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Crisis and Self-Sufficiency: The Left and Its Challenges During the Long 1960s in Sri Lanka

Devaka Gunawardena, Ahilan Kadirgamar

Abstract

This paper argues that Sri Lanka's leftist movement encountered structural challenges while attempting to transform Sri Lanka's dependent economy during the long 1960s. This process culminated in the global economic crisis of the 1970s. The predominantly Trotskyite left initially championed import substitution industrialisation in the period after Sri Lanka gained independence from Britain in 1948. Eventually, during the crisis of the 1970s, it was forced to radicalise its approach. It began to focus more on achieving self-sufficiency in key agricultural products. The left's reflexive bias toward industrialisation, however, undermined its attempt to reconceive development from an agrarian perspective. The left experienced an enduring setback during the elections of 1977, which ushered in the neoliberal transformation of Sri Lanka. The article explores the consequences of the left's historical neglect of the agrarian question during the long 1960s and the fateful implications of its delayed engagement with rural communities.

Keywords: Sri Lanka, leftist movements, Agrarian Studies, development transitions, Marxism

The global order that we have known for decades is unravelling. A crisis that has been decades in the making appears to be coming to a head in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pressures on the existing global order are creating space for alternative visions. Exploring the historical dynamics in the periphery may offer ideas for future possibilities amidst the current disorder.

In this context, the question of self-sufficiency has emerged with renewed force (Helleiner 2020). The concept was long thought to be banished to a bygone era. Powerful global institutions had made clear that "there is no alternative" to the free market consensus. But the urgency of our moment means

Devaka Gunawardena, University of California, Los Angeles, USA; devakagunawardena@gmail.com. Ahilan Kadirgamar, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka; ahilan.kadirgamar@gmail.com. We wish to thank Kamran Asdar Ali and Claudia Derichs, the IQAS staff, and three anonymous reviewers, for their thoughtful comments and critique. We also appreciate the efforts of Vijaya Kumar to locate and send us a copy of the Five-Year Plan of 1972–1976, which helped us a great deal with our argument.

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that self-sufficiency once again offers an important signpost for understanding the *longue durée* of colonialism and its aftermath in the form of persistent global inequality.

We seek to analyse the great lessons of the tumultuous period of the long 1960s to clarify this point. We are interested in the concept of self-sufficiency that emerged, not from the hegemonic centres of the globe, or for that matter, the regional power centres, but from the periphery of the Global South. In this regard, Sri Lanka[1] has been at the forefront of major questions. It was colonised for four and a half centuries by the Portuguese, Dutch and finally the British. It presents the conundrum of a society that has interacted with modern forms of state-making for centuries.

Sri Lanka's postcolonial history anticipated major global shifts. Its movements for independence, which Sri Lanka achieved in 1948, were subdued compared to other countries in the region. But the vibrancy of its leftist movement – including perhaps the most successful Trotskyist party anywhere in the world, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) – put critical questions on the post-independence political agenda. Sri Lanka's left grappled with challenges facing other poor, predominantly agrarian countries that also attempted to break the long cycle of dependency. It moved from opposition to government over the period analysed here. The shift culminated in the crisis of the 1970s.[2] The left encountered enormous obstacles just as it became junior partner in a coalition government, the United Front (UF), which lasted from 1970 to 1977. Moreover, the left was constrained by the political dynamics of the coalition. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), one of Sri Lanka's two dominant bourgeois parties at the time, led the UF.[3] The SLFP in turn was led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who had earlier become the world's first female prime minister in 1960.

The left was ultimately crushed; first by global economic recession in the early 1970s, then, in 1977, by a reinvigorated right, led by the other bourgeois party, the United National Party (UNP). The UNP initiated one of the world's earliest experiments in neoliberalism, known locally as the "open economy".[4]

1 For purposes of continuity throughout our article, we use the term Sri Lanka, instead of its earlier name of Ceylon, which was changed in 1972. The shift in the country name reflects the post-independence struggles around the island's identity, including past colonial and present ethnic exclusions.

2 Technically, the first actor of the left to join a government was the Viplavakari Lanka Sama Samaja Party (VLSSP), a breakaway of the LSSP led by Philip Gunawardena, which joined SWRD Bandaranaike's Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP) government formed in 1956. But it remained an outlier among the left until the formation of the majority left's coalition with the SLFP led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1964. The VLSSP, however, gave an impetus to early land reform efforts.

3 We use the term bourgeois party to refer to the left's own self-understanding of its interaction with other political parties of the time. It was prevalent in the polemical debate. Although the left also participated in parliamentary democratic institutions, it distinguished its own role from bourgeois parties by foregrounding its vision of socialism. It argued that this would require the eventual transcendence of capitalism. See Abhayavardhana (2001) for discussion of the ways in which this tension between short-term and long-term goals played out in the left's political strategy.

4 Our goal in highlighting Sri Lanka is to situate it in a global trend. Specifically, we emphasise the way in which it anticipated the structural adjustment programmes that were imposed on many Southern countries during the 1980s. In large part, the failure of the left in Sri Lanka during the 1970s crisis created a

This meant paring back the welfare state and establishing Export Processing Zones (EPZs). The UNP government also took a hard-line stance on ethnic issues, leading to violent riots against the Tamil community in 1983, which triggered a devastating 26-year long civil war. But Sri Lanka's policy experiments and ideological debates during the long 1960s continue to make it a crucial place from which to preview a renewed global discourse of self-sufficiency.

In addition, the debates across leftist parties reveal much about Sri Lanka's social formation, particularly the challenges of social transformation. When Sri Lanka was pushed to the edge by economic crisis, aggravated by the capital strike during the global economic downturn of the 1970s, the concept of self-reliance began to take shape.[5] It was a radicalisation in terms of both the Sri Lankan left's own pre-existing emphasis on import substitution and trends echoing across the Third World at the time (see also Amin 1974: 19). For example, a foundational document of the period, the Arusha Declaration in Tanzania of 1967, argued: "In order to maintain our independence and our people's freedom we ought to be self-reliant in every possible way and avoid depending upon other countries for assistance" (Arusha Declaration 1967: 18).

In Sri Lanka, the Five-Year Plan of 1972–1976, published in late 1971, offered a tantalisingly brief description of self-reliance, which we distinguish from the concept of self-sufficiency. As the authors of the Plan put it, "in regard to the balance of payments, [the Plan] adopts a strategy which will rescue the country from its present predicament and establish an increasingly self-reliant base for future growth" (Five-Year Plan 1971: 11). The concept of self-reliance here appears to describe a long-term process to strengthen the capital base, which reflected a broader attempt to construct the "Third World" as a political project.

The Five-Year Plan also referred to the need to increase the "production of essential food items such as fish, milk, eggs and fruits and by gearing the production of consumer goods to the needs of the masses" (Five-Year Plan 1971: 12). Furthermore, it also explicitly referred to the underlying concept of self-sufficiency with respect to the staple of rice.[6] The Arusha Declaration made a similar point by referring to the need to become "self-sufficient in food, serviceable clothes and good housing" (Arusha Declaration 1967: 17).

space for the right to take advantage of its weakness and to impose an alternative vision of the economy. This occurred in conjunction with, but was also distinct from, the emerging imposition of "fiscal consolidation" by global institutions such as the IMF and World Bank on countries facing looming debt crises. These Western-dominated institutions increasingly hegemonised the field of international development, while the Soviet Union and China underwent their own profound transformations toward the end of the Cold War.

5 The capital strike by the West, as Sri Lanka shifted to the left, compounded the declining terms of trade. These trends made the path of import substitution a necessity. We owe this point to conversations with a prominent Sri Lankan political economist, the late SBD de Silva, who repeated it to one of the authors in several conversations.

6 The Five-Year Plan set the following goal: "Increasing paddy production to achieve self-sufficiency in 1977" (Five-Year Plan 1971: 37). Furthermore, on the question of milk important for nutrition, it set another significant goal: "During the Plan period the increases in domestic production of milk will be sufficient to replace all imports of full cream milk powder as well as butter fat and skimmed milk for the condensery" (ibid.: 54).

Thus, in our understanding, self-sufficiency points to the immediate question of working people's consumption assured by local production. Furthermore, self-sufficiency refers to the challenge of securing working people's daily reproduction – particularly food, a challenge that is more evident during crises. Our primary method is to outline what was meant by self-sufficiency by examining the ideological debates of the period from 1953 to 1977. We draw out the implications of this concept by focusing specifically on the left's handling of the agrarian question in Sri Lanka. We choose 1953 as a starting point because of the Great Hartal; a massive protest opposing a World Bank-inspired attempt to cut the rice ration. It spurred the collapse of the UNP government in 1956 and the rise of the SLFP as an alternative bourgeois party. Later, the majority faction of the left decided to participate in a coalition with the SLFP in 1964. The coalition gained power in 1970 but was eventually defeated in 1977. The hope of the long 1960s were dashed in Sri Lanka as elsewhere across the world, in the massive crisis of the 1970s.

Writing at this time, the political scientist James Jupp summarised the paradoxes of the 1970s crisis. He framed the "test of state enterprise in Sri Lanka" as a question of "whether the plantation sector can continue to produce as efficiently as before and whether the country can become self-sufficient in rice, thus freeing its diminished exchange resources for the import of industrial equipment and raw materials" (Jupp 1977: 635). As he further noted, "in 1973 Sri Lanka was spending 47 per cent of its import bill on food, while 71 per cent of raw materials used in manufacture were imported" (ibid.).

Despite the left's herculean efforts, it collapsed and was discredited during the critical moment of Sri Lanka's transition to an open economy in 1977. The UNP took power, and the left was defeated in a manner from which it has never recovered. Or as Ronald Herring, an important rural sociologist working on the agrarian question in South Asia, articulated: "So severe was the economic crisis of the early 1970s that there is a sense in which the complex of policies in place at the time, and the political forces associated with them, were inescapably delegitimised in popular perception" (Herring 1987: 327).

This is not to deny that the left in Sri Lanka won crucial victories during the period under study, including the defence and expansion of universal healthcare and education. Sri Lanka achieved relatively high Human Development Indicators in the region. Wealth inequality also decreased, thanks especially to food subsidies such as the rice ration. But even Sri Lanka's strong welfare state faced powerful headwinds. These included the structural decline in terms of trade for Sri Lanka's export crops (Herring 1987: 326, Shastri 1983: 3) and a long period of capital outflows (De Silva 1985, Shastri 1983: 5–6). These trends crystallised in the 1970s crisis.[7]

7 For terms of trade, Herring notes: "Though the economy was exporting substantially more in 1975 than in 1960, those exports had a purchasing power little more than one-third the smaller volume of exports in 1960" (Herring 1987: 326). For capital outflows, Shastri points out that "according to one calculation for the

The agrarian question from the bottom up

We do not analyse the failure of the left and the triumph of the class project of neoliberal globalisation as inevitable. Instead, our goal is to identify the ways in which the left ceded the agrarian question to the right. This created contradictions within society that were ultimately exposed during the economic crisis of the 1970s. We analyse this shift on two levels: 1) How did it shape the eventual crisis, paving the way for neoliberal regime's ascendance? and 2) How do the questions implied by this period remain urgent and relevant today?

The 1970s crisis pushed the left in power to the breaking point. As revealed in the Five-Year Plan, the left began to take food production more seriously. But by then it was too late. Drought, youth insurrection and myriads of other problems exploded. The left had been circumscribed in its approach because of its earlier attempt to prioritise an industrial over an agricultural worldview. We argue that the bias reflected the nature of the left's social base, especially the urban working class, from which it had historically mobilised.[8]

Our argument, however, is not simply that the left was hobbled by an exclusive emphasis on industrialisation. Rather, by the time it realised the critical necessity of achieving self-sufficiency in food in particular, it was overwhelmed. Or as one commentator on the Five-Year Plan noted, the country's shift to domestic food production was admirable as a long-term goal but could not resolve the immediate scarcities when food imports were restricted (Balakrishnan 1973: 1168). Critically analysing the challenges faced by the left requires a deeper appreciation of the day-to-day burdens of managing the economy once the left had come to power.

In contrast, the right, led by the UNP, had taken the historical initiative on the agrarian question. Since even before independence, it had framed the agrarian question in terms of the expansion of smallholder agriculture. The Green Revolution strategy of the 1960s to import inputs such as fertiliser put more pressure on the balance of payments. The import/export situation became untenable in the 1970s. Sri Lanka was forced to radicalise its efforts under extremely unfavourable global conditions. These developments provoked multiple crises in the balance of payments, fiscal sustainability and mass unemployment.

18 year period from 1952 to 1969, private capital transfers from Britain to Sri Lanka amounted to Rs. 87.2 million while the amount transferred from Sri Lanka to Britain was Rs. 315.7 million (Calculation by Sri Lanka, Ministry of Planning in 1975: 104)" (Shastri 1983: 6).

8 A second-order argument could be made as to why the left was concentrated among the urban working class in the first place. The bias was embedded in global Marxist ideologies of the time. Furthermore, there was far less direct confrontation between elites and the colonial state in Sri Lanka compared to other countries in the region, which presumably would have required rural mobilisation. In either case, these hypotheses would require a more sustained analysis of the articulation of international and national factors that shape the strategies of leftist movements in different countries. This question lies beyond the scope of our paper. For our own purposes, we make our argument about the left's urban bias to clarify our main point about the left's blind spot vis-à-vis the agrarian question. Specifically, we postulate the type of broader social mobilisation implied by the question of self-sufficiency.

Drastic measures taken by the United Front (UF) government included further nationalisation, including that of the country's main source of foreign exchange at the time, the plantation sector (Herring 1987: 328, De Silva 1985).

By the time the left started thinking on a national scale about the agrarian question, it was already consumed by the need to manage the crisis. Nevertheless, its failure contains seeds for a renewed critical appreciation of the question of self-sufficiency. We conceive this discussion as part of a much longer scholarly project. Our argument is an initial attempt to grapple with this question through a sympathetic critique of the left's legacy in the long 1960s, as revealed in the crisis of food production in the 1970s. We recognise the massive historical challenges the left faced. To do them justice requires sustained meditation on these paradoxes for which there were and are no easy answers.

We advance this argument vis-à-vis the bulk of existing scholarship on both the Sri Lankan left and Sri Lanka's post-independence challenges. Broadly speaking, we ground our analysis in the tradition of political economy that emerged in response to the social movements and struggles of the long 1960s. The growing predominance of ethnic conflict and, eventually, civil war, provoked a shift in academic analysis toward a focus on ethnicity, culture and law. This includes the more recent frames of peace, conflict and transitional justice that continue to define much of the scholarly debate. We attempt, however, to revive the long-dormant tradition of political economic analysis. Drawing on such work, we propose an alternative explanation of the decline of the left beyond the standard narratives of the left's capitulation to Sinhala majoritarian nationalism and compromises made with bourgeois parties.[9] Instead, we highlight the difficulty the left faced in building a diverse constituency among working people across the urban/rural divide.

At the same time, we draw deeply from the language and analysis of the mostly left-oriented authors of the period. The gravity and clarity of their writing offers an extremely useful approach for grappling with the challenges of our own time, even though we critique their assumptions. We develop our argument using the empirical materials of a relatively under-explored archive, including the previously mentioned Five-Year Plan, debates in the dissident journal *The Young Socialist* (1960–1970) and later (post-1977) analyses by left and non-left authors in the *Lanka Guardian*. We argue that they offer fertile ground for inferring the dynamics of the period.

In addition, we acknowledge the long trend of agrarian scholarship on Sri Lanka. We use the left's archive, however, to make a much more specific point

9 This line of thinking is especially prominent even in the otherwise subtle historical analysis of Kumari Jayawardena's work. She tends to attribute the left's failings in a reductive manner to the "petty bourgeois" class origins of its leadership (see, for example, Jayawardena 1987). We instead place more emphasis on the urban bias of the left. Specifically, we observe the difficulty the left faced in organising the country's vast rural constituency, and the need to frame this contradiction as an explicit theoretical and political problem. The left postponed this task until it had already arrived in power in the 1970s, at which point it was besieged by intractable crises.

about the difficulties of social mobilisation to transform agrarian relations. There has been extensive study of elite attitudes toward the peasantry across a range of studies (Brow / Weeramunda 1992, Herring 1988, Moore 1985, Moore 1989, Samaraweera 1981, Shanmugaratnam 1985). We take this approach further, to look at what the process meant from the bottom up. We analyse the obstacles to achieving a broad coalition that included people who are often categorised as either urban working class or peasantry.

We move beyond existing Marxist debates about worker-peasant alliances by foregrounding the overlap of low-income groups across the rural and urban divide, as represented in the category of working people. We theorise working people who, despite their diverse positions in relations of production, encounter a whole set of cross-cutting issues rooted in the shared circumstances of their reproduction, of which the question of food is a critical aspect. Toward this end, we see our analysis of the Sri Lankan left as contributing to theorising the concept of working people in the global South (Shivji 2017; for a foundational gendered analysis of the question of self-sufficiency, see also Mies 1999). Self-sufficiency is a lens to analyse the struggles of working people, which form the background of our analysis of the Sri Lankan left's ideological debate. The concepts are necessarily related. Self-sufficiency is not just about balancing the economy from an expert perspective but requires the active involvement of working people in defining their basic needs.

Defining the Left

For purposes of narrative convenience, we use the term left to refer both to a specific set of actors and, in a deeper, Gramscian way, the "common sense" that permeated the two dominant left parties of the time, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and Communist Party (CP), and their dissident factions. But we recognise that the left is not a theoretically homogeneous category. We acknowledge that it has been a movement riven by splits and open conflicts. We provide a brief sketch of the trajectory of the left both before and after independence to clarify some of these differences (for other overviews, see Amerasinghe 1998, Fernando /Skanthakumar, eds. 2014, Wickramasinghe 2015). Our goal is to concretise the long-term historical dynamics described above with real people and actors.

The Sri Lankan left originated in the colonial-era labour struggles, when students returning from abroad took a far more ideological role vis-à-vis the style of business unionism that predominated at the time (Jayawardena 1974). These students formed the LSSP in 1935, from which dissidents split and formed the CP. The latter was represented first and foremost by SA Wickramasinghe, who

became a Member of Parliament (MP). Thus, at the moment of its birth the Sri Lankan left was the product of a historical irony. Trotskyists were the founders and Stalinists were the breakaways (Woodward 1962: 308).

The LSSP remained the main source of theoretical innovation, especially its chief economist, NM Perera, constitutional scholar Colvin R. De Silva, and historian Leslie Goonewardene. From its ranks emerged the politicians and activists who would eventually define its legacy, burnished by their role in anticolonial struggle. The party gained representation in parliament from 1947 onwards.[10] It could count on about 10 MPs in a legislature of 95. Eventually by 1956 it gained around 15. It fluctuated between 10 and 15 until it reached the zenith of its power in 1970 and won 20 seats in a 151-person legislature. The Communists achieved a smaller, but not insignificant representation throughout the same period.[11] The numbers alone do not reflect the outsize impact of the leftist parties on policy debate.

Given the overwhelming focus on the parliamentary path, the LSSP, especially its pre-eminent theoretician Hector Abhayavardhana, developed its justification for alliances with the party that supposedly represented the "national bourgeois", the SLFP. The SLFP itself was formed in 1953 from a split from the "comprador bourgeois" UNP, whose founder, DS Senanayake, belonged to a powerful elite family. The split by SWRD Bandaranaike, leader of the SLFP, from the UNP was both an opportunistic move in elite political competition and an attempt to mobilise a different social base. Voters generally viewed the SLFP as the party more representative than the UNP of Sri Lanka's "five classes": teachers, indigenous physicians, Buddhist clergy (the Sangha), workers and farmers. The bulk of these groups constituted what Marxists might refer to as the "petty bourgeois". The SLFP, in cultivating its nationalist politics – both with respect to its Sinhala Buddhist constituencies as well as on the international stage by moving closer to the Soviet Bloc – created a break in Sri Lanka's postcolonial history.

The LSSP eventually joined a political coalition with the SLFP in 1964, after the latter became prominent in national politics following its victory in 1956

10 Many of the participants of the Bolshevik Leninist Party of India, Ceylon, and Burma eventually joined the LSSP, but they were also initially represented with five seats in the parliament elected in 1947 (Amerasinghe 1998: 82).

11 Women who stood out among the MPs include Vivienne Goonewardene (LSSP) and the British-born Doreen Wickremasinghe (CP), both of whom built their own careers on the basis of engagement in various activist causes such as the anticolonial movement and educational reform, and who happened to be partners of LSSP and CP leaders. Nevertheless, the fact that they often remained subordinate to men both in the actual organisational structure of the leadership – a familiar trend within the leftist movement – and the mainstream political narrative demands a proper reading against the grain of the archive. Of the few existing studies available, these include a collection of short biographical sketches (Muthiah et al. 2006) and Jayawardena's (2016) comparative study. Further engagement through archival work, however, would need to be done to incorporate both the empirical question of female representation within the leftist movement and beyond this, to interrogate gender in broader terms as a "useful category of historical analysis", to use Joan Scott's (1986) phrase. We keep these questions in mind throughout our article, weaving them into our own social analysis based on existing coverage in the literature and our own (limited) ability to make inferences.

on the back of the Great Hartal of 1953. The LSSP's decision to join with the SLFP resulted in the split of a small faction, the LSSP(R), in 1964. The breakaway group included distinguished representatives such as the politician Edmund Samarakkody, the political theorist V. Karalasingham and the trade unionist Bala Tampoe, all of whom continued to prioritise extra-parliamentary struggle over parliamentary politics.

At the same time, as political scientists such as Robert Kearney and Janice Jiggins (1975) note, a growing frustrated rural youth population did not find its concerns represented among the dominant left factions, even the dissidents of the LSSP(R). They were attracted to various international movements, including the legacy of Che Guevara, the ongoing struggle in Vietnam, and Mao's China (Abeysekera 1979). From this diverse coalition emerged "New Left" factions heavily influenced by the Communist Party-Peking Wing. The CP-Peking Wing had split from the CP primarily for international reasons, due to the Sino-Soviet split of 1963.

The division was reinforced when the LSSP and CP eventually joined forces with the SLFP to form the United Front (UF) government of 1970.[12] Leftist factions that promoted insurrection, drawn largely from the CP-Peking Wing, coalesced around the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, or People's Liberation Front). The JVP combined an incongruous mix of theories and ideologies. It planned a nationalist-infused revolt against the failures of the left in power to resolve the concerns of unemployed rural youth. This was known as the First JVP Insurrection of 1971.[13]

These trends dovetailed with the origins of militancy in this period among the Tamil people primarily living in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Because the Sri Lankan left ceded the agrarian question to the right, the latter was resolved in a way that prioritised Sinhala smallholder cultivation. Moreover, after 1956 and the passage of the Sinhala Only Act, Tamils were increasingly discriminated in state employment and cut off from access to patronage through the state. In response to ethnic majoritarian policies, the Federal Party campaigned on the plank of regional autonomy. It broke away from the Tamil Congress and became the dominant Tamil parliamentary party by the late 1950s. By the 1960s, Tamil nationalism was on the rise. It coalesced under the banner of federalism,

12 The LSSP had three Ministers in the Cabinet, up until they were expelled in 1975, while the CP had one.

13 Authors such as Kearney and Jiggins (1975) offer an extended analysis of the role of Sri Lanka's alliances with various global powers, including the Soviet Union, and the subsequent help its UF government received from around the world to crush the JVP Insurrection in 1971. To compare, the Communist Party of India (CPI)-Communist Party of India-Maoist (CPM) split in India in 1964, which further evolved into Naxalism, represented by the Communist Party of India-Marxist Leninist (CPI-ML). China supported the latter ideologically. In contrast, China had far less of a role to play in the emergence of the JVP in Sri Lanka. In fact, it turned a blind eye to the Sri Lankan government's suppression of the Insurrection in 1971. The CP-Peking Wing led by N. Shanmugathasan had support from China. But despite its role in the anti-caste struggle, it was eclipsed by Tamil militancy in the North and the JVP in the South.

particularly in the face of the Sinhala Only language policy and discrimination against non-Sinhala groups in state employment.

The incongruence between the Tamil nationalism of the Federal Party and the class politics of left parties led to a confrontation between their two constituencies in the predominantly Tamil electorates in the North. The LSSP theoretician and politician V. Karalasingham, who had contested and lost against the Federal Party Leader S.J.V. Chelvanayakam in the parliamentary election of 1960, wrote an influential pamphlet, published by the *Young Socialist* in 1963, titled, "The Way Out for the Tamil Speaking People – The Minority Problem and the Ceylon Revolution". In that essay, he acknowledged the overwhelming support for the Federal Party, but he also addressed the futility of such support without a national vision and socialist programme. In subsequent years, the left also gained ground among the oppressed caste constituencies. But this trend, too, reflected the lack of possibilities for a coalition between the left and the Tamil nationalist mainstream.

Tamil youth became radicalised in the 1970s due to the discriminatory policies of standardisation in the state university system, which allocated places based on majoritarian principles. Newly formed Tamil militants drew inspiration from diverse and at times contradictory ideological quarters, including national liberation struggles such as in Palestine as well as Zionism and the formation of Israel. The possibility of armed struggle became more tangible in the aftermath of the JVP Insurrection in 1971 and the break-up of Pakistan through Indian intervention. These small emerging groups of armed militants considered a similar type of intervention after insurrection.

In the longer historical context, the politics of ethnic minorities in the regional periphery were also shaped by concerns about land, particularly colonisation schemes to increase agricultural production, which began during the late colonial period and expanded after Independence. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the lending arm of the World Bank, arrived in Sri Lanka during its first Mission to the country in 1951. It subsequently released a significant and extensive Report of close to 1,000 pages titled *The Economic Development of Ceylon*. In the report, which was eventually published in 1953, it pushed for the expansion of agriculture through colonisation schemes. However, these initiatives, which were implemented in tandem with patronage networks, were perceived as efforts to expropriate Tamil lands and gerrymander the system to reduce minority representation. Given this context, we identify a relationship between the agrarian question and national question. Only by reckoning with the concerns of working people on the periphery can we analyse the sources of discrimination that were appropriated and deflected by the Tamil nationalist elite.[14]

14 Building on this perspective, we argue that the long arc of Tamil nationalism from the late colonial period to the rise of Tamil militancy in the 1970s cannot be reduced to economic grievances. Tamil society itself was divided by class and caste divisions. Rather, the over-determination of Tamil nationalism and its culmination in a protracted armed conflict requires further analysis of the workings of nationalist ideology,

In the South, the left's dissident youth factions coalesced under the JVP. The JVP embarked on a far more Sinhala chauvinistic struggle in its Second Insurrection in 1987. The JVP had been suppressed after 1971 but many among the youth who had been jailed were eventually "rehabilitated" and released in the mid-1970s. The JVP began shifting toward open democratic politics. The Jayewardene regime, however, proscribed the party again after the 1983 anti-Tamil riots. The regime used the JVP as a scapegoat, erroneously referring to them and other left parties as "Naxalites". It blamed these groups for the massacres to distract from the participation of key elements of its own government in organising the violence.

The JVP's membership changed as it was forced underground. It also shifted further to the Sinhala nationalist right on the national question. It began to see its exclusive role as defender against Indian invasion. The threat appeared to manifest concretely when the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) arrived in Sri Lanka in 1987. The IPKF attempted to police an initial ceasefire between the Government of Sri Lanka and Tamil rebels. The JVP blamed the Government for "inviting" the IPKF, and it took up arms against the state. It was crushed by a vicious counterinsurgency in the South in 1989.

In the North, the youth factions engaged in a long, violent period of consolidation eventually leading to the "sole representative of the Tamil people" politics of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by the late 1980s. A significant chunk of this narrative has been covered in one of the most searing indictments by the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) in an important work written in the thick of armed conflict, titled *The Broken Palmyra* (Hoole et al. 1992). The LTTE eliminated most of its competitors and even dissent within the Tamil community by the late 1980s and ensured the subordination of Tamil politics to its military separatist project. These trends within both the Sinhala and Tamil polity represented the failure of the left in general to tackle underlying social problems that had alienated youth constituencies in the previous era. Moreover, these insurgencies further hardened the repressive apparatus of the state (Abhayavardhana 1975).

In this context, general assumptions about social change through industrialisation, which had hegemonised the left, continued to shape the inchoate attitudes of militant youth.[15] We further acknowledge that while these attitudes were crystallised in the left's discourse, they broadly permeated the general understanding of pre- and post-independence elites as well. The SLFP, for example, became associated with the programme of industrialisation after independence.

political mobilisation and external influences. The latter include India's support for Tamil militancy at the moment when Sri Lanka shifted away from India's pro-Soviet stance towards alignment with the United States, under the neoliberal regime of JR Jayewardene in the late 1970s.

15 There are a few examples of attempts to break free from this theoretical straitjacket. These include post-Maoist analyses by intellectuals affiliated with groups competing with the JVP. They aimed to capture the same social group of unemployed youth and farmers.

In addition, the left's more refined thinking on the subject enables us to grapple with this problem in a more explicit way. Although the JVP, for example, broached the need to engage with agrarian issues, its pre-eminent focus was on capturing state power rather than theorising what it planned to do afterwards. Thus, we focus on the contradictions in the left's thinking insofar as it was represented by those who held positions of political power during the long 1960s, especially in the LSSP and CP.

The Right's solution to the agrarian question

We must grasp the prevailing social relations of production rooted in agrarian structures and the way in which the left responded to them.[16] Although often a less prominent aspect of mainstream narratives of the left in this period, we argue that the agrarian question structured its strategic choices. Since the late colonial period, the question of the ways in which rural communities would be incorporated into the economy had been articulated in terms of land colonisation, especially in the Dry Zone in the North Central and Eastern parts of the country (Jayasekara / Amerasinghe 1987, Herring 1988, Moore 1989, Samaraweera 1981).

Elite politicians, most famously the founder of the UNP, DS Senanayake, used the issue of Sinhala peasants who had been evicted from Crown Lands during the British colonial period as a way of claiming their ability to represent the masses. Their emphasis on trusteeship, however, in contrast to social mobilisation for the purposes of anticolonial struggle, meant that the politically subdued transition from the British to the Sri Lankan ruling class did not require framing peasant question in terms of agrarian reform. Moreover, the majoritarian framing portrayed Upcountry Tamils, descendants of indentured labourers who arrived from India during the colonial period, as outsiders. Elites justified the disenfranchisement of Upcountry Tamils at Independence in 1948 on this basis (see Samaraweera 1981 for a historical overview of this problematic).

The elites predominantly within the Sinhala community negotiated on the issue of land colonisation. They established a compromise between Kandyan Upcountry and Low Country communities by excluding other ethnic communities, especially Upcountry Tamils. Moore (1989: 196) notes:

> While building anti-plantation sentiments into the Sinhalese nationalist myth was not in the direct interests of the Low Country elite which dominated the nationalist movement in the 1920s and 1930s, it was a price which had to be paid for broadening the movement. The latent challenge to the Low Country elite's own position could be, and was, minimised by focusing the interpretation of the plantation episode on those areas where the disjuncture between village and plantation was extreme, i.e. in the Kandyan areas.

16 We use the term "social relations" of production as a shorthand for the totality of interconnected moments of production, distribution, exchange and consumption explicitly outlined by Marx (1993) in the *Grundrisse*.

This manoeuvre had important effects on the political strategy of the left. As Moonesinghe put it, "politically, [DS Senanayake] believed, that in creating a landed and house owning peasantry he would have a Maginot Line against the LSSP and deprive it of the support amongst the more poverty striken [sic] elements in the Western and Southern littoral" (Moonesinghe 1962: 51; see also Jayasekara / Amerasinghe 1987: 35–36).

The Sinhala elites who would eventually take charge of the postcolonial state developed their own paternalistic relationship toward the peasantry, based on a "tutelary or custodial attitude". This meant that little would change in the transition from a British to Sri Lankan ruling class (Moore 1989: 197–198; Samaraweera 1981). Elites, represented predominantly by the UNP, conceived the peasantry's problems as an issue of landlessness rather than land redistribution. They designed massive irrigation schemes, including the Gal Oya scheme in the East, regardless of the costs incurred.[17]

Despite their diverse intra-left backgrounds, Trotskyists and Stalinists agreed on the basic critique of this approach. They criticised agricultural schemes due to their apparent inefficiency (see Moonesinghe 1962: 53, Wickremasinghe 1951). Referring to the Gal Oya irrigation scheme in Eastern Sri Lanka, for example, LSSP dissident Edmund Samarakkody wrote in the *Young Socialist*:

> Much has been said about this "Development" but the resulting reality is the extension of subsistence agriculture covering nearly one million human beings and a continuous draw on the finances of the state. The idealising of what Marx called "the idiocy of rural life" cannot be a substitute for economic development of the non-plantation agricultural sector. (Samarakkody 1964:16)

The bias toward "efficient" agriculture and consequently the need to prioritise industrialisation shaped the left's critique of the right in general. The crisis of the 1970s, however, forced those in power in coalition government to take the question of food production far more seriously, as evidenced by the emphasis of the Five-Year Plan. We return to this point later when discussing the outcome of the left's transition from opposition to government.

In the meantime, because the left postponed the question of transforming agrarian relations, the right pursued unopposed an approach focusing narrowly

17 Important continuities can be observed between the Gal Oya and Mahaweli irrigation schemes. The Gal Oya scheme constituted an early effort to increase land available for cultivation in Eastern Sri Lanka, while the Mahaweli scheme covered a much larger area of the rural South and extended into the North-East. The accelerated development of the latter came to symbolise the JR Jayewardene regime's "Open Economy" after 1977, including increased dependence on prominent global institutions, such as the World Bank, for aid. See, for example, Gamini Dissanayake's interview with the *Lanka Guardian*: "The accelerated scheme will have so many spin-off effects. We see it already. 118,000 acres will be covered by the Maduru Oya scheme … a larger area than Minneriya, Polonnaruwa and Medirigiya … private enterprise has moved in little shops have come up … as the jungle is being cleared, trucks and bull-dozers … workshops, repair shops … small canteens … stores … later there will be hospitals and schools, cinemas, … co-ops … a whole new economy is taking shape, and there is a sense of bustling growth … the multiplier effect of all that will be tremendous" (Dissanayake 1981: 25). Despite the staccato transcription of this interview, the dramatic imagery follows from the elite framing of the agrarian question. Later ethnographic studies of changing perceptions of rural Sri Lanka offer critical descriptions of the ways in which the state's relationship vis-à-vis society was constructed based on *longue durée* assumptions about reviving a morally decaying village (Brow / Weeramunda 1992).

on agricultural productivity, in conjunction with powerful global institutions such as the World Bank.[18] From its first mission in the early 1950s into the 1960s, the World Bank prioritised agricultural production over industrialisation. As a result, the focus on farming in colonisation schemes meant that sustaining agricultural production required increasingly expensive agricultural inputs imported from abroad during the Green Revolution of the 1960s (Jayasekara / Amerasinghe 1987: 45).

Moreover, smallholding farming communities became dependent on state support. Peasant constituencies were mobilised politically through the nationalist discourse of resurrecting the traditional village combined with the objective of extending individual ownership, rather than by challenging social hierarchies in rural communities (see Jupp 1977: 640). Class differentiation within the predominantly Sinhala peasantry increased. Land colonisation schemes were meant to address land fragmentation, share cropping, mortgaging and even distressed sales. Many landlords were absentee owners, who retained parcels of land while pursuing increasingly urban consumerist lifestyles (Shastri 1983). Although land concentration did not necessarily expand rapidly, ownership of land buttressed a politically active constituency of rich smallholders and middle-class urban clerical workers (Moore 1989: 185).

Consequently, elites were able to block efforts to pursue land reform (Jayasekara / Amerasinghe 1987: 41–42). The Paddy Lands Act was passed in 1958 through the efforts of the SLFP's coalition partner, the Viplavakari Lanka Sama Samaja Party (VLSSP), which was led by Philip Gunawardena.[19] But land reform was constrained. The central plank, the formation of Cultivation Committees, was co-opted. Tenancy rights were watered down (Moore 1989: 205). Elites instrumentalised agricultural extension services for their own purposes. Finally, although cooperatives offered a new distribution system, they encountered difficulties in transforming production in the rural economy, in the absence of a bigger push for land reform. As Ronald Herring, debating the agrarian question, puts it:

> These policies have diverted land questions from aggregate or class-welfare issues to local questions of allocation – who should benefit? – and thus channelled political energy into particularistic connections with powerful brokers and bureaucrats. (Herring 1988: 615)

18 In many ways, this echoes the contemporary debate about the need to radicalise the concept of food security from the perspective of food sovereignty. See, for example, Edelman 2005: 339.

19 See Woodward for a description of Gunawardena's "anti-democratic and dictatorial tendencies," and more importantly, his eventual isolation within the Bandaranaike Cabinet (Woodward 1962: 319). Abhayavardhana (2001), among other theorists on the left, criticised Gunawardena as well. Nevertheless, Gunawardena was rare among the left at the time in considering a progressive solution to the agrarian question, although he shared many of the elite's paternalistic assumptions about the peasantry on this issue (Moore 1989: 199). In addition, his Secretary at the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, GVS De Silva, went on to produce heterodox analysis of the agrarian question in the 1970s (reprinted in Silva 1988). Silva questioned the linear trajectory of urbanisation long before such analysis became a standard part of the repertoire of postcolonial and postdevelopment studies, and which in Sri Lanka anticipated the seminal work of Abeysekera (1985).

On the one hand, the significant extension of the smallholder sector countered the dispossession of smaller farmers (Moore 1989: 183). On the other hand, this meant the radical politics of landless people were conservatised because they were drawn into thinking as small landowners (Herring 1988: 615).

Dunham and Abeysekera explain what followed from this framework and the corresponding difficulty of conceptualising a redistributive approach to the agrarian question from a leftist perspective: "In Sri Lanka low wages had traditionally been supported through welfare measures; today self-sufficiency in rice has been almost achieved – though not by land reform. It has been done through state-aided colonisation schemes which left vested interests and social conflicts in the countryside more or less untouched" (Dunham / Abeysekera 1987: 14). Thus, in Sri Lanka, the solution to both the agrarian question and the question of self-sufficiency articulated in terms of food sidestepped the class confrontation. The latter would have been necessary for substantive redistribution and to transform the structure of rural social relations.

The agrarian question from the perspective of the social periphery

For the left to challenge local elites would have required grappling with critical yet neglected components of the agrarian question. First and foremost, it would have required a deeper investigation of the gendered division of labour in the household. Conceptualising the peasant household as a constituent unit of the traditional village community maintained social hierarchies, which prevented the increased mobilisation of *all* working people, not only men, to achieve land reform and other redistributive measures. The left continued to accept the static image of the countryside. Seeing women as agents embedded within social relations would instead have required challenging patriarchal norms, and thus a completely different understanding of the agrarian question – one that would prioritise the question of social reproduction in more comprehensive terms.[20]

Even in the absence of such efforts, the social welfare state that expanded after independence still generated broad gains for the population, including women. Jayaweera notes:

20 With the triumph of the open economy in 1977, elites exploited women's labour by undermining the basis of their livelihoods in rural areas. Many women had to migrate to work in the garment factories in the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and as migrant domestic labour in other countries to sustain their households, because the UNP government slashed the social safety net. The state facilitated the super-exploitation of women's labour by undermining their social reproduction in the countryside. Critical analysis of gender must include this class dimension. This is also different from the "socially conscious" microfinance approach, epitomised by individualised self-employment schemes, that now dominates the question of gender in the countryside. Again, because the left frequently ignored gender during the period we examine, later civil society organisations recuperated gender in a way that did not necessarily point to broad social transformation. The latter goal would require political confrontation with dominant social forces.

> Male literacy rates of the population over 10 years rose from 76.5% in 1946 to 85.6% in 1963 and subsequently to 90.5% in 1981. Female literacy rates rose more steeply from 46.2% in 1946 to 67.1% in 1963 and 86.5% in 1981 and the gender gap narrowed appreciably, particularly as male and female literacy rates of the school age population reached near parity by the end of the sixties. (Jayaweera 1990: 52)

However, ideological defence of the welfare state did not involve the theory and practice of transforming agrarian relations. Institutions such as the Women's Rural Development Societies did not have the theoretical ballast to conceive these organisations as a radical means for challenging gendered hierarchy. The latter would have required articulating gender in terms of active participation in political movements that confront the dominant order.

Consequently, the under-representation of women in texts on the period, and the difficulty of engaging the question of gender broadly, represents a major blind spot in the left's discourse. In many ways, this continued to reinforce the patriarchal attitude of political leadership across the ideological spectrum, despite the occasional appearance of female politicians of national stature, including, of course, the rise of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first female Prime Minister. The question of gender during the period demands a proper reading against the grain of the archive, beyond the scope of this essay.

The second decisive limitation of the left's analysis of the agrarian question related to the predominant emphasis on land colonisation, especially in the Dry Zone in the North Central and Eastern parts of the country, and its implications for non-Sinhala communities. For example, the plantations in the Upcountry were shielded from takeover until the moment in which Sri Lanka was already facing severe economic crisis during the 1970s. This paralleled difficulties in achieving land reform in the Wet Zone in the South-West of the country.

The plantations were run by Agency Houses, which repatriated profits from export sales abroad throughout the post-independence period. When the UF government nationalised large Upcountry estates in the early 1970s, significant damage had already been done to the economy, especially from declining investment in re-planting (De Silva 1985). Beyond the immediate goals of producing tea (and to a lesser extent, rubber) for export, the continued division between land colonisation for a predominantly Sinhala peasantry and exploitation of plantation workers meant that the latter were ignored in late attempts to achieve self-sufficiency in food.

Initially, the left, especially the LSSP, attempted to oppose the disenfranchisement of the Upcountry Tamils in 1948. As it saw things, the UNP was attempting to undermine its voter base. Writing in 1961 in the *Young Socialist*, the LSSP leader Colvin R De Silva, for example, prioritised the working-class identity of estate workers in general:

> Let it be stressed in the first place that "the rural people of this country" are not a homogeneous mass. On the contrary the rural people of this country are remarkably variegated from any point of view other than the geographical fact of their rural residence.

> For instance, a whole army of wage workers interpenetrates the rural mass. We refer here not only to the urban workers who reside in rural homes but also to those wage workers who live and work in the country side. The best known amongst these are of course the village people who work on estates but there are as large a number of wage workers in other occupations. Whatever hits the working class of his country hits this section too. (De Silva 1961: 86)

When the left became involved in coalition politics after 1964, however, its attitude toward the Upcountry Tamils shifted. It began to see them in terms of a communal constituency. This was rooted in a narrower understanding of the challenges and exclusions facing Upcountry Tamils. The left often saw Upcountry Tamils from a paternalistic point of view. Or, as even a sympathetic observer such as Samarakkody put it, they were "wage slaves condemned to be inarticulate and virtual beasts of burden for nearly a hundred years in their new home in Ceylon" (Samarakkody 1964: 15). Incredibly enough, even this may be considered a relatively progressive judgement compared with the attitudes of later leftist groups such as the JVP, which began to see Upcountry Tamils not even as mute and incapable, but rather as direct invaders from India.

The Upcountry Tamils, beyond their role as wage workers, had a potential stake in the break-up of plantations and the setting up of a cooperative system to transform agrarian relations. Their participation could have provoked the restructuring of the economy in a way that would have made Sri Lanka less dependent on food imports. Instead, because of the left's tacit acceptance of the right's framing of the agrarian question in Sinhala majoritarian terms, even when the UF nationalised the plantations, the left conceived it as a top-down process that did not fundamentally require breaking up the plantation system and redistributing land. As a result, the reforms were easily reversible. Plantations were re-privatised in the 1990s. This was the inevitable consequence of the left's difficulty in engaging with the agrarian question through the broad participation of diverse communities in the project of land reform. Accordingly, the agrarian question inevitably had implications for the national question (for explicit theorisation of the national question more broadly from a left perspective, see Uyangoda 1979).

In the North, the particular stronghold of the Tamil minority in the Jaffna peninsula, there was increased land pressure. This led to colonisation schemes in the Vanni, which is contiguous with the North Central Dry Zone. Simultaneously, greater accumulation from the intensive cultivation of cash crops, such as onions and chillies, in Jaffna created social tensions within its rigid caste system. The landless labour from mainly oppressed caste communities sought to break free. The CP-Peking wing led by N. Shanmugathasan gave leadership to a major struggle against untouchability that was launched in October 1966.

That struggle – which could be considered the first armed struggle in Sri Lanka's postcolonial history – struck an irreversible blow to untouchability. The rise of Tamil nationalism in the 1970s, however, politically deflected the

anti-caste mobilisations. Still, an important outcome of this struggle was the significant change in the social relations of production in the palmyra palm sector. In 1972, the UF government gave the Palm Development Co-operative Societies, whose members are exclusively oppressed caste toddy tappers, the monopoly on the tapping, distribution and processing of toddy. This measure greatly uplifted the social and economic situation of that community. It was an example of the potential path toward a self-critical understanding of the relationship between agrarian and industrial production. It remains an initiative full of implications that were underexplored in the theorising of the left of the period.

The trajectory of industrialisation

Given its relationship with its urban working-class base, the left's preferred strategy was an emphasis on industrialisation, which it hoped to achieve through nationalisation. It pursued this approach almost exclusively until the economic shocks of the 1970s, at which point it was forced to think more about import substitution in terms of necessities, especially food production, as well. The left generally avoided the agrarian question until that critical point because of its urban bias. While it could mobilise its urban working-class base to put pressure on the state to pursue industrialisation, it continued to face challenges in adopting a similar strategy of mobilising the peasantry and landless in the countryside.

The left's preference for industrialisation, however, was not simply a rehash of the debates about primitive socialist accumulation that dominated, for example, the early Soviet Union. Instead, the left's approach reflected the specific challenges imposed by the legacy of colonialism in Sri Lanka. Colonial capitalism had created infrastructure, such as ports and railways, that facilitated the transfer of wealth to the metropole from the plantation economy, reinforcing Sri Lanka's dependency even after it gained independence. Moreover, this created a proletariat as well, from which the left gained significant membership. In response to these trends, the left's goal throughout the long 1960s was to diversify industrial production. It thought it could achieve this through state ownership of industry. The assumption was that industrialisation would accordingly resolve the agrarian question by absorbing the rural population in modern industries.[21]

The left assumed that a surplus in agricultural production could be invested in industrial manufacturing. LSSP dissident Edmund Samarakkody argued in 1961 why the left should support efforts to pursue industrialisation. He wrote the following remarks in the *Young Socialist*, before the majority faction of the left joined the coalition with the SLFP in 1964:

21 The Five-Year Plan did also raise the question of rural industries, but in general the focus of the left leading up to the crisis was on developing a heavy industrial base.

> It is not just a question of diversification of the economy that poses itself but a bold plan of industrialisation with the aim of speedily making the industrial sector (manufacturing industries) the larger and the prominent sector leading to converting an agricultural economy into an industrial economy. Given such a perspective a development plan geared to such a perspective the working class (proletariat) will necessarily begin to play a prominent and dynamic role. (Samarakkody 1964: 66)

Samarakkody among others assumed that, barring an increase in productivity, Sri Lanka would not be able to sustain its population. Or, as he argued in a subsequent article: "In 1950, 50% of Ceylon's gross national products were obtained from Agriculture. In the same year Industry (including Cottage Industry) accounted for only 5% of the gross national product" (Samarakkody 1964: 19; see also Karalasingham 1963: 34, Moonesinghe 1962: 51, De Silva 1961: 87). For much of the left, the challenge was to increase productivity. The consequence was that the plan for the left privileged expert knowledge, comparable to the way in which the market was reified by the ideologues of the right. The plan became an abstract, impersonal force that required short-term sacrifices, whether top-down or bottom-up, to achieve higher living standards in the long-term (Perera 1961; for a self-critique, however, see Goonewardene 1980).

After the 1956 change in regime from the UNP to SLFP, even the mainstream parties began to operate in the framework of state intervention. As Jayasekara and Amerasinghe note, a National Planning Council was created and "the allocation for industries in the Ten-Year Plan increased to 20% from the 4.7% in the Six Year Plan of the former government" (Jayasekara / Amerasinghe 1987: 41). According to Colvin R. De Silva, one of the chief architects of the LSSP, writing in 1961, the degree of state investment measured progress toward socialism as such; or as he put it, "the LSSP conceives of economic development in terms of state investment activity" (De Silva 1961: 82).

De Silva among others recognised that further expansion of the welfare state was circumscribed by the degree to which the state could take control of "the surplus investment capacity of the capitalist class" (De Silva 1961: 83–84). Leftist critics of the LSSP's coalition with the SLFP from 1964 onwards tried to explain the deviation from apparently successful examples of import substitution industrialisation by arguing that the entire Sri Lankan capitalist class was unable or unwilling to challenge the dominant imperial relations in order to invest more in industrial manufacturing (Karalasingham 1963: 35, Samarakkody 1964: 72). But regardless of its participation in or opposition to coalition with the SLFP, the left's thinking across party lines was defined by the goal of industrialisation.

Because Sri Lanka lacked strategic raw materials and instruments of production, left politicians prioritised "self-sacrifice" to provision the base for industrialisation (see, for example, De Souza 1970). This appeared to undercut the redistributive emphasis of the welfare state. Anticipating the austerity that the UF government would impose during the 1970s, future UF Finance Minister

N.M. Perera made the following call in the *Young Socialist* in response to the SLFP Finance Minister's Budget Speech in 1961:

> It would mean a completely new approach to the whole problem of taxation based on a period of austerity for all. It would mean the social ownership of all the commanding heights of the economy. It would mean a Plan which will spring from the people for the fulfilment of which they will gladly make sacrifices. In short, it means the first steps in the task of socialist building. (Perera 1961: 88)

The neoliberal right today often makes the facile argument that the left failed to attract investment from outside during this period. Contextualising the left's constraints, Jupp instead argued that Sri Lanka was unattractive to private capital quite simply because "[i]ts domestic market is very small. Heavily capitalised concerns in paper making, chemicals or cement were unlikely to have been financed from domestic or foreign private capital" (Jupp 1977: 634).

During the 1960s, the state took over and invested in enterprises that required more capital, including intermediate and investment goods. In reviewing this period, Shastri notes that the "relative share of intermediate products increased from 26 percent in 1962–64 to about 35 percent in 1970, while the production of investment goods showed only a marginal increase from 8 to 12 percent" (Shastri 1983: 7). Capitalists during this period mainly occupied the consumer goods sector. At the same time, the share of consumer goods as a proportion of total production dropped from 65 per cent in the early 1960s to 50 per cent by 1970 (ibid.).

This expansion of the public sector in production and its ambiguous relationship to the private sector created further problems. According to Gunatilleke "the result [was] that large parts of the public sector became increasingly inefficient and the private sector, with the exception of a few pockets such as the tourist and gem trades, lost its incentive for growth and investment" (Gunatilleke 1978: 12). Consequently, Jayasekera and Amerasinghe argue that import substitution:

> [...] tended to concentrate on the production of non-essential goods that were often of a sub-standard quality. These industries had no significant impact on the unemployment problem. On the whole the import substitution strategy contributed little to either planned development or to building up a firm industrial base. (Jayasekera / Amerasinghe 1987: 43)

This tendency compounded the obstacles the left faced during the 1970s crisis. After coming to power, it confronted multiple crises in the balance of payments, fiscal sustainability and mass unemployment. The Sri Lankan left struggled with the question of sustaining the economy. In desperation, it began to articulate the need for mobilisation to create, for example, rural industries (Five-Year Plan 1971: 14–15). But having failed to organise in the countryside up to that point, the left was circumscribed in its action. It took power in a coalition at the precise point when it lacked the rural mobilising capacity to resolve the overwhelming crisis.

We provide a Table below from the Five-Year Plan, which provides the structure of the economy in 1970 and the UF Government's plan for development over the next six years. Significantly the highest annual growth rate of 10% was to come from industry. Industry was supposed to absorb the reduction in the share of agriculture in the GDP. With the economic crisis of the 1970s, however, the plan was not successful. Nevertheless, it gives useful clues to the overarching vision of the UF, especially in its conceptualisation of the relationship between agriculture and industry.

As hopeless as it may seem from the present vantage point, many on the left assumed that they could push through the ensuing difficulties of the "transition period". But the consequences in terms of social crisis would be felt sooner rather than later. The upshot is that unlike many other democratic socialist experiments during the Cold War that were smashed by direct imperialist intervention – the most famous example perhaps being the coup in Chile in 1973 – the trigger for the collapse of Sri Lanka's experiment, although no doubt severely restricted in room for manoeuvre, was its own contradictions.

Table 1: Sectoral Contribution to Gross Domestic Product, 1970 and 1976

Sector	1970		1976		Annual rate of growth in %
	Value in million Rs.	Share of each sector in %	Value in million Rs.	Share of each sector in %	
(1) **Agriculture**	4,264	36.3	5,671	33.7	4.9
Tea (includes processing)	810	-	953	-	2.8
Rubber (includes processing)	328	-	374	-	2.2
Coconut	593	-	727	-	3.5
Paddy	951	-	1,433	-	7.1
Other	1,582	-	2,184	-	5.5
(2) **Industry**	1,523	13.0	2,692	16.0	10.0
(3) **Construction**	771	6.5	1,094	6.5	6.0
(4) **Services**	5,202	44.2	7,365	43.8	5.9
(5) **GDP** at 1970 factor cost prices	11,760	100.0	16,822	100.0	6.1

Source: Five-Year Plan 1971: 28

Reproducing class divisions

How did these contradictions play out in practice? Although the state took over diverse industries, it did not necessarily transform the social relations of production. Later authors such as Shanmugaratnam have identified this limitation in terms of the distinction between statisation versus the democratisation of production relations (Shanmugaratnam 1985: 77; see also Jayasekera / Amerasinghe 1987: 49, for reference to the "unsuccessful idealistic experiments" of the UF Government in particular).

The left's strategy of seeking solutions through the state, especially by gaining access to state power through coalition politics, faced many constraints and limitations. The postcolonial state in Sri Lanka had limited resources and few avenues for redistributing limited capitalist resources, many of which were tied to metropolitan capital. It did not have much room to manoeuvre during the crisis of the 1970s. Whereas Western theorists confronted monopoly capitalism in their respective countries, a similar form of local monopoly capital did not emerge in Sri Lanka capable of providing higher living standards, and with which workers could have negotiated for a bigger slice of the pie. Therefore, the state was pushed to participate in the capitalist law of value that required investment. A section of capitalists could thereby operate within the parameters of an ostensibly statist economy (see Shastri's (1987) use of Kalecki's related concept of the "intermediate regime"). The Sri Lankan left's theorisation of the struggle against imperialism did not necessarily call for the transformation of social relations; rather, it primarily demanded state ownership of property.[22]

The narrowing of the political horizon shaped the ideology and practice of urban working-class organisations, especially trade unions. Trade unions affiliated to political parties negotiated the needs and concerns of their members with employers or, in the case of public sector enterprises, the state. Many of the Ministers in charge of these public sector institutions were in fact from the SLFP. This further complicated the relationship of the trade unions traditionally aligned with the left parties. They attempted to negotiate with the SLFP leaders of the UF Government in the 1970s. Meanwhile, the expansion of the public sector as an avenue of employment had started earlier. By 1963, public servants belonging to trade unions had become three quarters of the bureaucracy. Half of the urban trade unions' membership was public servants (Kearney 1966: 399–400).

22 This framing appears even before the LSSP famously joined the coalition with the SLFP in 1964. In particular Colvin R. De Silva articulated an early criticism of the CP in 1954 by identifying nationalisation as the litmus test for the development of socialism. He argued that a report by the CP does not contain any "anti-capitalist measure whatsoever". Specifically, he argues, "Nationalisation has disappeared altogether; there is no nationalisation measure proposed even against foreign capital. It is an 'anti-imperialist' programme which is not anti-capitalist!" (De Silva 1954: 2–3).

The predominant solution among trade unions was to obtain employment rather than challenge hierarchies in the social division of labour. Similarly, this trend reflected the left's difficulties in organising workers in smaller private enterprises and agricultural labourers, who were much harder to access, versus the public sector workers who were concentrated in major government institutions. This challenge also speaks to the point made by those on the left who had engaged with the agrarian question when reflecting on the period. In a retrospective interview in the *Lanka Guardian*, for example, Ariyavamsa Gunasekera and Kalyananda Thiranagama argued that organising the peasantry "is a difficult and painful job. It is also less profitable than organising the Trade Unions" (Gunasekera / Thiranagama 1979: 16).

Left political parties that came to power in coalition governments starting in 1956 used the state to obtain employment and other benefits for their members. But they often did this without challenging the fundamental assumptions of capitalist production that continued to shape social life. As a result, the role of trade unions not only included collective bargaining but securing the industrial peace. Similarly, workers' struggles often articulated reformist and Sinhala majoritarian assumptions (Kearney 1965: 121, Kearney 1966: 407 Shastri 1983: 8). As Abeysekera (1979) noted in the *Lanka Guardian*, for example, urban trade unions were less likely to condemn the UF Government's massacre of youth during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)'s First Insurrection of 1971.[23] Furthermore, when the left parties retreated from their earlier progressive stances on the national question as well, the trade unions followed suit. They increasingly remained silent on anti-minority measures (Jayawardena 1987; Wanasinghe 1965).

The failure to confront fundamental gendered, ethnic, religious, and caste divisions meant that the labour movement was able to achieve gains for its predominantly Sinhala working class and middle-class membership only so long as local capitalists accepted the class compromise. This truce ended in 1977. The difficulty of the deepening struggle afterwards enabled the super-exploitation of a female gendered working class from rural areas, ethnic minority communities and other marginalised groups, who had not been included in the earlier historic compromise.[24]

In addition, the left faced the challenge of mobilising youth from the subordinate strata in the 1960s and beyond, along with the resulting pressures this

23 Abeysekera's elaboration is important here: "To quote Samarakkody again, 'the failure of the working class to be even articulate against the murders and atrocities of the government (in 1971) is the measure of the disorientation of the working class that had taken place through coalition politics since 1964 and of the process of absorption into the trade union apparatus into the capitalist state structures which had been taking place.' Indeed one may ask whether the excessive preoccupation with economic struggles at the trade union level was not one of the factors that determined reformist political positions" (Abeysekera 1979: 12).

24 At the same time, we also recognise the ways in which historical victories of the labour movement could be re-articulated during later struggles by diverse groups of workers. For example, many female export manufacturing workers opposed pension reform in 2011, fending off police battalions in places such as the Katunayake Export Processing Zone. The difference is that these struggles are embedded in their experience of the double burden of work in the factory and reproductive labour in the household.

created. Abeysekera (1979) argued that even though the “petty bourgeoisie” appeared split between the new and the old, the concerns of the latter, such as small farmers and shop owners, were expressed in a growing movement of frustrated youth who had not obtained employment in the public sector. As Abeysekera put it, “both these bear the same ideological relationship to the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class and that this ideological relationship is enough to merge them into a single class” (Abeysekera 1979: 12). The momentous election of 1956 had come to symbolise the promise of a general reaction against the English-speaking elite who had been over-represented in state employment and higher education until that point. The mobilisation of the petit bourgeois base of the SLFP came back to haunt the UF Government. The failure to realise the promise of 1956 – which had signified the project to achieve broad social gains for upward advancement among Sinhala-speaking subordinate strata – had, by the 1970s, sharpened the frustration of rural youth.

The contradictions of these struggles became manifest in the tension between the aspirations generated through the expansion of the welfare state versus persistent inequalities in the quality of education, in addition to constraints on the growth of job opportunities (Jayaweera 1990: 64). Accordingly, the issues facing the youth across the country also reflected the left’s difficulties in transforming the social relations of production. Alternative strategies of resistance, from youth insurrection to ethnic separatism, varied greatly in terms of their political consequences.

The left’s dominant approach throughout much of the long 1960s meant prioritising industrialisation over agrarian transformation. The left wanted to expand industry according to a comprehensive plan. When it encountered severe political economic obstacles to achieve its goal of industrialisation, the emerging neoliberal right capitalised on this mistake. The right, led by the UNP under JR Jayewardene, articulated the virtues of participation in the global economy.

Opposing state ownership, the UNP in its rhetoric anticipated the emerging authoritarian populist defence of the “little man” (Hall 1979). The UNP was able to play on the contradictions of the social democratic state, as Hall might have put it, and the apparently rigid bureaucracy that had been constructed. Jupp illustrated its appeal: “Reiterating a proposition from earlier platforms the UNP told the voters that ‘if you have a little property of any kind, a small business or a small house, you are by that much independent. If property through the country is widely dispersed in millions of private hands, the power which resides in the ownership of property is also dispersed and power cannot be used coercively’” (Jupp 1977: 638).

This shift toward the right traced the contours of the urban/rural divide, especially the left’s further alienation from rural constituencies. The left began to contemplate the possibilities of rural mobilisation in the middle of the multiple crises of the 1970s. But by then it was too late to engage in the type of

base-building that would have enabled it to pressure the state to enact transformative policy during an especially constrained period. Instead, the left experienced a moral crisis. It found itself supporting a government involved in the brutal suppression of a revolt that cost the lives of thousands of youths during the JVP Insurrection of 1971. Repressive elements of the state took the initiative. The left's rather late attempts at further land reform failed due to the class interests of its senior partner in the coalition government, the SLFP, which was beholden to the landed elite. These developments ensured a dialectic of violence, which would continue to define Sri Lanka's political trajectory beyond the 1970s. The ethnic conflict turned into a full-blown civil war that eventually ravaged the country.

The global conjuncture

Given where the left ended up, ideologically disoriented and politically crushed, it may seem odd to return to the point at which it failed. But we find it useful to do so because the problems that the left confronted remain with us today. Moreover, the value of its experiment requires sustained interrogation of multiple factors that had both positive and negative consequences. Even as we analyse the left's apparent strategic mistakes, we also acknowledge its legacy. By many measures inequality in Sri Lanka was lower during the long 1960s than at any other point since independence. This parallels the experience around the globe of the "Golden Age" of the welfare state.

The reality is that the left in Sri Lanka, as in much of the rest of the world, faced similar challenges overcoming the political economic constraints on the welfare state in its long-term struggle for socialism. Rather than explaining these as a failure to maintain its political independence vis-à-vis bourgeois parties, or the "petty bourgeois" class background of its political leadership, we argue that the fundamental challenges the left in Sri Lanka faced reflected the limitations of the pressure it could exert on its leaders in power. The challenges of the 1970s crisis forced the left to begin thinking explicitly in terms of self-reliance. Moreover, self-reliance is a goal we must distinguish from the question of self-sufficiency. The need to achieve self-sufficiency in food, particularly, became palpable during the crisis in a way that demands critical analysis of the left's earlier attitude toward the agrarian question.

We also acknowledge the external dimension during the same period. Sri Lanka was at the forefront of the Non-Aligned Movement. Later, along with other countries, it also grappled with the declining terms of trade that shaped the relationship between former colonial powers and the countries they had colonised. The proposal for a New International Economic Order, formulated

in the United Nations Conference for Trade and Development by eminent economists such as Raul Prebisch and Sri Lanka's own Gamani Corea, sought to improve terms of trade for the Third World's primary commodity exports.

But with the ultimate defeat of these efforts in Sri Lanka and abroad, the articulation of neoliberalism and ethnic majoritarian politics became dominant. The upshot is that debates that reckon with the left's strategic limitations are again becoming relevant during the current period of global crisis. Once again, Sri Lanka must grapple with the question of self-sufficiency. Whether or not the country experiences a sovereign debt crisis, for example, participation in the global market carries its own dramatic risks. Sri Lanka's vulnerabilities have been exposed during the economic depression triggered by the Great Lockdown. In this context, the political frustrations of marginalised and dispossessed communities may be articulated in either a left-wing or right-wing populist direction. The latter contains potentially dangerous and irreversible consequences for democracy in Sri Lanka, even though the country is the oldest electoral democracy in Asia, with its universal suffrage reaching back to 1931.

Sri Lanka, much as during the crisis of the 1970s, is facing a moment of reckoning along with the rest of the world. If we are to approach the crisis differently this time, we must also understand what happened that specifically led to the 1970s crisis. As we have argued, the Sri Lankan left postponed sustained engagement with the agrarian question, which was appropriated by the right. Instead, its predominant method was to pursue state ownership of industry.

But its fundamental conceptualisation of planning remained an abstract, expert approach that dictated rather than listened to working people in the formulation of their needs. Leftist authors of the time may have chafed against this claim. They might have argued, for example, that self-management in state enterprises was taken seriously.[25] Or that the Five-Year Plan engaged with the question of mobilisation to build up rural industries. But we argue that the challenges the left faced while attempting to govern show that base-building across the urban/rural divide remained the pre-condition for its other efforts.

We are taking neither a nativist nor anti-modern position in emphasising the agrarian question. Instead, we argue that specific questions raised by Sri Lanka's working people require explicitly understanding the ways in which their demands are embedded in daily tasks of reproduction. These include the critical question of achieving self-sufficiency in food and other basic needs. To approximate the immediate needs and concerns of working people does not mean imposing a reactionary nostalgic outlook on their livelihoods. Rather, it means extrapolating from working people's lives, experiences and demands the fundamental implications for transforming social relations of production.

25 See Goonewardene 1980 and Skanthakumar 2015 for reference to experiments in "Yugoslav-style" self-management.

Accordingly, we propose the need to theorise self-sufficiency in terms of a holistic understanding of the relationship between the basic needs of working people and their mobilising capacity to obtain what they need. Whether this ultimately means Sri Lanka must produce specific products or create different, inter-related industries depends entirely on the form of engagement and patient listening involved in organising with diverse communities and their social institutions, such as cooperatives. This includes articulating the relationship between different types of struggles – for example, capturing land through squatting, thereby redistributing it. Ultimately this process leads back to the question of what the left does not only in opposition but also in power: specifically, the way in which it triangulates the relationship between party, movement and state.

Finally, we must re-emphasise that the left's push for self-reliance in the 1970s, and the implicit question of self-sufficiency, emerged against the background of the *longue durée* of dependency. Keynes made a similar argument during the nadir of the Great Depression of the 1930s. As he put it in an article titled "National Self Sufficiency" in 1933:

> But over an increasingly wide range of industrial products, and perhaps of agricultural products also, I become doubtful whether the economic cost of national self-sufficiency is great enough to outweigh the other advantages of gradually bringing the producer and the consumer within the ambit of the same national, economic and financial organisation. (Keynes 1933: 2)

We quote Keynes for the purpose of intellectual provocation.

During a crisis period when the world no longer took capitalism for granted as the sole destiny of humanity, Keynes's critique encourages renewed reflection about what kinds of political economic experiments are possible. In his essay, even though he comes off as an anti-communist and uncritical of colonialism, Keynes contrasted these productive experiments in self-sufficiency with a narrower emphasis on what he called "economic nationalism". He recognised that ideological flexibility is required to grasp the broad range of potential arrangements countries may adopt in response to crisis.

The current conjuncture in Sri Lanka, which occurs amid the unravelling of the neoliberal order, contains the potential for different political economic trajectories. The danger of a fascist turn exists; either from within the nationalist regime now in power or the forces that it has cultivated and encouraged. Such actors allude to the language of self-sufficiency in tandem with economic nationalism, xenophobia and attacks on minorities. Our contention is that progressive and internationalist actors should not concede self-sufficiency to the nationalist right. Rather, a working people's politics across the rural-urban divide must provide a vision of self-sufficiency linked to economic democracy, emphasising freedom, equality and coexistence if it is to head off the threat.

From our own historical perspective, we view self-sufficiency as the first step in a longer project to reconstruct the coordinates of global solidarity previously

embodied in the now ideologically defunct Non-Aligned Movement. Sri Lanka's experience with these challenges during the long 1960s created an important platform for global engagement. It is our hope that at the very least grappling with these questions intellectually today could in turn identify the challenges facing working people across the Global South. Toward this end, we remain inspired by the radical spirit that animated the long 1960s, even as we must confront its consequences that still shape our orientation toward the future.

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