

Students, Soldiers, the Princess and the Tiger:

Contradictions in the Iconography of the Nation.

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On the 4th of February I watched TV with my family. Watching the spectacle of docile bodies dancing in a theater of power, I realized, as usual, that my reaction was different from that of others in the room. As such I was reminded that the collective representations of the 'imagined community' of a nation need not be consensual: Even though I watched what was dished out, I didn't cheer on cue. Rather I formulated a critical response in my mind. This response turns on a simple premise, culled from Marx: modern nations are inherently contradictory¹. It is the play of these contradictions that the State attempts to manage; it is in these breaks, oppositions and cracks that radical social struggles emerge and operate.

As viewers of live TV broadcasts, we are positioned in an 'imagined community'. The construct, pioneered in recent years by Benedict Anderson is now widely used in the literature on nationalism². Anderson argues, that any community which is not small enough to be 'a face to face' one, must be 'imagined' into existence. So much is obvious. But what may not be is simultaneity of the 'imaginings' of the inhabitants of a modern nation. Anderson captures this 'simultaneous imaginings' by highlighting the emergence of readers of mass

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circulation newspapers in modern nations, who 'observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barber shop or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in every day life...creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations'³. Live TV coverage goes one better. Reading a newspaper is a practice of simultaneous consumption, but it is always yesterday's news that makes the paper, and in Sri Lanka we never believe what we read. In the context of live TV, both the viewing community and the event are simultaneous; furthermore it is positioned as 'real' and 'true': it takes more work to argue that live images are 'fictions taken for the real.' This then is our positioning as viewers, as we sit down to watch TV on Independence day.

The spectacle we see, must be understood as an ideological product, which, Althusser argues, is not only a system of ideas; it is also what we do: a set of practices⁴. The apparatus of state, such as the schools and army become sites of ideological practices, in other words, how they train people becomes important. In Althusser's categories, ideological practices 'interpellate subjects'.

What are the ideological practices foregrounded in this spectacle on Independence day? The practices of the docile, disciplined body are central. The radical French historian, Michel Foucault argues, that our age has 'discovered the body as an object and target of power'⁵.

The disciplining of the body, hitherto restricted to the monasteries and armies, is extended to schools, prisons and asylums. Discipline in its attention to the 'micro-practices' of the body - for example, how a student dresses, walks, stands - produces 'subjected and practiced bodies,' 'docile' bodies.

The opening sequence of the live TV broadcast of the Independence day show depends upon, and is produced by such disciplined docile bodies. Students stand to attention; collectively their bodies make up a map of the nation, and icons of its religions. So what?, you may ask: isn't discipline a good thing? But note the center of the map where the navy band fits in so easily. Note that the disciplined bodies of students and soldiers are continuous here, the soldiers and students could replace each other, stand in for each other, and the iconography of the nation would not change. This, I suggest, is dangerous. A disciplined docile body is not a dissenting body, nor a creative body. The training of school children for mass 'drill displays' -to use the common revealing term -has blurred the subject position of student and soldier. Simply put, these students will become soldiers and fight and die in the war, in a chronology of activity which many may not think to question. Or put another way, the interpellation of soldier has been pre-figured in the schools, the subject position of the student has been militarized. As such, the ideological iconography that makes claims of ethnic harmony, is a grim reminder of

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war: a contradiction in the iconography of the nation has emerged upon the screen.

In the next sequence, another contradiction in our iconography emerges, along the axis of gender. The image here is of an anchor being released and raised, the voice over tells us that the 'anchor' is produced by naval bodies, the sea which 'parts, waits and waves' is made up of dancers from a troupe known as the peace ballet. There is here a vague, superficial reference to peace, yet the ideological thrust links masculinity to military authority. It is the anchor—the icon of the navy—that is the agent here, it moves, disturbs and marks. The sea is passive, waiting to be acted upon, parting as the anchor drops, waving as it raises. What is more, the sea is also a sign of nature. As Sherry Ortner has argued in a classic paper⁶ dominant patriarchal ideologies, often posit nature as feminized, while masculinizing culture. In terms of dominant ideological norms, I argue then, a passive image, linked with nature is also a feminized image, which here sharply reemphasizes the active masculine icon of military authority⁷. It is important to note that my critique here turns on the gendering of the icons themselves, not on the biological sex of the bodies that make them up. That is, in the images of anchor and the sea, the presence of women soldiers, and male dancers do not affect my argument: gender, as an ideological construct is not reducible to biology. It is, in this context, that we observe the defiance of death by military motor cyclists, a sign of violent masculinity, produced by the practices of female soldiers. Once again, I suggest, a contradic-

tion in the iconography of the nation has emerged; the collective representation of the nation has begun to crack.

Finally, I want to move to what was presented as the special feature of the celebrations, the enactment of the coming of Vijaya. Throughout the evening this performance was billed as a sign of the nation's ancient history and heritage. This was not, however, the first time 'history' appeared in the spectacle. Earlier, a message of peace was read by four couples taken to represent the four ethnic groupings of the nation. Here the message explicitly stated: "we are bound together by a common history...." So I waited in anticipation for a re-enactment of this common history. Now, the coming of Vijaya is not a tale with any historicity; it is a particular version of the past produced in different socio-historical contexts: the shifting nature of myth, has been demonstrated by scholars⁸. So as I waited for this common 'history,' I wasn't looking for a lesson in ancient history. Rather, what I anticipated was a recreation of the myth that would speak to the unity of the nation. In particular I recalled that since Vijaya's second wife was a *Pandian* princess, perhaps this marriage would be foregrounded, and the Tamils, albeit under the sign of the submissive wife, would appear in the history of the nation. Yet, it was not to be: what followed was the exact opposite, for the princess had disappeared, only to be replaced by a Tiger. In this version of the myth, Vijaya is cursed by Kuvani; the curse is physically manifested in the form of a Tiger⁹. And the Tiger, a well known sign in dominant ideological practices, is kept at bay by a sacred thread (*pirith nule*). And so fi-

nally a massive contradiction in the iconography of the nation emerged: two histories were invoked, one speaking of commonalities, unity and peace, the other of curses and disruption. ■

Notes

1 I am influenced here by Marx's "On the Jewish Question" in Tucker, Robert ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, [1843] 1978 and *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1844] 1970.

2. *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1983.

3. Anderson, 1983: 39-40

4.. 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus' in Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, London: New Left Books, 1971

5. *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979: 136, snf 135-169, passim.

6. 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture' In *Women, Culture and Society*, Michelle Rosaldo and Louis Lamphere (eds.), Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1974:67-87

7. For an insightful, ethnographically grounded argument which demonstrates the links between masculinity and military practices see Malathi de Alwis "The Manliness of War and the Abstraction of Death," in *Pravada* 1992: 1(2)

8. R.A.L.H. Gunawardena, "People of the Lion: Sinhala Consciousness in History and Historiography" in *Ethnicity and Social Change*, Colombo: SSA, 1984

9. Even though it was depicted as a spotted animal and referred to as a leopard, its symbolic significance as a Tiger could not be missed.