Reactivation and The Sri Lankan Social Formation

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Abstract

A powerful insight of Newton Gunasinghe's 1970s study of the Kandyan social formation in Sri Lanka is the insistence on the formation's historically contingent nature. Ostensibly traditional and unchanging, the formation's elements of caste, kingship, land tenure, and temples cannot be dissociated, argued Gunasinghe, from the long history of European imperialism and colonialism. Employing critically Louis Althusser's concepts of survival and overdetermination, Gunasinghe explored what he termed 'reactivation' to explain the peculiar way the social formation could be at once old and new. In doing so, Gunasinghe opened powerful lines of inquiry into how Sri Lanka explores its past, celebrates its traditions and marks out a space for the perpetuation of these traditions in the future. In this article, based on my 2012 Gunasinghe Memorial Lecture, I argue for the ongoing importance of this perspective by conceptualising reactivation as the recursive repetition with and within difference of not only elements of the social formation, but also in related areas of practice.

Keywords: *Sri Lanka, reactivation, repetition, social formation, Gunasinghe Lecture*

Introduction

Newton Gunasinghe's major study of the Kandyan social formation is a landmark work in Sri Lankan sociology applying Marxist social theory to historical and ethnographic analysis (Gunasinghe 1990). *Changing Socio-Economic Relations in the Kandyan Countryside* explores from an historical perspective the modes of production comprising the social formation that developed in the sometimes land locked Kandyan kingdom as the kingdom resisted European colonial conquest until the 19th century. For notwithstanding multiple attempts during well over

200 years by the Portuguese and the Dutch, island-wide suzerainty by a foreign power was not achieved until Kandy's formal annexation by the British in 1815 and progressively amid rebellions through the 1820s. The reasons for the British success in the face of their predecessors' failures are not only many and complex but also well documented (De Silva, C. R. 1953; De Silva, K. M. 2005; Dewaraja 1988). They did not simply reveal a greater appetite on the part of the British for intrigue and the military wherewithal to defeat the Kandyans' favoured mode of guerrilla warfare, but also, as Gunasinghe argues, the cumulative effect of Kandyan resistance in a changing world system. In maintaining independence, the nature of the Kandyan social formation became in part a caste feudalism overdetermined by an almost continuous threat of conquest that if anything intensified in the last decades of Dutch power in the island ahead of the British annexation of Dutch territories in 1796.[2] That threat, moreover, was itself transforming in relation to European capitalism, industrialization, and the growth of bureaucratic state power during what Eric Hobsbawm (1977) has dubbed the 'age of revolution'.

Put differently, one could say that the Kandyans' favoured mode of guerrilla warfare, which deployed certain aspects of local social organisation and the corvée labour/service relations of the institution of *rājākariya* (regal service) enabled Kandyan resistance but also changed the nature of this social system through the overdetermining threat of war which is to be seen as an aspect of the modes of production themselves. Ultimately, that system was worn-down, not simply by new military technologies, frictions within the Kandyan elite exacerbated by Dutch territorial gains in the 1760s, and the British adeptness for intrigue and the amplification of these frictions, but also by the guerrilla-like nature of a growing mercantile capitalism that kept picking away at the Kandyan social formation, eventually unravelling its potential for resistance as the modes of existence – Kandyan and capitalist – morphed together.

Less of a conquest let alone a decline and fall than a process of assimilation, what the Portuguese missionary chronicler Fernaõ de Queyroz had once called the 'temporal and spiritual conquest' of the island was arguably not achieved until, as it were, the spirit of capitalism

[2] For a discussion of caste feudalism see Roberts (1994, 2004). See also Bandarage (1983) who draws upon Gunasinghe's analysis.

was established in the 1800s.[3] Those Portuguese efforts of the 16th and 17th centuries described by De Queyroz were of course not without impact, for like the more extensive activities of the Dutch, they drew the island into the thrall of European mercantile capitalism, private landownership, and the bureaucratic administration of movement, of both people and commodities (Dewasiri 2008). These are the features that Gunasinghe argues characterise the Kandyan social formation.

Gunasinghe thus insists on the contemporariness of this social formation with colonialism, and thereby develops an implicit critique of the conservative sociology of Sri Lankan society as simply divisible between the traditional and the modern, between caste and caste feudalism on one side and colonial capitalism, class, and associated status groups, including the categories of ethnicity, on the other. This amounted to a critique of a sense of singular crisis or turning point, of radical disjuncture and threshold of modernity as a motif of certain 20th century Sri Lankan social science as well as, and more importantly, nationalist thought. The idea of a pristine traditional society hit over the head by the truncheon of modernity wielded by Europeans and dragged kicking and screaming into the present; a present now filled by ethnic antagonisms made possible by colonial cadastral surveys and the doctrine of rule by division over which the hapless natives had (and have) no control.[4] Instead of that single hit, Gunasinghe identifies the multiple blows and with those blows the punch-drunk stupidity of any *bumiputra* nationalists who imagine themselves as cultural and religious revivalists commanding and demanding a return to heritage and righteousness. Such people, as both politicians, activists, and scholars, display that great characteristic of nationalist thought, what Benedict Anderson (1991: 5) calls the paradox of the power of nationalism set against the intellectual poverty of its key protagonists. Gunasinghe towers over these people and

[3] The title is drawn from De Queyroz's three-volume account translated from Portuguese by Father S. G. Perera and first published in Colombo in 1930 (De Queyroz 1992). My play on its title and the famous work of Weber is intended to highlight the dynamics of the term 'spirit' in relation to the broader argument of the paper.

[4] Steven Kemper's *The Presence of the Past* makes this mistake in what is otherwise an interesting account of the role of the Sinhala Buddhist chronicles in the old and new politics of Sri Lanka. Kemper's critique of Bruce Kapferer's (2012) study of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, for example, identifies a simplistic trajectory from traditional to modern that the concept of reactivation easily avoids. Another well known example is the modernisation thesis of Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere's *Buddhism Transformed* (1988).

for this reason his work deserves our continuing attention. For not only is he more insightful, but also an antidote to the nationalistic tendencies to which even the best scholars are prone from time to time.

Gunasinghe's critique of antiquarian social science and nationalist ideology was, moreover, characteristic of the work of his fellow members of the Sri Lankan Social Scientists' Association–an association founded by a generation of post-independence scholars who did so much to create the best features of Sri Lanka's university system and to bring together Sri Lankan and foreign social scientists in lively debate and analysis in a time that refused to surrender the national project to cynical self-interest. As Serena Tennekoon (1987, 1990) describes, this also made them targets of verbal attack by the *bumiputras* both printed and more threatening. For Sri Lanka's circumstances of a 30-year civil war involved a state taking war as its object, losing its memory through substitution by imagined histories, and making social criticism increasingly unwelcome. Here by 'state' I mean not only the conventional figures of politicians and state functionaries acting within and outside the law, but also those reactionary figures and groups situated on the edges of the state who, at times of crisis, become shadow state functionaries, advisors, and the like. Often stifling debate by threats and intimidation, these shadow-state figures gained considerable notoriety at different stages of the civil war (Bastin 2009, 2014).[5] Gunasinghe became a target of their resentment and, sadly, this contributed to his early death. And while he is not normally counted among the fallen – the assassinated academics, journalists, and heretics – many of his students and colleagues know that he was indeed another casualty.

Gunasinghe's work remains important not just for this reason but also because it is insightful and can continue to mitigate the nationalist ideologies that permeate in often more subdued but, for that, more pernicious scholarship emerging from the universities and the think tanks of the neoliberal corporate state. It can, for example, inform an understanding of the extended historical trends of Sri Lankan state formations and imperialist conquests. Such continuities are marked always by small crises that cannot be ignored but must always be treated as distractions from the larger trend. For indeed, it is only with a sense of

[5] While Gunasinghe's early and untimely death in 1988 was from natural causes, along with others he had been targeted with death threats by extremist groups in the midst of the 1987-1991 insurgency associated with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front).

this trend, what Fernand Braudel calls the *longue durée* of capital and market commodification (Braudel 1985), that these crises can be addressed in the best way possible. This is not to deny the relevance of critical events, for indeed history is composed of such events. But certain patterns or orders of history occur and remain germinal within such events and the broader conjunctures of events.

In the *longue durée* approach, one can begin, for example, to rethink the political economy of Sri Lanka's natural resources (starting with its geographical location) as well as the largely trade-free biases of Sinhala Buddhist historiography to be found in the Buddhist chronicles and thereafter in the scholarly periodization of history that lends itself to a postcolonial development regime. Here I note especially the work of another SSA stalwart, the historian Leslie Gunawardana (1984, 1995, 2008) who was also one of the most original thinkers on the history of the *longue durée* in Sri Lanka. His work informs, for example, Karthigesu Indrapala's excellent study of the formation of Sri Lankan Tamil identity in its insistence on a south Indian and Sri Lankan regional perspective; a recognition that bodies of water like the Palk Strait may be barriers to armies but facilitators of commerce in both people and ideas (Indrapala 2005). Unsurprisingly, Indrapala's book is condemned by the *bumiputras* who like to imagine that, like the demon-king Ravana, they have always been here. But instead of imagining themselves as members of Ravana's retinue, they should be challenged to stop imagining their mythologies as their histories by being prompted to rethink those mythologies, but to do so from a comparative regional perspective.

The task is difficult, not least because there are south Indian *bumiputras* as active and as intellectually challenged as their Sri Lankan counterparts. But it is work that must be done and to do it we must all start with a critical reflection on our own ideological inclinations and on the kind of historical detail that nationalist historiography identifies and deploys. For only then will we recognise our own sympathies and tendencies to *bumiputra* thinking. This is avoidable if one remains attentive in the manner of Gunasinghe to the constituent elements of the social formation and how these elements are themselves modified and reformed in their interaction within the formation itself.

The twin concepts of royal science and nomadology are useful here (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) with the former characteristic of the State modality of power while the latter corresponds more closely to the war machine. Tied to the State, royal science strives for fixed points in

the manner of geometry and associated boundaries within which the space – social, economic, political, etc. – is conceptualised as consistent. The intellectuals who serve the interests of such States, such as Buddhist monks, thus produce a form of knowledge organic to the State and its sense of itself. But such a perspective as one that imagines bodies of water as the equivalent of a castle moat – a perspective appropriate to a war elephant reluctant to get its feet wet – does not capture the phenomena in all their complexity. In particular, it does not capture a sense of the modalities of power that use the water for speed of movement and continually rupture the planes of consistency – the *vamsa* or threads – imagined by the State and its organic intellectuals.

I am stressing, then, both the importance of the *longue durée* approach and the insistence on the currency of the social and cultural institutions and practices we observe in any one moment. This may appear to be contradictory: arguing for the identification of enduring patterns of current uniqueness. Indeed, it sounds very like the old refrain of French modernism '*plus ça change plus c'est la même chose*' (the more things change the more they remain the same thing). But this is a critical point in the analysis of the social formation. It requires some further discussion in relation to Gunasinghe's work specifically his critical engagement with the work of two Marxist theorists Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser.

Dedicated followers of intellectual fashion may recoil at the very mention of Gramsci and especially Althusser, not least because it dates Gunasinghe's work in the 1970s. Hopefully, in what follows I will be able to convince those fashionistas otherwise and show not only the continuing relevance of Gramsci and Althusser in Gunasinghe's treatment but also their relation to more contemporary theorists who will themselves be cast one day (if not already) into the shadows.

Hegemony, Blocs and the 'Southern Question'

Writing in the 1920s, Gramsci argues that class factors are compounded by culture and geography to form the division of Italian society and politics into an industrial northern and an agrarian southern bloc. He thus draws Marxist theory away from a more formalistic analysis of class to examine through the concept of the bloc a social assemblage marked by cross-cutting ties that obviate or suppress internal class differences and thereby establish systems of rule or hegemony that derive their power from the kinds of tension that have been established

both within and between blocs.[6] In Italy, the northern industrial bloc maintained hegemonic control over the South precisely as the latter defined itself in opposition to the former in terms of the rural-urban divide in late 19th and early 20th century Italian politics. The very nature of the antagonism in the South towards the North was thus an expression of the North's hegemony and not necessarily a foundation for revolutionary mobilisation unless it could be thoroughly deconstructed and have its internal contradictions of hegemonic power fully understood. What Michel Foucault (2008) would later identify more broadly as a feature of power – resistance – was thus identified by Gramsci as central to the nature of hegemony and not its immediate adversary. Hegemony, that sense of rule that appears as if it were the natural order of things, must be understood, therefore, as more deeply entrenched than its surface appearances of struggle and resistance. For such resistance could amount to little more than an expression of what the 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (2014) has called '*ressentiment*' – the celebration of victimhood at the hands of another who is wrongly perceived to be the only source of one's suffering.

Along these lines, for example, political parties and trade unions could easily fall into the role of serving the interests of dominant class groups through their acts of resistance to these dominant groups and especially when these acts of resistance are fuelled by *ressentiment* or what Nietzsche described as a slave morality. Writing from prison during the heyday of Italian fascism, these issues of complicity in resistance were especially important to Gramsci. They revealed how working-class movements could be enlisted to serve the interests of the ruling elites precisely as these movements appeared to be opposing those elites or worse as their *ressentiment* was channelled into other ideologies like racism and fascism.

Immediately one can see why Gramsci's work would appeal to someone trying to understand the Sinhalese social formation in 19th and 20th century Kandy. For what Gramsci advocated is a form of grounded theory that at the same time remains true to the basic Marxist principles of dialectical materialism and the quest for the creation of a more equitable society. In particular, describing the Italian social and political formation in terms of blocs and doing so especially in terms of hegemony

[6] An important development of this concept of the bloc can be found in what the Deleuzean theorist Manuel DeLanda (2006, 2016) calls 'assemblage theory'. In the concept of the assemblage (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

(and resistance), Gramsci's 'Southern Question' powerfully informs Gunasinghe's analysis of the Sri Lankan civil war (its 'Northern Question' so to speak) and his abiding interest to analyse the agrarian bloc in Sinhalese politics. The starting premise in such an approach is the complete disavowal of ethnicity as anything but an emergent ideology informed not only by class interests but also by ideological obfuscation drawing upon cultural geography. Out of this emerges the agrarian bloc where class becomes fractionalised and peasant social movements are restricted by cross-cutting ties based heavily on kinship and caste, but also patronage across caste lines and extending through family histories and elite formation. How these patterns of elite and class fraction are reproduced remains the critical fulcrum of both the conflict and its lack of resolution. The greatest mistake in the analysis of Sri Lanka's civil war, therefore, is to depict it as an ethnic conflict. For in the very act of doing so, one not only plays into the hands of the unthinking opportunists on both sides of the violence but also assists in its perpetuation. Here too a possibly even greater mistake than the depiction of the civil war as an ethnic conflict is the assumption that the war has ended. Far better, then, to consider not how war is the continuation of politics by other means but instead how the state is the continuation of war by other means (Tiqqun 2010: 79).

In more recent analyses of Italian politics, the rise of the new right-wing movements like the Lega Nord (Northern League), the associated new regional movements, and the intensifying opposition to migrants and especially refugees characterise a world in which Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and bloc remain current notwithstanding the shocking circumstances of war both hot and cold that brought it about in the years following Gramsci's death in 1937. Put differently, notwithstanding the fact that so many of the moments of the 'age of extremes' (Hobsbawm 1994) occurred after Gramsci's death at the hands of the Italian state, his insights remain powerful. The class fractions, social formations, and cross-cutting ties remains strong if perhaps focused on new types of political mobilisation involving region and locale (Gòmez-Reino Cachafeiro 2016). To this we can also add the recent suggestion by Kajsa and Jonathan Friedman (2011, 2022) to abandon left/right characterisations of political parties and their ideologues and note instead the concentric circles of relative access to wealth in an increasingly (vertically and horizontally) polarised world of rich and poor.

Gramsci's concepts of the bloc and hegemony were thus very important to Gunasinghe's analysis and a major reason why we should continue to remember his work well after his death during the second JVP insurgency when these very tensions and their associated ideological blindness were so potent in their exposure of the war as a civil war. For in the current moment many of us who enjoy the sense of peace prevailing since the extermination of the Tamil Tigers in 2009 must remain sensitive to the fact that a Sri Lankan 'Southern Question' remains, not simply as the political aspirations of ethnic minorities but as the tension in the social blocs and their cross-cutting ties. For while one war may appear to be over, another war persists and continues to fracture Sri Lankan society. Reading Gunasinghe, in short, is not to reminisce about recent history but rather to inspire us to rethink what we mean by peace in our times.

Consider, for example, the growth of Buddhist clerical militancy, the emergence in the early 2000s of the formal political party known as the Jathika Hela Urumaya and its offshoots like the Bodu Bala Sena and the Ravana Balaya. It is easy to characterise these movements as reactionary, extremist and right-wing (Deegalle 2006), but a more careful analysis would focus on the nature of the contemporary Sri Lankan social formation and the location of the protagonists of these movements in that formation (Gunasinghe 1996b).

There is precedent for this in the excellent work of Kitsiri Malalgoda (1976) on the Buddhist revitalisation movements of the 19th century, but what is also needed is a less parochial and more comparative approach that revisits, not only Gunasinghe's discussion of Gramsci's analysis of the Italian 'Southern Question' but the rise of populism more broadly and how in many populist movements the protagonists are voicing their sense of alienation from the promises of life which they thought they were about to inherit. There are, in short, some striking commonalities between the Trumpians in the US who stormed the Capitol in 2021, the 'Gotagogama' protesters who stormed the Presidential Residence in Colombo in 2022, and the BBS monks who demanded the body of their colleague who set fire to himself in front of the Temple of the Tooth in 2013 immediately after recording a statement decrying the slaughter of cattle and the threat of Muslim terrorism. Knee-jerk reaction would refuse such comparison and prefer instead to deplore these people as deviants instead of being people with a grasp of their social situation that, notwithstanding its inadequacies and its

ressentiment must be taken seriously for any kind of defusing reconciliation to occur.

Survival and Reactivation

The other Marxist theorist informing Gunasinghe's work is Louis Althusser who shared with Gramsci a critical perspective on the Russian Revolution and its implications for a Marxian theory of history. Althusser (1977) seeks to develop Lenin's account of the revolutionary climate established in Tsarist Russia in 1917 when an imperialist formation replete with facets or elements of a feudal mode of production, most notably the bondage of labour to land and an associated incapacity to value that labour as a thing in itself – wage labour – struggled in the conditions of modern industrialised warfare. Through the survival, argues Althusser, of these fragments of the feudal mode of production in the conditions of industrial capitalism, a heightened state of contradiction remained, albeit not of the order Marx imagined. Such contradiction, Althusser continues, led to the conditions for revolution. His argument, first published in 1962, had strong parallels to other political ideologies and social movements active in East and Southeast Asia at the time. One could say, however, that where Althusser displays greater optimism about the revolutionary moment, Gramsci enables one to be more circumspect and mindful of how many forms of direct action serve rather than subvert the dominant interests of the dominant class.

Gunasinghe asks similar sorts of question to Althusser of the Kandyan social formation and the modes of production that developed through the 19th century. Instead of survivals, however, Gunasinghe finds *reactivations*. Share-cropping and small-owner cultivation, for example, are reactivated; crafts are typically eliminated or only partially reactivated. *Rājākariya* (service or corvée labour) initially banned by the British and then re-established, served to reactivate caste feudal structures of patron-client relations that had the appearance of tradition while forming the basis of an elite transformed into what Gunasinghe termed (taking another term from Gramsci) a 'subaltern elite' of the new colonial state. Concomitantly, the British achieved their position through crushing the old Kandyan state: 'dissolving its integral linkages among various instances and tearing it apart for capitalist penetration and dominance *by absorbing some of its exploitative relations*' (Gunasinghe

1990: 210, emphasis added).[7] What had once served in resistance to colonial powers thus became an agent of complicity in the colonial state and its plantation economy.

The incidence and nature of localised rebellions over the 19th century wonderfully well documented by another great of the SSA, Kumari Jayawardena (2010),[8] reveal that the shift from resistance to complicity was neither immediate nor without violence. It also reveals how other factors such as improved military communications were also important to the colonial conquest of the entire island. Nevertheless, argues Gunasinghe, the transformative potential of reactivation is not to be overlooked, especially when one considers the enduring power of the Sri Lankan elite and the authenticity of its members' often overstated claims to being the champions of the downtrodden.

Here I can pause to consider the now infamous crimson scarf (*sataka*) that was modelled on the colour of the deep south Sri Lankan staple *kurakkan* (finger millet) by the founder of the Rajapaksa political dynasty Don Mathew Rajapaksa, a politician and MP from 1936 until his sudden death in 1945. Known by some as the Lion of the Ruhuna, D.M. Rajapaksa was a friend to Dr S.A. Wickramasinghe, the founder of the Ceylon Communist Party who was also related by marriage to the extended political family associated with the Senanayakes, Wijewardenes, and Jayawardenes (Jiggins 1979: 103). When D. M. Rajapaksa died, he was succeeded by his younger brother Don Alvin and subsequently by his own sons Lakshman and George whose cousins Chamal, Mahinda, Gotabhaya, and Basil have also been MPs, ministers and in two cases heads of state. At the time of Gotabhaya's flight from office in mid-2022, it was estimated that some 40 members of the family were associated with government. That *sataka*, which had once symbolised the poor rural peasantry of the agrarian bloc, had come to symbolise a political dynasty and more accurately a kleptocracy that, until its *walauwa* (manor house) was burnt down by an angry mob in May 2022, still proclaimed its representational status as the champions of the downtrodden.

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[7] Note that corvée labour is an imprecise gloss for *rājākariya* which embraces public works but also caste-specific obligations. Patrick Peebles (1995) argues that *rājākariya* is the critical and definitive feature of the Sinhalese caste system and also the fulcrum of colonial transformation. See also Jayawardena (2000, 2010) for discussions of the subaltern elite.

[8] The title of her book *Perpetual Ferment* is taken from Gramsci's 'Notes on the Southern Question.'

The enormity of colonial capitalist impact on the development of the modern Sri Lankan social formation has thus entailed recursive folding of the social formation back upon itself creating not survivals but reactivations. *Rājākariya* and the subaltern elite are the chief among these. The analysis of the social formation, a world of multiple modes of production coexisting and often, but not always, creating friction or contradiction, is not to be a study in antiquarian provenance grounded in a notion of tradition (or even 'invented tradition' when of course all traditions are invented and all heritages are imagined) but rather a rigorous analysis of current moments informed by a sense of the long term trend involving the market commodification of everything whereby every act of containment – the regulation of the market as the fundamental apparatus of the state – both amplifies the process and condemns each apparatus be it the city-state, the nation-state, and now the corporate state, to an eventual failure.

Following Deleuze (1994) and his critique of Hegelian dialectics, I describe such reactivations as repetitions with and within difference. In this argument the repetition is always different; its difference being not simply an immanent identity or simply temporal variation wherein one thing eventually becomes its precursor, but a substantive difference that the precursor could never predict and only the repetition as a simulacrum can reveal in its moment of actualisation. The repetition thus reveals an essence of the original (which is itself a repetition) but not *the* essence of the original, because no phenomenon ever consists entirely of its essence, but always carries its potential to move in different directions – to 'differen*c*iate' (Deleuze 1994: 207). Such a potentiality, moreover, is never contained in the thing itself but belongs instead to a world of multiple strata in which its boundaries are porous. The world is thus virtual, albeit not in the sense of a virtual reality (as the almost but not quite real) but rather the play of possibility including, and especially relevant here, the folds of recursivity or repetition within difference.

Just as the map is not the territory and the thing is not the thing named, so too do the territory and the thing become different when they are mapped and named (e.g., by 'royal science'). We can apply that same point to caste and to caste feudalism and recognise too how our analyses create their own feedback onto the very things we study, collate, and compare.

Applied to Gunasinghe's analysis, the critical point about reactivations like *rājākariya* is that they were not the same as the

contradictory survivals Althusser imagined for Russia and elsewhere. In Deleuzean terms this kind of survival would correspond to a generality and be of less importance to any repetition within which the transformative difference is concealed. When we say less important, however, we are referring to this transformative potential that the survival or repetition of sameness simply masks via its generality.

The reason why this matters is because it is very easy to confuse a repetition with a survival and a generality with an essence. *Bumiputra* nationalists such as advocates of cultural heritage, and the *bandaras* or custodians of tradition including archaeologists, museologists, and historians, are some of the most adept at this. They hide their ideology behind their methods, and they appeal to the mob as they control the ways the mob has been educated to believe that the generalities are survivals – 'traditions' – rather than repetitions.

Karl Marx famously begins his essay on the 1851 coup by Louis Bonaparte with the quip that while Hegel argued that everything in history occurs twice, the first time it is tragic and the second time it is a farce. Commenting on this in 2007 in relation to the nature of contemporary power, Jean Baudrillard (2010) argues that it is when the farces begin to repeat that we once again see history. The farces must, in other words, be taken seriously, and here we can see the importance of addressing the ideas of survival and reactivation as Gunasinghe describes them and of extending Gunasinghe's ideas into more recent events.

Repetitive Kingship

I will illustrate this point and conclude this paper with a brief example I have discussed elsewhere (Bastin 2012). The Sri Lankan president, Ranasinghe Premadasa, who rose to power amid the civil war that was slowly killing Newton Gunasinghe and some tens-of-thousands of others, was well known as having low caste and urban working-class roots. These personal circumstances mirrored those of his first political mentor, A. E. Goonesinha, the founder of the Ceylon Labour Party (Jayawardena 2004; Roberts 1994). And just as the Labour Party disappeared through its failure to transcend ethnic division and extend its representation beyond the urban working class and into the plantation sector and more importantly the broader agrarian bloc, so did Goonesinha's protégé end up making a career as a client politician under the patronage of those members of the subaltern elite who formed the United National Party. Modelled closely, too closely, on the British Labour

Party, Goonesinha's Labour Party lacked relevance as it failed to command the multiple modes of production constituting the social formation. It was not alone in this, for none of the left-wing parties was ever able to cut across the dominant cleavage of the Sri Lankan social formation – ethnicity – and create a proper form of adversarial democracy giving expression to class struggle. Party politics replete with high voter turnout were thus the greatest obfuscation of democracy in Sri Lanka. Lauded as a model third world democracy by self-interested political scientists and politicians, Sri Lanka then turned into a train wreck leaving these same people scratching their heads trying to find the cause of the disaster when all along it has been staring them in the face.

Consequently, Goonesinha and his protégé Premadasa were drawn into the patron-client relations characterizing the UNP at that time. But Premadasa was a nationalist and a politician not restricted by personal gain. When the modicum of peace in post-independence Sri Lanka, a peace marked by burgeoning ethnic antagonisms tied to the island's 'Northern Question' but also to the profound tensions within the subaltern elite, gave way to civil war from the early 1970s, Premadasa became a key figure in reconstructing the UNP on less elitist lines. In this way he acceded to the prime ministership when the subaltern elite UNP leader J.R. Jayawardene created the executive presidency in 1978 via the country's third constitution since independence and fourth constitution within less than fifty years. A decade later, with the civil war in full swing and the Indian Army occupying the Tamil north and east, Premadasa eclipsed his elite rivals in the UNP and secured the nomination for the presidency that he subsequently won with a very slim majority in one of the lowest voter turnouts in the electoral history of the country. Empowered, nevertheless, Premadasa then set about the task for which his political career and marginal social position had prepared him – the eradication of those political groups for whom the Sri Lankan state was, for one reason or another, illegitimate. This did not make Premadasa a *bumiputra* nationalist in the manner of some of his contemporaries whose own histories of caste feudalism and the social groups they represented were part of a different order; indeed, a reactivated order in which ethnicity acquired an overdetermining power of cross-cutting patron-client ties.[9] It made him, instead, a nationalist of a different kind

[9] Janice Jiggins' detailed account of a 1943 by-election in Balangoda involving the Ratwattes and Bandaranaikes on one side, the Jayawardenes and Senanayakes on the other side, as well as the Mathew and, to a small extent, the Rajapaksa

who was able to articulate with the patterns of structural violence informing the *bumiputras* and their ideologies but remain separate from them. Premadasa could thus flush out the shadow state the war had formed and unleash the state of exception – the paramilitary groups – to rebuild the state. That period in Sri Lanka between 1989 and 1991 corresponds in its way with the Great Terror in France roughly 200 years earlier.

Having let loose the paramilitaries, many of them trained in counterinsurgency by British and Israeli operatives, Premadasa then began to act like a king. He commissioned a replica of the throne that had been a gift from the Dutch governor to the King of Kandy in 1692, a throne repatriated in the 1930s from Windsor Castle where it had been taken after the great Kandyan rebellion of 1818. Along with replicas of the Colombo Town Hall, the throne accompanied Premadasa on official visits to inaugurate new model villages in his Village Reawakening development program. The critical point was that everything was a simulacrum, even the 'awakened' villages themselves. For Premadasa's opponents, especially the subaltern elite for whom his usefulness had expired to the point where they began to accuse him of human rights violations and even sorcery with nefarious Indian sorcerers, he had gone too far. His simulations of kingship required a rebellion, and so, that state of civil war that has been the state of Sri Lanka ever since independence was allowed to continue. The kingship may not have been allowed in the manner Premadasa imagined but as a larger ideological formation it was reactivated in its very usurpation. Best of all, by bringing together his copy of the throne and a representation of the seat of Colombo urban politics – the Town Hall – which had been the seat of Goonesinha's and later Premadasa's power, Premadasa was 'reawakening' (read reactivating) the agrarian society in a new and highly urbanised form. The repetition of farce was indeed making history.

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families, among others, is a highly illustrative account of caste and family politics in mid-20th century Sri Lanka (Jiggins 1979: 96–111). Published well before the anti-Tamil riots of 1983 in which a prominent member of the Mathew family played a major role, Jiggins' account explains both the history of association in Balangoda between the high caste Ratwattes and the subordinate Vahumpara Mathews and the history of enmity born of this association. *Caste and Family in the Politics of the Sinhalese 1947-1976* is thus a compelling read in conjunction with Gunasinghe's account of the Kandyan social formation and the concept of the subaltern elite.

In his description of Premadasa's activities, the anthropologist H.L. Seneviratne (1999: 224 n59) can barely disguise his scorn. This is understandable when one considers the brutality of the regime and sheer absurdity of Premadasa's travelling circus. However, we should not allow any sense of outrage to prevent a deeper analysis of the social formation that can generate such violence as well as our reactions to it. For what Premadasa exposed with his stage props was what an earlier commentator on Sri Lanka's first prime minister D.S. Senanayake had called a 'comico-repulsive replica of the English ruling class' (Halliday 1971: 63). But instead of Senanayake's suits and morning horse rides on Galle Face Green, Premadasa pretended to be a king and a Buddhist one at that. Summoning the structural violence of the status bloodbath of caste, these replicas of the English ruling class replete with their badges of membership of the Oxford Union, expressed their disdain with all the fury of kitchen pots calling the kettle black. In other words, they reproduced in their sniggers the same vitriol they had themselves endured when acquiring their symbolic capital from the centre of Empire. As Anderson (1991) shows in his study of the origins of nationalism, it was in this cultural violence of mockery in the imperial centres of Europe that the native subaltern elite discovered their roots and desire for independence. They then failed to recognise their own capacity to create new monsters along the same lines.

For indeed, who were these imperial snobs at the centre of Empire dismissing the 'coconuts' and children of convicts if not the descendants of bullies and brutes whom Gandhi had described as needing to be civilised?

Sri Lankans who know I am an Australian of British ancestry may object to my identifying simulacra like Premadasa and Senanayake before him, or even of being dismissive of the Rajapaksa *sataka*. I simply respond that in the theatre of power, especially state power, every emperor is to be recognised for wearing new clothes and then called out by naïve bystanders for the nakedness and absurdity of power. In other words, the task is not to be offended but to be appalled in the manner of the subjects of Jean Rouch's 1955 film *Les Maîtres Fous* which depicts members of a West African spirit possession cult known as *hauka* entering trance and mimicking British colonial rulers in ways that expose the absurdity of these rulers' trappings of power. In Gunasinghe's terms, the *hauka* thus reactivates British rule through imitation that then enables the members of the cult to reflect on the nature of power and powerlessness in the

hegemony of the everyday world. The film is decried these days as being offensive both by the British and by Africans, albeit for ostensibly different reasons that a more careful analysis of contemporary identity politics and the power relations they disguise would expose. The task, therefore, is neither one of mockery nor offence but rather the careful analysis with a view to achieving a more equitable society. It is not a simple task especially in the current climate of essentialism and the censorious identity politics of 'PC Worlds' (Friedman 2019). But that only makes it all the more pressing.

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