

## NATION OR GRID? CHANGING THE CO-ORDINATES

*Unmaking the Nation, The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka. Edited by Pradeep Jeganathan & Qadri Ismail, SSA, 1995.*

"... such is the deceitful game of history. People sacrifice their time, put their freedom and even their lives at risk just to cross, or eliminate borders they know are absurd. And then- soon afterwards- in a single decree, the borders disappear without a trace.....

In revealing their transience, these borders also seem to expose the futility of all former sacrifices. But perhaps it is really the other way round: if it weren't for those who in their battle against borders risked everything, the borders would not disappear, but would become a net and all of us trapped insects inside" (Ivan Klima)<sup>1</sup>

Frantz Fanon argued that the major weapon of the colonizers was the imposition of their image on the colonized. In order to be free the colonized need to shake off this imposed self-image. The writers of *Unmaking the Nation* aim to break this straight-jacket, selecting the discourse of the nation as their target. The nation as a representation of power is exposed, its ideology undressed. Suspicious of the rhetoric of nationalism, with its rallying cries to protect cultural identity they seek to "unmake" the notion of a distinct race, culture and nation. The question of identity as an organizing principle of politics becomes a defining theme. This is pertinent in a world in which the decline of Marxism means that class as a universal subject has waned. This book is about crossing borders, an important project if we are to see beyond the cliches which govern our lives and see that our horizon is only one frontier.

David Scott's article attempts to displace the historicism that has dominated discussions of the nation as a cultural form. The "People of the Lion" by R.A.L.H Gunawardana is an example of this historicism. Although Scott admires the way in which Gunawardana meticulously "takes us through various stages of collective identity in Sri Lanka", he feels that the writer is too dogmatic. If only historians would mock their linear craft occasionally and play the Fool for a day, to see the world in another way. Scott's aim is to challenge the "scrupulous attention to discipline" and sensitise us to the hybrid strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of a nation. We are asked to abandon traditional strategies for understanding the nation and shift into a textual and metaphoric realm. Is "Midnight's Children" a metaphor for a nation? Why do British football hooligans like to wear Union Jack boxer shorts? These are the kinds of questions we should ask and more. Scott invites us to creep out of bounds, away from more literal readings of the

beginning of nations and grasp the complex web of symbols which make up different and yet common enough thoughts of the nation. Imaginings which allow for common feelings and experiences across social structures through the potency of signs.

David Scott's article aims to sensitise us to what kinds of expression gain currency whilst others are devalued. He wants us to grasp that "the ideological construction of the past is a structure of representations inserted into a political project". Underlying the article is an understanding that the word "difference" is very serious and a recognition that our particularities are counterweights against the homogenising steamroller of universalism. I enjoy the Dadaist provocation of David Scott - his article is a challenge to engage in a duel of epistemologies. We would be wrong to parry his awkward questions and be prepared to engage in mental gymnastics. If nationalism, defined by ethnicity is a brand of false universalism then we need to analyze the inter-relations of difference, power and subjectivity. Nonetheless I am not content to ask, in Scott's style only "so what?". A form of cultural politics seems to emerge from Scott's style/writing/questions in which the fissiparous tendencies of "particularities" are not conditions to be resolved but are seen instead as conditions of freedom. This view must be treated with caution. The fear that universal claims or "totalizing themes" are inherently repressive means that it is arrogance to try to re-imagine the world.

We must recognize that nationalism is an ideology as are many other forms of hierarchy and domination. Aversion to ideological combat means that those breaking down totalities are incapable of counterpoising an unapologetically ideological Right. The logic of competing differences does not heal divisions but intensifies them. Fighting entrenched power requires a strategy. It requires theory. Deconstruction is the much needed moment of transcendence from stale knowledge. It kicks us out of mental sloth. It is a useful catalyst giving us the opportunity to revel in new language allowing us to see the world in Technicolor not just black and white. It is a healthy response to centuries of taken for granted oppositions (white/black, male/female, culture/nature etc.) But how does deconstruction tackle systemic problems? As a woman I can recognize that different women emerge out of differential experience of the race/class/sex nexus. Yet to remain on my level of difference and indulge in linguistic competition with different oppressions does not forge solidarity. Male supremacy is a systemic form of domination, a set of material, institutional relations not just a set of bad attitudes. How are we to break these relations?



I recognise that the deconstructionists provide a counterweight to imperial "authority" and some may consider their tactics as the basis for a "politics of liberation". They defy the rationalization of the world into nation states. However many writers and singers have been dwelling on the theme of "mental slavery" for some time, Bob Marley being one of my favourite examples. So what's new in Scott's argument? Other writers have pointed out that "the real challenge is to make the counter-narrative explicitly".<sup>2a</sup> Yet Scott is content to tease, he comments that "the political task of theoretical intervention is to refuse to be governed by the questions of one's adversaries, that the task in fact is to will, perhaps even to risk changing the problematic in which these questions have appeared to us natural, legitimate or even imperative." I think that an even bigger risk is to recognize that people with their differences exist in a society which still needs to define its purpose for existence. Scott's aim may only be to increase discursive space yet theorists need to engage in a debate in which people, with their differences and in a world in a "state of flux", still need to consider what sort of political culture they wish to belong to. Deconstructionists would appear to be on the side of a political culture in which people act as consumers rather than citizens, a culture in which the consumption of different patterns of lifestyle replicates particularized identities. Yet there are issues which may unite people. Alliances around racism, sexism, the destruction of the environment, better education and more jobs may be the basis for a new political culture. A culture in which people move beyond race, class, religion and ethnicity to forge an identity around the concept of the "citizen".

Scott comments that the political forms of "being-in-common" need to be reformulated. Does he mean that the language to describe what it means to be a citizen needs to be more flexible? He talks of a sense of "urgency" which is always the point at which people (including myself!) tend to end their articles. Perhaps what's needed is that the idea of "being-in-common" simply needs to be acted upon guided by a humanitarian understanding of difference. Community groups affiliated to the ANC in South Africa, struggling against an apartheid regime, being an example of this kind of action. The positive aspect of Scott's article is that it is challenging-it raises questions and it is this type of project which renews theoretical debate. It is an article which is about moving the parameters. Scott's article also encourages us to ask what this thing "reality" is. Many of the things that we take for granted are cultural constructs - even the way in which we organize time. The safe sense of certainty we would like to accept is cultivated. It rarely occurs to us that image-makers and discourse puppeteers are guiding how we act. It is as if we are in the middle of a bland super highway planted with signs. We pass our lives rushing from sign to sign.<sup>2b</sup> That's what I like about writing like David Scott's. He stops the car and takes a long hard look at the writing on the sign.

Pradeep Jeganathan's article is in a similar inquisitive vein to Scott's. He scrutinizes the "construction" of Anuradhapura raising new questions about the history of knowledges in the past. He aims to "unmask" what has made knowledge authoritative. By unpacking the construction of knowledge during

colonialism he reveals that Anuradhapura was "made" in the nineteenth century. This dispels any cherished ideas that Anuradhapura is "ancient". What Pradeep shows is that Anuradhapura was re-made by both nationalists and Orientalists in the nineteenth century and that this reconstruction was shaped by particular relations of power. The "positivistic historiography" of colonial scholars was a validating aspect of the colonial project. The categorisation and ordering of orientalist scholars assisted the re-ordering of time and space in Ceylon. The image of ancient sites decaying spurred the process of restoration and the "civilising" force of the colonizers. The language used by colonial visitors to describe Anuradhapura: "air is heavy and unwholesome", "malaria broods", "damp nature" suggests an inevitability of degeneracy which only the colonizers, with their engineering precision and technical brilliance, can stem. The "natives" are not equipped to deal with the problem." The indolence and apathy of native character are not calculated to struggle against...[the decay]..." In this way, the British, with "their expertise" altered Sinhala identity irrevocably. The forced introduction of Enlightenment values, especially the emphasis on rationality as the source of knowledge and the ordering of society, disrupted traditional religious, social and political identities. It is also important to note that the secular nationalism of the West propounds an ideology for ordering the nation-state which legitimises a particular social and political order. The decision to have two separate administrative units for India and Sri Lanka was critical for the modern identification of Sri Lanka as a separate nation. Thus what Pradeep alerts us to is that even Buddhist nationalism is a reaction to and shaped by modernity. The concept of a Sri Lankan identity is shaped by legislative and territorial changes inaugurated by the British. The power of modernity is that it makes us take these identities for real.

On a wider level, what emerges out of Pradeep's article is the need to revise the academic canon. Knowledge itself needs to be rethought. Gadamer points out that we need a "fusion of horizons". What we have previously taken for granted as the background to valuation needs to be situated as one possibility alongside the different backgrounds to the formerly unfamiliar culture. "The fusion of horizons" operates through developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate contrasts. So that if and when we find substantive support for our initial presumption, it is on the basis of an understanding of what constitutes worth that we couldn't possibly have had at the beginning. We have reached our judgement partly through transforming our standards (in the process).<sup>3</sup> We must stop looking over our shoulders expecting approval from knowledge makers of the past. They made mistakes. It is time to rethink what makes sense and move forward speaking with our own voices, using a language which takes different life experiences and ways of understanding as a fact and doesn't try to conflate or marginalise these.

Jonathan Walters' article "Multireligion on the Bus" makes some interesting comments on how to re-study religions. It takes a fresh look at how identities based on appropriations of religion become a way of looking at the world. However, I had



a problem with taking this article seriously simply because his description of a bus trip seemed like an idealized memory. It also indicated the need to take a gendered analysis of social interaction. I feel that the description of a bus trip by a woman might not receive such a rose-tinted analysis. The type of "intimacy generated" in a bus that I have experienced is a man masturbating on my shoulder (who subsequently received a slap....breaking Walters' "culture of etiquette"!!). I know one Sri Lankan woman who always travels with a pin to ward off any overly intimate advances!! And haven't you noticed how men always sit with their legs wide open invading women's personal space without a thought.....On a more serious note this brings us to the issue that Walters' himself brings up - that of heuristic tools. The concept of individual methodologicalism which remains at the root of Social Science analysis (despite attempts to unleash postmodern anarchy!) is flawed. It can not account for gender differences in experience and sets certain codes for understanding how we should see the world. Walters' is right to suggest that traditional epistemological issues concerning the nature of explanation in the social sciences should be rethought. The essential contestability of normative concepts in fields such as religious studies should be the first problem theorists grapple with before accepting one type of theoretical structure and applying it to social phenomena. This is the legacy that deconstructionists should leave us, the possibility of new types of methodology. The accepted philosophy of knowledge should always have a devil's advocate to toy with.

Qadri Ismail's article sets out to "unmoor identity". In order to achieve this he examines a set of questions including how we should represent a social formation. His task is to examine identity construction within the Sri Lankan Muslim social formation focussing on the Muslim elite from the early years of this century to the late 1980s. Muslims are split into Eastern and Southern Muslims. Nonetheless Muslims as a group, become represented as a peaceful trading community of Arab origin, despite the fact this reflects primarily the Southern male Muslim elite. Qadri thus indicates that the category of "ethnicity" subsumes different types of identity (class, gender). Qadri's discussion of the creation of a Muslim identity is to remind us of those differences. He also examines "Sri Lankan identitarian discourse". A discourse is a regulatory device, it includes and excludes. It is also the site of struggle over the constitution of subjects within it. This means that Sri Lankan identitarian discourse encompasses many positions nonetheless the discourse becomes dominated by nationalist positions. An example may be the Jathika Chinthanaya ("National Ideology") position that there is no ethnic/Tamil/minority "problem" in Sri Lanka. The result has been that subjects who contest the dominant position have been targeted for elimination. Partly out of self-protection and due to the logic of identitarian discourse, the Muslim elite aligned itself with the Sinhala elite. This means that Muslims shaped their identity in accordance with the types of definition used by the dominant position. This does not mean that identity is a stable category-people live with many identities. The success of the identitarian is that s/he makes her/his identity the hegemonic one and therefore sets up a hierarchy of identities. This means that we need to recognize that the setting up of identities involves a power struggle.

Mala de Alwis continues this process of unmaking the self-evident. She explores the role of women in the nationalist movement, showing us how a discourse of "gendered respectability" enabled women to enter the public sphere but simultaneously set certain parameters for the way that women behaved. She also delineates the way in which women are viewed as "sexual objects" and are regulated by "sexuality" which continues to affect women's representation. Mala uses the examples of Hema Premadasa and Mrs. Bandaranaike to show how their "respectable roles" as 'housewives of the public' enabled them to enter, be active and also acceptable in the public domain. This theme is still relevant today, with contemporary gossip about Chandrika Kumaratunge's respectability.

Sitralega Maunaguru also stresses the need for a gendered analysis. She acknowledges that others have made the point that women have been key to the nationalist project but she feels this is still a marginal view. Until this is a mainstream point of view the point "must be re-made until it can be assumed". Her focus is the role of women in latter day Tamil nationalist struggles. Her argument is that the gendered spaces of protest - the wife, mother and warrior confine women to certain roles within the struggle. She also examines the phenomenon of rape in war and shows how this confines women to a discourse of honour and shame. Moving away from the positioning of women within the guerilla movement and other struggles she highlights the positive role women have played in challenging violence and the fact that women resist the roles "given" to them by the guerilla movements and instead struggle for peace.

P.L. de Silva's focus is to look at the construction of "violent masculinity" within the LTTE struggle. He attempts to draw out the props of militarism - the glorification of martyrs, the totalizing attempts of the LTTE to order the world and the emotional dependence the LTTE extends over its cadres. He concludes that the "combat mode" that the LTTE has chosen is "doomed to failure in the long term". I thought that the comments about the strength of women in the LTTE was useful for understanding how relationships at large are structured by social practices which we take for granted unless they are absent. P.L. de Silva indicates that because women are the emotional support in ordinary families they have more strength to endure isolation. Men, on the other hand, rely on emotional nannying in conventional families tend to displace their dependence on to the LTTE. Perhaps if we are to struggle for a more peaceful society we need to be more aware of people's emotional needs and encourage men to build a masculinity around the necessity of these emotions rather than reifying their masculine selves.

The last essay in the volume by Yuvi Thangarajah deals with the Veddahs of the east coast. This makes the point that a dominant identity can conflate other identities in its attempts to engulf more recruits to a nationalist cause. He looks at the way in which the Veddahs have been positioned by Tamil nationalists in a parallel with the Sinhala nationalists' positioning of Tamils. He also offers insight into how the discourse of modernity sets up hierarchies in which certain patterns of



behaviour are deemed better than others. *The enforcement of these hierarchies through legal mechanisms indicates the way in which the State has the power to order and hierarchise.* To me, this comment is one of the most important insights in the book. The State still has a monopoly on the means of violence. An active resistance against various oppressions must also have an understanding on the role and nature of the State. It is not enough to disaggregate hierarchies and tackle them piecemeal. In order to tackle systemic exploitation we need to understand how economic exploitation in all its forms - flexibility, "Post-Fordism", "information technologies" is still about control rather than fragmentation. The dispersal of power that has accompanied globalisation does not mean that people are less susceptible to low wages. What has happened is that in an act of presdigitation Capital eludes Labour so that direct action as a form of resistance speaks to an invisible enemy. In order to conjure up that invisible enemy we must keep clear in our minds that problems of identity and ethnicity are accompanied by continuing economic exploitation and the surveillance of a predatory state apparatus.

This is not to undermine the important contribution of "Unmaking the Nation" with its unveiling of hegemonic identities. Definition is the menacing warden of a society which wishes to control certain sections. In medieval Europe, women who displayed any signs of independence and intellect were branded as witches. In order to find out if they were witches they were thrown into a pond. If they drowned they were just "ordinary women", if they swam they were witches. That is why the desire to question, to suspect norms and the impetus to change should be respected. The contributors of this book engage in that dissenting tradition. The discourse of the nation deserves analysis whilst the project of "unmaking" is not frivolous given the power of nationalism to create ethnic enmity.

The question of the usefulness of the nation as a category draws us into a wider debate concerning what unit we should use for social analysis. What hermeneutic tool is useful? Nonetheless I wish the writers had gone further. If the nation is unmade what will the role of the State be? Some writers have commented that on the ground, boundaries matter less

and less and yet political structures assert themselves more and more. How are we to respond to this dilemma? And even if we unmake the nation we cannot disentangle it from dependence. The Sri Lankan state has become increasingly penetrated by foreign investment and global culture. Traditional sovereignty is no longer a viable goal in an era of global interdependence. Although we can demystify globalisation, deconstruction does not offer the tools to overcome dependence. References to local culture are in themselves creations and are increasingly fragile in the wake of globalisation. We must recognize that the "postmodern carnival of violated boundaries"<sup>4</sup> does not necessarily mean an improvement on the hegemony of one dominant identity. The politics of particularised identities can unleash chaos, the former Yugoslavia being one of many examples.

What we need is a new theory of social transformation. The experiential inter-weaving of various forms of social domination deserves debate. A debate in which strategic alliances are allowed despite differences. One day I would like to be a fly on the wall in which a set of people do have the arrogance / confidence to re-imagine the world. Imagine a meeting with a male feminist, a white anti-racist and some Marxists in the middle of a heated discussion of how to integrate an anti-racist and feminist perspective with an overall radical politics.....but then this was only supposed to be a book review.....

### **Yolanda Foster**

- 1 Klima, Ivan (1993) *My Golden Trades* p39, Penguin, England
- 2a Homi K. Bhaba (1993) *Nation & Narration* p291 Routledge, New York.
- 2b This image is borrowed from a story called "The Surveyor's Story" in Klima's book *ibid*.
- 3 Taylor, Charles (1992) *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* p67, Princeton, New Jersey. I have quoted Taylor's comments at length since I find them a useful commentary on how we might improve our ways of understanding in order to account for different world views.
- 4 Buell, Frederick (1994) *National Culture & the New Global System*, John Hopkins Press, London. ■

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