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Book Review

Sri Lanka: Lessons from the Left

- Reviews section -

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A felicitation event for senior activist Santasilan Kadirgamar, held a couple months back at the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue on August 9, coincided with the launch of an important collection, Pathways of the Left in Sri Lanka, edited by Marshall Fernando and B. Skanthakumar. In the spirit of the above epigraph, the volume provides valuable recognition of the impact the Left has had on Sri Lanka. In terms of the contributions, the essays manage to cover quite a bit of material, all while re-emphasizing common themes in the history of the Left.

Of course, the Left in Sri Lanka is currently defined more by its absence than its presence. At the same time both its historical contribution to culture and society and its continuing potential as a critical imaginary means we must take stock of its defeats and victories. Such a genealogy may enable us to obtain a critical perspective on the present and the apparently inexorable decline of the Left in Sri Lanka; a fate it shares with similar movements elsewhere around the world. In this regard, the collection is extremely useful for critically reflecting on these developments.

In the case of the essays they are organized both along thematic and historical lines. Generally the earlier chapters focus on the emergence of the Left, particularly the Trotskyist Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), from the 1930s to the height of its power as part of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party-led coalition government in the 1970s. Later chapters tend to focus more on the transformation and decline of the Left after the insurrection and subsequent repression of Sinhala Marxist youth led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) in 1971. The quality and content of the contributions, similar to many other edited collections, is at times uneven. Some remain committed to organizing empirical materials, others are more theoretical and impressionistic, and still others biographical. Nevertheless while the strengths and weaknesses occasionally end up working against each other, the end result is a more polyvalent discourse that achieves the editors' goal of pluralizing our understanding of the Sri Lankan Left and its possibilities.

The first two essays (Santasilan Kadirgamar, Jayadeva Uyangoda) provide a critical overview of the Left and the implications of its languages of emancipation and progress for Sri Lankan society. Uyangoda, for example, usefully discusses the vernacular translation of key concepts such as "class struggle" (panthi satana) into Sinhala. The second set of essays (Vijaya Vidyasagara, Vijaya Kumar, Paul Caspersz, Ajith Samaranayake, Pulsara Liyanage) address different topics concerning the Left including trade union activity, plantations, religion, media, and women's participation. Vidyasagara and Kumar have compiled an impressive list of laws, regulations, and ordinances affecting working class organization. Both tend toward the line that over time unions became part of the existing politics of patronage within the state. Among the other essays as well, there is a wealth of fascinating information, including the controversy over Dr. NM Perera's alleged claim that bricks should be taken from Ruwanwelisaya, the historic dagoba in Anuradhapura, to create something more publicly useful, such as toilets! These and other anecdotes offer interesting clues as to the public's perception of the Left as well.

In the latter half of the collection, the third set of essays (Gamini Keerawella interviews with Lionel Bopage and Wimal Fernando) provides a useful set of self-reflections on the JVP. Keerawella usefully situates the generational distinction between the "Old Left" (LSSP, Communist Party, etc.) and the "New Left" in relation to global trends such as the student unrest of 1968.

Finally, the fourth set of essays (Rohini Hensman, Sumanasiri Liyanage, Ahilan Kadirgamar, Ganesan Sivaguru, Kumar David) address theoretical challenges for any new Left movement, including the impact of globalization and the under-theorized role of the state. Moreover, Kumar David offers a provocative essay on Left sectarianism with some useful prescriptions.

Despite the immense variation in scope of contributions, several common tropes and themes emerge. First among them is the notion that the Left has committed a series of theoretical and tactical blunders that caused it to be eclipsed by larger social forces, particularly ethnic nationalism. For some of the contributors, this begins with the Left's failure to develop an independent coalition separate from the nationalistic Sri Lanka Freedom Party led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964. For others it's the alleged adventurism of the JVP insurrection in 1971, which invited massive state repression and resulted in the deaths of thousands. And still for others, 1980 is the sign of the final blow against the Left as a result of then president JR Jayewardene brutally crushing the ill-considered General Strike, including dismissing 40,000 workers under emergency regulations.

While the proximate causes and dates change, there is an underlying sense that the lack of a rigorous strategic framework—on issues as varied as the national question or the distinction between revolutionary and parliamentary politics—compounded by petty interpersonal disagreements has caused the Left to fracture. At the same time there's also a sense that the consequent tactical errors of the Left created insuperable challenges.

In this regard it's useful to apply Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's distinction of a war of maneuver (involving a "frontal attack" on the state) versus a war of position (involving the slower accumulation of changes through struggles over institutions). The Left apparently still needs to learn the lessons of the latter in its confrontation with the state and dominant social forces.

Beyond the evaluative stances of the individual contributors, however, the collection more generally provides an archive of the Left, both in the literal bibliographic sense and as a repository of collective memory, including interviews with important figures of the movement. Firstly, Eef Vermeij and one of the editors, B. Skanthakumar, have compiled an exhaustive list of sources, including important party documents, though mostly in the English language, which they present at the end of the collection. Secondly, while the emphases, gaps, and meaning of the narrative shift depending on the perspective of individual contributors, they often emphasize key figures and events, contributing to the consolidation of Left discourse. If the Left has been defined as much by its defeats as its victories, it's important to consider both in order to contribute to any possible re-imagining of the Sri Lankan Left today.

To conclude, while *Pathways of the Left in Sri Lanka* covers extensive ground, it doesn't quite flesh out the alternative possibilities for the present moment. Changes since the late 1970s have yet to be effectively theorized in this collection or other texts for that matter. For example, what is the significance of the increasing prominence of the informal economy? What kinds of amorphous political actors does it entail? Theorists in India such as Partha Chatterjee and Kalyan Sanyal, for example, have struggled to account for the absence of a traditional working class, noting instead the rise of the unorganized sector located in India's massive slums. More specific to Sri Lanka and its marginal position in the world, how has the rhetoric of anti-imperialism been increasingly appropriated by forces on the right? How might Sri Lanka's pervasive economic dependence since the late 1970s contribute to xenophobic anxieties about "threats to the nation" articulated by the Bodu Bala Sena and other actors? These knotty questions require rethinking the Left's traditional vocabulary of criticism.

Second how does the Left's discourse relate to social scientific disciplines such as political science? Critically reflecting on the evolution of academic disciplines in Sri Lanka—'for so long defined by Western policy-making, whether "development" or more recently "human rights"—requires taking into account the implications for the Left and its continuing theoretical innovation, which can then be connected back to concrete struggles. Here the work of authors during the 1980s such as Newton Gunasinghe and Charles Abeysekera continue to provide a benchmark for ways of reworking Western Marxism to develop innovative insights into the Sri Lankan situation. They redeployed Louis Althusser and other theorists to account for the increasingly unstable conditions of the peasantry and the impact of the free market "Open Economy" since the late 1970s, producing important studies in their wake. Future analyses might additionally move beyond economic relations to uncover potential new domains of politics, such as the role of student theater in social criticism and Sri Lanka's rich tradition in the arts.

Whether these and future analyses are relevant to a Left party or trade union movement ultimately depends on the risks and action taken by political actors; the same kind that the forebears who are evaluated, criticized, and yet nevertheless honored in Pathways of the Left in Sri Lanka for their personal and collective sacrifices so insightfully demonstrate. The Left of course remains an “empty signifier” insofar as the boundary over who is or isn’t “Left” can be policed but never brought entirely under control. The most obvious example is the ambivalent attitude throughout the collection presented toward the JVP as a result of the latter’s propensity toward nationalist violence. Nevertheless despite the subsequent controversy, the “golden age” of the Left from the 1930s to the early 1970s has provided a legacy in which all Sri Lankans have participated and enjoyed in the form of various welfare measures and social protections.

Ultimately, Pathways of the Left in Sri Lanka provides fertile ground for continuing to think about the contested legacy of the Left and its lessons for those who remain committed to creating a just society.

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