

# **Sri Lanka: Don't Use Class as a Weapon to Dismiss Social Struggles - Devaka Gunawardena**

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**We can blame the chaos of the contemporary global moment for many problems. From rising prices, to rearmament and the possibility of outright military conflict between hegemonic powers, there is a lot about which to be extremely concerned. But one of the most banal trends that is nevertheless frustrating in its very blockishness is the cheap import of “anti-woke” politics into the discourse around Sri Lanka’s Left movement. Ideas, unlike goods, do more damage to the country’s balance sheet when they are of low value. Because the Sri Lankan Left has been pulverised for so long, however, it appears any insipid claim can influence the definition and appropriation of the Left by careless, undisciplined, and, in some cases, downright devious actors.**

Nevertheless, we must leverage any attempts to use the shapeless clay of the Left to fashion new forms of reactionary politics, seeing them instead as an opportunity to clarify what is really at stake in class analysis. Classes, as EP Thompson showed in his famous work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, are made up of real, complex people with contradictory identities, beliefs, and habits. Accordingly, any attempt to define classes without an understanding of the way in which social struggles mediate the class structure is useless, if not counterproductive.

Thompson, of course, debated Perry Anderson on the merits of a ‘humanist’ versus ‘structuralist’ approach amid the rise of the New Left in Britain and Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s. But Adam Przeworski (1977) offered a useful way of reconciling the two angles by sharpening the *relational* definition of class in terms of struggles. To quote Przeworski:

It is obvious that concrete struggles can be analysed in terms other than those of class: they can be analysed as struggles among groups with different levels of income or different degrees of authority, such as struggles between sexes, races, religious groups, regions, ethnic groups, and so on. Should then a conflict over local control of schools, the rift between Catholics and Protestants, or the division between Anglophones and Francophones be analysed in class terms, and if so, why? Should the feminist movement? Should the black one? (387)

Przeworski offered a tentative set of criteria to evaluate these questions:

What brings the particular conflict about? What led the participants to be organised in the particular form? What are the potential outcomes? What are the consequences of these outcomes for future development? All of these questions concern objective conditions... (387-388)

The value in this theoretical move is that it does not attribute anything inherent to people’s everyday

struggles. It asks instead that we take seriously the issues and demands raised by resistance. We must consider its overall impact in relation to the capitalist system; specifically, the process of accumulation. This is what Lenin meant by the “concrete analysis of the concrete situation”. In this sense, there is no abstract principle of ‘class’ to which exploited people must conform in order for the Left to be compelled to take their struggles seriously.

Meaning, class can manifest even in struggles over ostensibly ‘non-class’ issues such as ethnic or gender oppression. *There is no categorical reason why any issue cannot also become a class issue.* In the case of the Hill Country Tamil community in Sri Lanka, for example, their exclusion from citizenship in 1948—not to mention the over-one-hundred years prior of indentured labour—enabled a hyper-exploitative system that weakened labour throughout the country. Similar, shadowy sectors of quasi-bonded labour have reappeared in various forms throughout Sri Lanka’s history. That includes the economic compulsion to migrate to ensure the survival of working people’s households. This is a double or even triple burden in the case of Hill Country Tamil women (Jegathesan 2019).

The fact that these diverse groups of people have earned the country’s foreign exchange is necessary to understanding the economic constraints—implied by the nationalist solution to the agrarian question—on the welfare state that the *Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (LSSP) and the rest of the Left helped construct (for example, Samaraweera 1981: 138; 146-147; 159). That includes the current need to develop a viable basis for self-sufficiency by valorising acts of resistance, such as squatting. The Left must critique the majoritarian nationalist construction of the Sinhala peasantry, which was the basis on which Hill Country Tamils were excluded from alternative ways of securing their livelihoods.

Only by engaging with concrete questions of land redistribution in a way that now prioritises marginalised communities can the Left offer its solidarity to help resolve these struggles in a progressive way. Meanwhile, downplaying or otherwise delegitimising the Hill Country Tamil identity is a recipe for further exclusion. Even the Old Left—far more sincere in its intentions than today’s pseudo anti-imperialist ideologues—failed in pursuing its land reform programme in 1972. It hitched its wagon to the regime of Sirimavo Bandaranaike (1970-1977), which forced the relocation of stateless Hill Country Tamils to India. Moreover, the government pursued a top-down nationalisation of the plantations that was easily reversed by privatisation in the 1990s.

*On what basis can we assume that the Left would do any better under a regime even more hostile to the concerns of oppressed communities?* The reality is that a highly selective appropriation of Left arguments could in fact help solidify the basis for new forms of wage repression under the current or a future authoritarian regime. Accordingly—and following Przeworski’s theoretical argument—it should be crystal clear that the embodied memory of [two centuries of a community resisting oppression](#) is as much a class issue as it is ethnic and gender one. It is more relevant than ever to grappling with the [existential catastrophe](#) now gripping many.

## **The Left’s Blind Spots**

Moreover, saying an issue manifests class characteristics means doing the hard work to understand non-class axes of oppression *according to their own irreducible historical logic*, as countless thinkers have argued for decades. In Sri Lanka, the Left has faced severe consequences for earlier ignoring or downplaying the oppression of women and non-Sinhala communities, among others. This gap undermined the radical programme it otherwise sought to achieve during the long 1960s. The historically specific image of the working class that the Left drew ended up excluding people who could have otherwise strengthened the struggle.

The prioritisation of the industrial male worker meant ignoring for too long the specific concerns

and issues of rural women, who are now resisting exploitation inside and outside the Free Trade Zones (FTZs). This is the point made by a very long lineage of feminists. They have argued that perceptions about class are always mediated by other non-class constructs, such as gender. Sonya Rose's (1997) "Class Formation and the Quintessential Worker" is a foundational example. [1]

It is, then, nothing if not an extreme regression to use the argument that class divisions exist within a community or identity, for example, to delegitimise social struggles that are in fact extremely relevant to the Left movement. In this regard, and parallel to the way in which Przeworski evaluates the class effects of social struggles, we must sharpen our intuitive ability to distinguish *sincere* versus *insincere* attempts to highlight class divisions within a community. Is such an ideological move part of a sympathetic critique meant to highlight the limitations of a struggle for the purpose of strengthening it? Or is it an attempt to use the language of class to dismiss the relevance of a non-class axis of oppression, thereby in fact reinforcing the dominant social order?

There is something particularly galling about the latter because it appropriates the Left's rhetoric while using it for ends than otherwise intended. When, up to the 1970s, the Old Left spoke about class divisions within different ethnic communities, it did so because it could assume that its emancipatory project indeed pointed towards the "end of history".

Colvin R. De Silva (1987), for example, highlighted the oppression of the *rodiyas* within Sinhala society to retroactively deflect claims of bias against the Tamil community when justifying the Republican Constitution of 1972. But he could do so because he still assumed that capitalism was on its way out, to be replaced by socialism in which all communities would enjoy the benefits. That vision justified a fateful tactical alliance with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

As we now know, however, the Old Left's attempts failed because it neglected the other ways in which non-class axes of identity could shape class. That shifted history onto unexpected tracks. In the case of ethnicity, it ended up *overdetermining* class after the 1983 riots against Tamils, as Newton Gunasinghe (1996[1984]) famously put it.

Meaning, first and foremost, one had to have a clear line on the national question to determine whether that person's politics were progressive in a historical sense or not. The question of [whether class now overdetermines ethnicity](#) in today's post-uprising conjuncture is open-ended. But there can be no going back to a pre-1983 moment when considering a progressive stance on the national question as a necessary, if not a sufficient, condition for someone's politics to be defined as Left.

Accordingly, there is crucial difference between the Old Left that engaged in sincere if very flawed attempts to put "class first", and today's ideologues who employ the same rhetoric, long after Sinhala Buddhist nationalism inflicted even worse violence on the country. Moreover, arguing that such nationalism is no longer a relevant problem flies in the face of all evidence to the contrary. While [historically evolving](#), it still permeates the social consciousness, and the [ways in which people interpret their economic challenges](#).

How else do we explain the recurring tendency of attacks on the Tamil and Muslim communities, along with the constant proliferation of violent racist groups under the patronage of rich and powerful actors? Why is the stigmatising 'NGO' label only applied to 'foreign-funded' organisations based in Colombo? How does this deflect attention from the [noxious and hateful forms of civil society](#) that spread their tentacles through electronic and social media; proto-fascists nurtured under the previous regime of Gotabaya Rajapaksa who now appear to be coming into their own?

Wittingly or unwittingly, then, vulgar ideologues pantomiming the Old Left's intellectual and political giants reinforce the very ethnic majoritarian divisions that the Left is trying to combat. They

cover themselves with the false pretence of universality, claiming to treat all workers the same, and so on. They ignore prejudiced attitudes that weaken solidarity between workers, rather than take leadership and push back. In this sense, capitulation to nationalism is embedded in the very structure of their thinking.

The Left in Sri Lanka is trying to recover from its previous dismissal of the national question. It would be a profound error to make the same mistake twice, by denying the oppressions faced by other marginalised communities—from the queer to Hill Country Tamil communities—because they apparently do not map onto a mechanical understanding of class.

More disturbingly, using class in this reductive, a-theoretical way can become a justification for reactionary politics, to undermine the claims of peoples experiencing different forms of oppression. As [Jamelle Bouie](#) pointed out in a different context, that in fact reinforces “hierarchies of race, gender and citizenship, a project that necessarily \*strengthens capital\* as a political & social force”. It contributes to new forms of reactionary and even fascist politics by constructing a ‘woke’ bogeyman to justify complicity with the most odious figures on the contemporary global Far Right. Instead, class is flexible, and the product of real people involved in real struggles.

## What Solidarity Means

Who benefits from the ideological fragmentation of the Left? Today’s ideologues who appropriate Left arguments about class may consider their manoeuvring a stage rehearsal. They may anticipate their role as advisors to a ‘developmentalist’ dictatorship akin to South Korea’s [Park Chung Hee](#)’s regime, via decayed Left formations such as the Communist Party of Sri Lanka. [2]

They may justify their arguments in terms of Sri Lanka’s need to industrialise, to dispense with slack welfare measures, and to construct a lean state built on wage repression with the ideological consent of the majority, obtained through a renewed majoritarian language of ‘nation-building’. But they are more like collaborators such as [Henri De Man](#) who, during World War II, appropriated the Left’s arguments for planning to defend fascist institutions. This is a path to self-destruction. [3]

In contrast, the true measure of solidarity for the purpose of achieving *self-sufficiency* is participating in social struggles with an ecumenical understanding of their broad relevance to the emancipatory goals of the Left. And in that sense, over time people in oppressed communities trust others who come to learn about their issues without assumptions or preconditions. A moving example is the movie *Pride*, about the organisation Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners during the British miners’ strike of 1984-85.

Idealism became a material force through that struggle. This ethos is in fact the only true basis on which the principles of the economy can be reconceived to construct a progressive development model. That includes labour intensification and [other moves](#) to grapple with the long legacy of ecological scarring caused by extractive industries, including in [the same places](#) where the British miners, for example, went on strike.

Such progressive principles are the only effective basis on which the Left can regain the stature it has lost among the working people in Sri Lanka as well. We must listen patiently. And we must consider the resistance of oppressed groups within a progressive horizon that can [strengthen those struggles](#). Working in relation to this horizon does not mean being uncritical either. In extreme cases, such as the hegemonic variant of [Tamil nationalism](#), solidarity with struggles may indeed require highlighting the destructive, reactionary politics of that approach, which undermines resistance.

But that should not mean dismissing the national question tout court, which evolved out of the Left's accommodation with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism from the 1960s onwards (Jayawardena 1987). The Old Left's tacit endorsement of racism with the late 1960s campaign slogan "*Dudleyge badey, masala vadey* (Dudley [Senanayake's] stomach is filled with masala vadey [a metaphor for the Tamil community]) reinforced the emerging Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna's (JVP) chauvinist rhetoric. That included maligning the Hill Country Tamil community as a 'fifth column' for Indian expansionism.

In this way too, dismissing racism while quietly endorsing nationalist politics eventually proved self-destructive to the Left itself during the state and JVP terror of 1987 to 1989. Many progressives—including members of the United Socialist Alliance (USA), and most famous of all, [Vijaya Kumaratunga](#), who defended Provincial Councils—were assassinated by the JVP when the Left's complicity with Sinhala Buddhist nationalism came home to roost. It is with these lessons in mind that we must not repeat the failures of the past.

A critical understanding of the way in which class is embedded within a historically evolving society—and in which pluralistic issues and demands come to the fore—is what should shape any attempt to interpret the relevance of a given struggle to a revived Left politics. Not a crude, arbitrary definition of class that ignores the decades of patient rethinking done by serious activists and theorists, who have grappled with the blind spots of the movement. The past is littered with the victims of such oversights.

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**P.S.**

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## Footnotes

[1] It is relevant to note here as well parallels with the radical, anti-imperialist political origins of a concept such as intersectionality. The idea was meant to grapple with the exclusions and limitations of Black power and women's liberation movements in the 1970s. [Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor](#) resists its reduction to professionalised identity politics by insisting on the universality of its claims:

...The Combahee Statement was also written to describe how race, gender, and sexual orientation were woven together in the lives of queer Black women. In describing the distinct experiences of Black women who were lesbians, they pioneered what would eventually become known as "intersectionality"—the idea that multiple identities can be constantly and simultaneously present within one person's body. The experiences of Black lesbians could not be reduced to gender, race, class, or sexuality. The C.R.C. demanded politics that could account for all, and not just aspects of their identity.

[2] We may add that Park Chung Hee cannot be discussed outside the [Gwangju Uprising](#). That revolt demonstrated the inescapable role of labour as a collective agency in reshaping the foundations of the South Korean state. Further investigations into the developmental state have revealed the extent to which it remained a contested terrain, on which a plurality of struggles emerged to shape and redefine its trajectory (Deyo 1989).

[3] Or as Gramsci put it, turning fascist rhetoric on its head:

From this series of facts one may conclude that often the so-called “foreigner’s party” is not really the one which is commonly so termed, but precisely the most nationalistic party—which, in reality, represents not so much the vital forces of its own country, as that country’s subordination and economic enslavement to the hegemonic nations or to certain of their number. (176-177)