

LEARNING TO BE POLITICAL THE CITIZEN WAY

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This essay is an attempt at retrieving our political selves. The circumstances and motives that have prompted its writing are varied and immediate. Varied, because of the fraying of the political in activist quarters of all hues; and immediate because this fraying has detracted from the consciousness of the everyday as political, of politics as a way of being in the world. What is endangered is the ideal of living as citizen.

The problem, as Shiv Visvanathan identifies it, is that "the political seems to be disappearing in a systematic way from the overformalised structures that most political activists talk about."¹ Among professional liberal politicians/academics, among -progressive (read left) social scientists/activists and among professional governance/democracy specialists, the political is bounded, limited and framed by an over-reliance on their own categories of understanding.

Lets begin with the academic left. The Marxist ideal was perhaps thwarted a long time ago with the failure of the internationalist project and the robustness with which nationalisms emerged all over the world. Ever since then, the story of this trajectory has been one of coping with nations and ethnicities and other such incomprehensible categories. The energy that has gone into the pursuit of this trajectory has, to be sure, enriched scholarship and theoretical rigour enormously. But it appears that some of its practitioners, at least in this country, feel that they have exhausted its potential. Jayadeva Uyangoda in a recent paper has acknowledged its futility at least as regards the category of ethnicity. "(Ethnicity) no longer evokes, at least in Sri Lanka, inspiration for new political inquiry and reflection. There is a pervasive sense of defeatism among progressive intellectuals in Sri Lanka."² What this means is that these scholars/activists no longer generate energy for political activism. The result is that they, reluctantly I suspect, reconcile themselves to moving into spaces and discourses of political action that modernizing liberals have been championing all along. One clear indication of this is the fact that the academic left's latest offering towards addressing the ethnic conflict is its support of the idea of a human right to peace.³ It is perhaps disheartening that after more than fifteen years of analysing and coping with the ethnic conflict, this is as original as the left can get! Both the liberals and the Marxists are nursed and nurtured by a shared internationalism which refuge the Marxists will willingly come back to, for otherwise, they fear, they will be condemned to the parochialisms of the native, particular and local.⁴

This defeatism of the left pushes it to cling on to fellow travellers in the region. So the left in Sri Lanka will tote the litanies of the Achin Vanaiks and the Praful Bidwais and will take up the anti-nuclear cause just as vehemently as their Indian counterparts. This is as much a symptom of the left's own disorientation as it is a genuine protest against the nuclear threat in the region.

To the liberal governance specialists, the political is democracy and democracy is a 'command and control structure' with elections forming the crux of the structure. Election campaigns, electoral rolls and election monitoring form the content of politics. In these political activists inheres the conviction, in true enlightenment rationalist traditions, that once the well-oiled election machinery is put in place, servicing a rationally organised 'command and control structure', progress and development will be the logical output. Anyone who has been following the Wayamba provincial council polls and the kind of attention it got from the media and especially from the democracy and governance specialists, is left with no doubt about what is considered centrally political by these people. The fact that this was an election to just one of many provincial councils and not even a national level election would not have occurred to many who were following the newspapers during the two weeks before polling day. Some of the post-election meetings organised to discuss the election monitoring process were extravagantly well attended, with many liberal activist luminaries turning up and debating the numbers and other such finer points. Even some of the meetings to discuss important constitutional issues during its drafting process were a big yawn when compared to the Wayamba election public post-mortems. The obsession with the structure and the electoral process that these activists display renders the political in terms and in an idiom that has all the *joie de vivre* of a statistics table.

To these liberals and to other activists for whom politics is only about rights, the rights discourse is an integral part of the larger -command and control structure. The problem with a uni-dimensional championing of the rights discourse, as Visvanathan eloquently points out, is that "(R)ights in a formal sense create, at times, an unhappy consciousness without guaranteeing liberty."⁵ Further, "(D)oes the idea of rights overformalize the spaces we occupy and impoverish them? The minute we talk of a space only in the language of rights, we diminish it. Maybe because the spaces need other languages of conversation. What actually disappears is the tacit richness of *tolerance*, of understanding, where a shrug or even a wink may be more genuinely open than a flag or a scream. Right as contracts are necessary but their glare only exposes the lack of tolerance seen as a gift of understanding, or even of affirming what you dont understand. I am not talking of the liberal idea of tolerance but a sense of diversity which just allows forms of life to develop quietly without being crass The language of rights.. draws lines in a stark way, disallowing tacit complicities, confusions, liminalities. It even pictures tolerance as weak and passive."⁶ Liberals need to recognise that the kinds of tolerances that make our everyday lives possible cannot be captured in their -command and control structures. We need to realise that rights are fine, but they also impoverish, and detract from, other articulations of the political. Across huge sectors of the population which are yet to fully imbibe the

liberal idiom, ways of life not entirely comprehensible to this idiom continue to thrive.

For the left to regain its political edge, it has to move beyond its mechanical and instrumental view of culture and ethnicities. It needs to learn to enjoy the *baila* not because *baila* is the music of the right class, but because *baila* is a way of life and they can dance to it; it needs to learn to enjoy popular Hindi movies just as a large number of Sri Lankans do. It has to learn to live its culture and not constantly disown or accuse it in the service of nurturing its ideological self image as internationalists. As Theodore Adorno himself understood: "(A)mong the motifs of cultural criticism one of the most long-established and central is that of the lie: that culture creates the illusion of a society worthy of man which does not exist; that it concedes the material conditions upon which all human works rise, and that, comforting and lulling, it serves to keep alive the bad economic determination of existence. This is the notion of culture as ideology. But precisely this notion, like all expostulation about lies, has a suspicious tendency to become itself ideology. Inexorably, the thought of money and all its attendant conflicts extend into the most tender erotic, the most sublime spiritual relationships. With the logic of coherence and the pathos of truth, cultural criticism could therefore demand that relationships be entirely reduced to their material origin. But to act radically in accordance with this principle would be to extirpate, with the false, all that was true also, all that however impotently strives to escape the confines of universal practice, every chimerical anticipation of a nobler condition, and so to bring about directly the barbarism that culture is reproached for furthering indirectly."⁷ Once the sentiment of this understanding finds its way into the lefts consciousness (or unconsciousness!), the energies and tensions it can generate will be able to interact more creatively with the politics of the other quarters, be it the liberal politicians/activists, the petty majoritarianisms of the PA and the UNP or maybe even the separatisms of the LTTE and other Tamil parties. If there isn't even an attempt to recapture this cultural space, the Prabhakarans and the Nalin de Silvas of the country will continue to have their tails up.

We can only lament that the drafting of the most significant document of the country, its proposed Constitution, did not see the kind of creativity and interaction that each of these different actors has the potential to bring to bear upon such a process. The sooner the realisations seep in, the healthier will the results be for the polity.

Notes

1. Shiv Visvanathan, "The Disappearance of the Political", in *SEMINAR 437*, January 1999, at p. 91. My essay is unashamedly

derivative of Visvanathan's essay and has been written in the conviction that the issues he raises need to be raised in Sri Lanka too.

2. Jayadeva Uyangoda, *Research on Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: A Critique Within*, paper presented at the Second Asia Africa Consultation on "Ethnicity and the Politics of Identity", Dakar, Senegal, December 1998, at p.1.

3. Left organizations like the Social Scientists' Association have institutionally supported this idea. Funnily enough, this liberal-left consensus has strange bedfellows who happily share a contempt for the population of the rest of the country. Someone like Sasanka Perera who, perhaps in a moment of inspired hubris, entitled one of his collections of essays as *The Death of Common Sense* can find his sentiments echoed by G.L. Peiris who complained that the Sri Lankan people are wanting in rationality. See G.L. Peiris "Five Requirements of Civil Society", in *A Symposium on Civil Society*, ICES, Colombo, 1995.

4. Accounts of Jayadeva Uyangoda's speech at the launch of J.B. Dissanayaka's book *Understanding the Sinhalese* indicate the ways in which these fears find articulation. Uyangoda, reliable sources inform me, spoke about, inter alia, how the Sinhala village was not as idyllic as Dissanayaka made it out to be and how it is in reality steeped in little jealousies and pettiness.

For a look into the kinds of real anxieties that such a facile internationalism as is shared by the liberals and Marxists causes, see R.L. Kumar, "Communications", *SEMINAR 453*, May 1997, p.57.

5. Shiv Visvanathan, *op cit.* at p.93

6. *Ibid.*, pp.93-93. The illustration that Visvanathan cites is better than any I can recall at the moment. I will recount it here for its full effect: "Years ago I was at a conference in Lucknow where a professor was explaining the concept of a *tawaif* to a visiting American. The latter said 'They are prostitutes, aren't they?' The professor laughed and said gently, 'No'. In the world of this American, there are mothers, wives, mistresses and prostitutes. A life with clearly defined boundaries. The language of rights exhausts the latter world but it only partially understands the former. The professor, a Marxist, felt desperate, almost enraged that the young American could not fully grasp that a courtesan was not a 'fallen woman'. Many feminist activists would also condemn the courtesan, but in that very act a way of life is lost." (pp.93-93).

7. T.W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E.F.N. ■

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