

ANTHROPOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY

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Jonathan Spencer (2007). *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 203 pp.

Anthropology offers an ideal point of departure for a radical rethinking of democratization theories. Its ethnographic method has the potential to enter and understand worlds (such as popular politics) which are often left unexplored or under-explored by the more formal methodologies of other social science disciplines. However, despite this potential, until recently the anthropology of democracy has been a marginal topic of study. Indeed, anthropology has not only failed to generate ethnographic studies of 'democracy,' but it has also failed to provide a critique of the Orientalism that is entailed in much of the theorizing about democracy. Universalistic and modernist misconceptions about democratization processes and the assumed homogeneity and static nature of culture are still commonplace in comparative politics and political science.

Following the decolonization period, anthropologists produced ethnographic accounts of how democracy was working (or failing to work) in the new independent countries (see Geertz 1963). In this context, democracy was considered a universal political form, and an indicator of modernity and progress. In recent years government agencies, NGOs, and international organizations have promoted democracy as the panacea for developing countries (see Paley 2002). These organizations often focus on promoting free and fair elections and good governance. In today's political discourse 'democracy' is widely considered the only legitimate political regime. Mainstream political studies which try to make sense of democratization processes have therefore often been trapped in this modernist narrative.

Only in the last decade have anthropologists begun to turn their attention to formal political institutions and to macro-political areas of inquiry. Many of the current ethnographic insights on the working of democracy in different settings

have emerged as part of discussions about 'the state', 'post-communism regimes' post-colonialism, and civil society. However, few have been the studies which directly address democracy as an object of ethnographic enquiry. Illustrations about how democracy has come to be understood and practiced in local contexts can be found in the work of Gutmann in Mexico, Paley's study of Chilean democracy, and Schirmer's work on Guatemalan politics and the military.

From the 1950s to the early 1980s anthropologists, did not pay much attention to democratic politics in Sri Lanka. During this period they produced a large body of literature on kinships, land tenure, village and urban Buddhism, caste and rural change. With some noteworthy exceptions (e.g., Margret Robinson 1975), studies on the politics of democracy have generally failed to exploring local politics ethnographically.

In the last decade anthropologists, intrigued by the phenomenon of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and by the ethnic issue, went back to the study of politics in Sri Lanka. Importantly this new literature on the anthropology of democracy draws attention to the daily lives and political struggles of people living in non-elite sectors of society.

It is in this context that we need to understand Jonathan Spencer's seminal work *Anthropology, Politics, and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia* (2007). Jonathan Spencer is professor of the anthropology of South Asia at the University of Edinburgh. Prior to this book, his published books include *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka* (1990); *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (1990); *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (co-edited with Alan Barnard, 1996); and *The Conditions of Listening: Essays on Religion, History and Politics in South Asia* (co-edited with C. J. Fuller, 1996).

In *Anthropology, Politics, and the State*, Spencer argues that the modern institutions of government in post-colonial countries have been understudied due to their presumed 'transparency' and foreign origin (2007). Accordingly, since

'democracy' originates in the West, its interpretation in post-colonial states has been considered essentially similar to those in the West and hence anthropologically irrelevant and intellectually unchallenging (2007:13). However, through his ethnographical (1990, 2007) study of rural electoral politics in Sri Lanka, he shows how democracy has different meanings for different sections of society.

Building on the findings of this research, this book offers a new way of analyzing the relationship between culture and politics, with special attention to democracy, nationalism, the state and political violence in Sri Lanka and India, in particular, and South Asia in general. This book concerns the way in which the politicization of culture has destabilized anthropologists' assumptions about cultural difference, and the language they use to talk about it. But it also concerns the way politics operates in different cultural and historical contexts, and proposes anthropologists to distance themselves from the reductionist models of the political, which dominate much academic writing.

For Spencer, there are two aspects in the definition of the political: 'expressive and performative as to the instrumental; and the 'dynamic force of the political. This book quite convincingly address both aspects of 'political' in the cultural contexts of South Asia which have been run through elegantly crafted eight chapters namely: The Strange Death of Political Anthropology; Locating the Political; Culture, Nation, and Misery; Performing Democracy; States and Persons; The State and Violence; Pluralism in Theory, Pluralism in Practice, and Politics and Counter-politics.

Though these eight chapters are equally important in understanding 'other people's politics,' the performative aspect of democracy which Spencer explains in chapter four is, in my view, quite fascinating. What kind of object do anthropologists take 'democracy' to be? They can systematically examine the gap between the promise of popular decision-making and the stark reality of disempowerment and exclusion. A second line of inquiry would be on the technology of democracy – the rituals, procedures, and material culture of the ballot. A third is to assess the cultural implications of democratic procedures and ideas as they are received in different contexts. According to Spencer modern democracies hinge on the idea of representation, of one person standing for a much larger group of people, making the decisions 'they' might expect to make had they been consulted. And the mysterious link between representative and represented is established and renewed in ritual form; through elections. He proposes that the idea of elections is best understood as ritual actions rather than instrumental (2007:78). So, Spencer argues that elections, like other so-called political rituals, are not epiphenomenal to the world of real politics. Rather, they are crucial sites for the production and reproduction of the political. This is an exciting book for political scientists, sociologists and anthropologists, but students and scholars from other disciplines would also be impressed by the conviction in Spencer's arguments and the diversity of ethnography and case studies. ■

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