**TEMPORALITY OF HISTORY: A READING OF THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF THE PAST IN POST-WAR SRI LANKA**

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# INTRODUCTION

This reflective and interpretive paper, despite engaging with philosophical observations on time, temporality, memory, and history, stems from a simple observation. In 2012, protesting students were evicted from the premises of a state university. A year later, a youth was shot dead during a protest demanding clean water in Weliweriya. In both instances, the army was involved. Social media erupted in uncensored ire, which was directed at both the government and the figure of the soldier. The armed military man was seen as a puppet in the hands of the state, an uneducated hooligan. The anger and derision seemed to travel back in time: heated arguments on social media reframed what was once seen as brave sacrifice on behalf of the motherland as ‘doing their job for which they are paid.’ This framing came into effect in the blunt criticism of disabled soldiers who were demanding disability allowances on the streets of Colombo in 2017 and 2019. One particular comment remains unforgotten: “they look like beggars begging on contract. produce them in courts and charge for public nuisance” (D.E.M.O.Crazy, 2017). This shift in popular imagination crystallized for me the extent to which the past phenomena is a moving target in constant flux, reframed in line with dominant discourse of the narrative present each time it is recalled.

In this backdrop, this paper reads time and temporality1 as an integral part of individual ontology and epistemology and by extension, of one’s engagement with the past. Specifically, this is an attempt to illustrate how temporality interacts with individual conceptualizations of and responses to past action with particular focus on the case of post-

war Sri Lanka.2 The paper reads how events, actions, and other constructs of our collective

history such as the war, the victory, the soldier, and post-war political choices become moving targets that are constantly re-remembered and re-told with different temporal signatures. In other words, I interpret the changing vocabulary with which these phenomena are referred to over time as a sign of the palimpsestuous quality of recalled past. The analysis draws on interpretative phenomenological analysis which attempts to unearth “how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” in a given context by focusing on “personal experience and [] individual’s personal perception or account of an object or event” (Smith & Osborne, 2009, p 53). In conclusion, this paper reflects on why it may be important for us to understand how located in the present our perception of the past is, and by implication how flawed it would be to pass judgement on past action from the vantage point of the present.

# DISCUSSION

'Time', ‘past’ and ‘history’ are terms that are commonplace enough that they often seem common sense. Closer scrutiny, however, shows these concepts to be rather abstract. Indeed, they − especially time − are among the oldest and most complex subjects of

1 In his seminal work *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (2009) D.C. Hoy distinguishes between time and temporality: “The term "time" can be used to refer to universal time, clock time, or objective time. In contrast, "temporality" is time insofar as it manifests itself in human existence.” (cited in Bryant, 2009, para.4). This paper’s focus lies on time as it relates to human existence and experience, although the two terms are at times used interchangeably.

2 I use the term ‘post-war’ (instead of conflict) consciously here; arguing that war used as a tool of conflict resolution, may have a clearly demarcated beginning and an end, whereas conflict cannot.

philosophical reflection: “attempts to conceptualize the nature of time have never been absent in the history of philosophy” (Braynt, 2009, para.1). This paper stems from the belief that these matters and the intersections therein are central to human interaction and therefore underpin virtually all aspects of life and lived experience – both every day and accumulated. The past that becomes history, for instance, underpins the present in significant ways. Consider, for example, how at a macro level, regimes legitimize their authority and practices of power, especially those that are violent or undemocratic, by invoking history; and how “Marxian theory of history [sees it] as a process of class struggles, or Herder’s theory of history [sees it] as a process of nation-formation” (Lorenz, 2011, p. 20). At a micro level, our actions and choices are only reconciled in history (Arendt, cited in Yaqoob, 2014). Hence, an understanding of the forces that come together in our perception of past is of critical significance with these matters inevitably interwoven with issues of consciousness, power and hegemony, with individual and mass resistance at stake.

This paper considers the interplay between temporality and the past in the context of post-war Sri Lanka given that the war-related history resurfaces constantly in different forms, framed in different ways, in support or in opposition to contesting ideological and political positions in an attempt to interpellate the masses. A sense of political stability has, to a great extent, evaded us: since the end of the most devastating conflict in the country’s modern history in 2009, 3 Sri Lanka has gone through numerous points of transition mostly manifest as transfers of political power between the leading political parties of the country. Contemporary Sri Lanka, even after over a decade of ‘peace’ is possibly what Gellner (1983) would term as a “nation in transition” with communities confronted with painful choices of identity, territory and political allegiance in order to invent, reinvent or strengthen a national consciousness. It is in this context that the epistemological process underlying memories and narratives of a shared past becomes significant, and the myriads of ways in which the past is remembered, recorded, referred to, and actively talked about demands scrutiny.

The past holds a place of significance in the context of conflict and war, especially in its aftermath, where remembering and narrating becomes a tool of reconciliation. In *Omens of adversity*, Scott (2014) traces the shifting emphasis on the past.

“....Then, the past had temporal significance only insofar as it was tethered to the engine of history driving inexorably toward the future. Now, by contrast, the past has loosed itself from the future and acquired a certain quasi- autonomy; ….it seems now to exist for its own sake, as a radiant source of wisdom and truth. ..... Then, the past was a social fact; now, however, it is a pathological one. The past is a wound that will not heal. What the past produces now are inward, psychic harms and injuries to an individual sense of self and a collective sense of identity” (p. 13).

This dual understanding of the past as simultaneously a source of wisdom to be excavated and memorialized and a pathological wound is central to the post-conflict process of ‘healing’ through memorizing, narrating and constructing the ‘truth’ of what happened. Speaking of ‘truth’, Scott suggests that “the only truth today is that every human being has the right to a perspective on what is true. Therefore, arguably, there is no single point of view that can monopolize or guarantee the truth for all.” (ibid., p. 14). Hence ‘truth’ can either be individually or collectively constructed, “with varying relations to structures and powers of authorization” (ibid.); thereby with varying degrees of visibility and authority. These ‘truths’ that reconstruct past action are invariably located in time, and therefore, unstable.

3 The Elam war or the Sri Lankan Civil War was an armed conflict fought from 1983 to 2009, by the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE), which aimed to create an independent Tamil state called Tamil Eelam in the north and the east of Sri Lanka. After a 26- year military campaign, the Sri Lankan military defeated the Tamil Tigers through heavy military measures. The war caused significant hardships for the population in all areas of life, with an initial estimated 80,000–100,000 people killed during its course. (Insight on conflict, 2009)

Lorenz (2011) posits that “history as a discipline defines its object, explicitly or implicitly, as being located in space and in time” (p. 14). In other words, the history of a particular subject constitutes the history of specific chunks of space and time as well. Traditionally, historicists assert the necessity of historical ‘distance’ – centuries of it – arguing that “historical truth is, as it were, rather like the clouds which take shape for the eye only at a distance,” with one’s head adequately freed from the cloud of contemporary consciousness (Humboldt cited in Hollander, Paul, & Peters, 2011). Nevertheless, the argument here is that in terms of contemporary history, this specificity and truth is encroached on by a secondary temporal and spatial signature; that we see the distant ‘cloud’ while enveloped in the fog of contemporaneous sensibilities.

Let us illustrate this argument with reference to the shifts in the framing of the war ‘victory’ and the means of achieving it over time. The end of the separatist armed conflict in the north and east of Sri Lanka marked a peripeteia in the dominant narrative of the nation and its political history. From the winner’s perspective, it was a euphoric second birth, a fresh journey into a better tomorrow and there arose in the horizon a sovereign nation, a utopian democracy of amicable race relations and rapid economic growth. In the immediate aftermath of war, underpinned by majoritarian patriotism, the statist truth supported a political climate where “victims and their persecutors [were] urged to adopt an attitude of reconciliation toward each other; [ ] to reconstruct the past in such a way as to enable them to conjure a reasonable, shareable, modus vivendi” (Scott, 2014, p.14). Consider for instance how these conditions at times reflected in art and entertainment with post-war cinema “construct[ing] a hegemonic memory based on ‘lessons learnt’— a trope required by the discourse of militarism in post-war Sri Lanka — undermining the true essence of reconciliation” (Karunanayake & Waradas, 2013, p. 1). Cultural artifacts such as these cinematic texts which “stand alongside history, testimony, and national spectacles as texts through which national collectivity is experienced and past is memorialised and made sense of” (Meegaswatta, 2019, p.30), had then the temporal signature of post-war majoritarian patriotism.

Further, the comprehensive military victory which ‘defeated’ the LTTE foreclosed not only the possibility of a repeat insurrection, but also alternative narratives that could contest the victor’s narrative of the conflict and its aftermath that invariably attempts to, “[in a bid] to control history and memory, [ ] manipulate versions of what happened to justify their actions and stigmatize those political and social interpretations that they oppose” (Historical Memory Commission, 2013, p.9). Especially in the immediate aftermath of the war, the distinctions among alternative values, beliefs, narratives and political systems almost completely vanished, having been subsumed in the new totalizing category of “anti- nationalism”; statist patriotism’s catchall for its political Others. The post-conflict state’s traitor-patriot binary markedly framed the talk about justice, nation, national identity and ideal citizenship, making it difficult for any political opponent to challenge the dominant political discourse. Such binarism, also seen in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks, leads to dissent or anti-war sentiments to be seen as being complicitous with terrorists and terrorism so that one cannot be against both war and terrorism (Butler, 2002). Furthermore, within such a state- controlled discursive terrain, the past and the present were framed in line with the hegemonic nationalist imperatives which demanded that the winner’s heroism and legitimacy of purpose and means be unreservedly praised.

However, increasing international pressure on Sri Lanka to investigate war crimes and human rights violations during and after the war and thereby ensure ‘transitional justice’, and a subsequent regime change,4 framed the past and the present in different terms.

4 Nascent alternative discourses against political extremism and authoritarianism of the post-war government came to a head with the transfer of power to the coalition government, dubbed the *Yahapalana* regime, with the victory of the common candidate Maithreepala Sirisena in the 2015

According to Scott’s (2014) reading of Post- Cold war trials of Grenada revolutionaries, such international pressure occurs within an ideological space constructed by the principles of liberal democracy primarily championed by the United States of America. “Transitional” justice, in this context, emerges as the legal mechanism which engineers the transformation of non- liberal or illiberal predecessor regimes into liberal democratic ones; the only acceptable political future in the post- cold war world. A line is thus drawn between the illiberal past and the liberalizing present, whereas post-war statist memory may portray a past marked by heroism, valour and sacrifice heralding a liberalizing present. With the increasing power and influence of the ‘international community’ (primarily consisting of a handful of western nations), the terms within which the past is articulated drastically changed over time, especially following the fall of the Rajapakshe government in 2015.

With this political shift, the term transitional justice gained momentum in Sri Lanka’s post-war political discourse. United Nations (UN) defines transitional justice as “the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society’s attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation” (UN, 2010, p.3). The terminology surrounding the concept alludes to “societies devastated by conflict or emerging from repressive rule” and “broken institutions, exhausted resources, diminished security, and a distressed and divided population” (ibid.) and has provided a new discourse to articulate the past. While the definition of and terminology surrounding transitional justice alone pose a challenge to the immediate post-war statist memory that excludes all sorts of violations and violence, the commitments made and steps taken by the *Yahapalana* government to address the components of transitional justice; namely prosecution, right to truth, reparation, and institutional reform (ibid. p 7-9) marked a shift in the dominant discourses surrounding the armed conflict and dented the image of an untainted victory and a liberating aftermath. Such changes indicated that the temporal grounds of judgment concerning past conflicts had altered. This involved a re-articulation of the past within “a political world redefined in a new jargon of authenticity [as that provided by the processes and concepts of transitional justice] that no longer admitted the legibility, much less recognized the legitimacy, of [ ] former political ambitions, [ ] former political languages, [ ] former political lives.” (Scott, 2014, p.5).

To illustrate this point further, let us consider another example that was briefly elucidated in the introduction: the figurations of the soldier at given points in time. The image of the armed man forever vacillates between hero and pawn, saviour and killer, and in between. Our perception of the soldier, then, does not stem from an inherent, unchangeable set of characteristics, qualities, or attributed action of which the value and impact remain static, but from temporal sensibilities founded on dominant discourses of the time. In other words, the figure of the soldier is a moving target in our intellectual and emotional landscape. This may explain why the hearings of soldiers accused of killing civilians in the Mirusuvil incident spanned over a decade.5 In the heat of the war and its euphoric aftermath, framing the heroic soldier, the armed saviour as a murderer had very well been a discursive impossibility. The facticity of death once seen as duty or service took over a decade and a half to be

Presidential Election against his formidable opponent Mahinda Rajapakshe, whose regime of namesake democracy had often been dubbed a ‘soft dictatorship’. New minority government was established with Ranil Wickremesinghe, the leader on the United National Party as the Prime Minister. The government was further consolidated through a partnership with the Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

5 In 2002, five soldiers of the Sri Lanka Army were indicted on 17 counts, including murder, by the Attorney General in connection to the killing of eight Tamil civilians in December 2000. With

proceedings transferred from court to court, interrupted by the assassination of a judge, a delay in appointing a replacement and witnesses fearful of travelling to Colombo, the hearing was dragged on for 13 years. In July 2015, the Colombo High Court found Sergeant Sunil Rathnayake guilty on 17 counts, including murder. He was sentenced to death and fined LKR 51,000 (Amnesty Int., 2020)

reframed as murder, massacre, or killing. This brings to the forefront the performative character of language: “the use of language is not just a medium of representation, but also a form of social action alias of practice (Lorenz, 2011, p. 27). A few years down the line, a change in majority opinion and a resultant change in political climate has seen to yet another framing of violence and death that resulted in a presidential pardon of Sergeant Sunil Rathnayake whose appeal had been rejected by five judges of the Supreme Court. On another occasion, hardline extremism reinterpreted as patriotic foresight resulted in yet another controversial presidential pardon in the wake of the 21 April Easter bombings. Past action appears neither absolute nor singular; rather, it is porous—constantly absorbing the sensibility of discourse and lived experience of ‘now’.

To draw on another example, the framing of individual political actions and choice in both personal and public spaces mirrors a similar process of temporal distortion. The derision with which the political views supportive of the *Yahapalana* coalition were criticized on social media towards the tail end of its lifespan points at an attempt to divorce past political action from its context and attribute ‘fault’. This precludes the fact that past action, past rationalisation, and political choices are embedded in a temporality very different from one which we inhabit now, therefore cannot be judged from the vantage point of present time. The conditions, sensibilities and discursive possibilities of a certain past cannot be nullified by present realities; yet, in remembering, the past contexts and conditions which are integral to both realising and understanding past choices and actions, are often violently and persuasively reinscribed from within different realities and sensibilities. Further, from a postmodernist standpoint, in a backdrop of ethno-religious and cultural diversity where individuals may experience time and space differently, no unitary self can narrate a unified history: different representational codes, different kinds of narrative ordering or ‘emplotment’ and explanation abound (Lorenz, 2011). Such an understanding may espouse what Arendt calls a hermeneutic relation to events: a “relationship with the past [that] would help individuals be reconciled to the world, and would ground future political action in a manner that militated against nihilistic voluntarism and revolutionary violence” (Yaqoob, 2014, p. 413).

The focus on the past does not preclude present and future: temporality forms a structure of interrelationships in which past, present, and future cannot be thought apart from one another (Hoy, cited in Bryant, 2009). Thus “the "present" of the present is never a pure present, but rather presents itself in and through a relationship to the past and future” (Bryant, 2009). And while the present may cloud our recollection and narration of past and history, the pastness of the past is far from a given, especially in the context of traumatic conflicts (Fogu & Kansteiner, cited in Lorenz, 2011). Lorenz (2011) argues that “In trauma the past refuses to become history—‘to go away’—…Traumatic experience unsettles history’s basic temporal distinction between the present and the past” (p. 29). The past does not then exist only in representations, but also in one’s experience of the present in some form. So, in a sense, our experience of time and history is, in Stoler’s (2016) words, recursive; it is characterized by a sort of layering over, a constant folding and refolding on itself, that would render any cross section of time a complexly interwoven stack of multiple temporal signatures. What does this mean for us as we negotiate multiple and diverging renditions and narratives of the past in our day today life in a post-war society fraught with political anxieties?

# CONCLUSION

In the case of post-war Sri Lanka, Scott’s argument that “a distinctive temporality is always embodied in—while not being the simple mirror of—each imaginary of history” (2014, p.7) holds true. In other words, the history told and memories shared bear the stamp of the time of telling with the lived reality of the present altering one’s perception of and relation to the past and its narration. Hence, this paper invites us to consider the nature of our ‘knowledge’ of the past, how it is achieved, and the role temporality plays in its construction.

Such a consideration brings home to us that any attempt to judge past events, actions from the vantage point of the present may be fundamentally flawed. An understanding of how temporality works in what we remember and how we remember, what we see and how we see, would, in my point of view, facilitate understanding and empathetic consideration of various individual and collective standpoints which is important to resolve tension and conflict through dialogue. It also means seeing, hearing, remembering and telling beyond what we are to see, hear, remember and tell as agents located in and conditioned by time.

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