, etc.?
10. How has critical social theory and its practitioners in Sri Lanka responded to the transformations heralded by the ‘open economy’; and with what outcome for progressive political projects?