

# From the Margins to the Centre: International Relations, the ‘Return’ of Nationalism and Post-War Tamil Mobilisation

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## Abstract

This paper engages with evolving social science and policy understandings of nationalism in the contemporary context. It explores the shift from the early post-Cold War period in which nationalism (along with identity politics more widely) was generally framed as an exceptional, instrumental, and reactive phenomenon, to the present environment in which the power of nationalism as a social force is now indisputable given its global prominence. In contrast to the Cold War era of ‘national liberation’ struggles, the post-Cold War tendency, informed in part by the liberal triumphalism that spurred a global transformative project, was to marginalise nationalism and nation-based politics as regressive and obsolescent in an age of globalisation and transnationalism. Nationalists and nationalist politics were thus deemed opposition to (liberal) progress itself. The problem with this orthodoxy is that it misread nationalist identity construction as tied, first, to an erroneous conception of the self-generated territorial state and antithetical to transnational and global dynamics, and thereafter to the instrumental action of elites re/producing nationalism as a cosmetic device to maintain domestic legitimacy (e.g. ‘populism’). In contrast, this article argues that nationalist identities, (along with territoriality and statehood), emerge through a complex and shifting historical interaction and mutual co-constitution of multiple global, regional and local dynamics that produce a potent, wider and deeper social diffusion of nationalism that exceeds merely ‘elite’ or state action. The paper argues that while mainstream scholarship, including International Relations, and liberal policy frameworks have yet to revise their understanding of nationalist phenomena, the sheer scale and breadth of nationalist dynamics at work at numerous ‘central’ and ‘peripheral’ sites and the need to engage these, at least at a policy level, creates a significant challenge to these orthodox approaches, if not renders their framing of nationalism untenable. The paper draws on examples of nationalist dynamics, including, Scottish, Catalan and Tamil nationalisms as well as the emergent Rohingya insurgency in Myanmar, and, to argue there is an urgent need to develop a wider ethics of nationalist claims and counter-claims, within which Tamil demands for self-determination can and should be situated.

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## Introduction

This paper critically engages evolving frameworks of nationalism scholarship in International Relations (IR) and the wider social sciences, and their significance for Tamil nationalism, particularly in the current global political context. Nationalism has gone through three phases of scholarly engagement from the period of the Cold War to the present: from a willingness to engage the phenomenon during the Cold War, to the initial post-Cold War period when nationalism was marginalised in scholarship – concurrently with its disqualification in western policy and practice, and in the current juncture, where the sheer proliferation of nationalist movements, notably including in the West, is compelling a renewed focus on the phenomenon.

In this paper we argue that this moment of reinvigorated nationalism, in its various forms, and associated engagement in academia and policy, is critical to an ethical reconsideration of diverse but often inter-related nationalisms. In particular, we argue the present makes unavoidable the need to distinguish between emancipatory struggles by oppressed, subaltern nationalist forces, on the one hand, and, on the other, the hegemonic and oppressive nationalist social orders that frequently act as the central motors of social injustice suffered by subaltern actors and communities. Such considerations are key to comprehending the evolving Tamil nationalist struggle, its location in the constellation of world politics today, and its constitutive relations with the continued dominance of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in Sri Lanka. Thoroughly suffusing the Sri Lankan state, its policies and even foreign relations, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and its differentiated subordination of the Tamil and Muslim communities intensified and further entrenched in the decade after the end of the island’s war in 2009. Amid the continuing pattern of complete and repeated failure to respond to demands for political justice and reform, the post-war expansion of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist enmity to

more fully include Muslims alongside Tamils has intensified through the state's draconian security response to the 2019 Easter bombings.

The paper proceeds through five main sections. The first two sections trace the shifts to what is ultimately a post-Cold-War orthodoxy, a hostile engagement with nationalism, posited as a dangerous alternative to liberalism. The third section examines the flaws and inconsistencies in this paradigm. The fourth section engages the current proliferation of nationalist phenomena globally and its implications for a scholarly and ethical reframing of nationalism and the fifth applies this to Tamil nationalism and nationalist struggle in the current political juncture.

### **Shifting Frameworks of Nationalism**

The Cold War represented both a period and a configuration of contesting global forces in which a relative legitimacy was afforded to nationalist movements, including counter-state insurgent forces. This was predominantly a result of three key overlapping factors. First, notwithstanding significant exceptions, there was broad acceptance amongst both liberal and communist powers of the legitimacy of nationalist self-determination struggles as a means of challenging and overcoming the structures and apparatuses of formal colonialism (although informal empire continued to swagger onwards). The post-WW2 era of decolonisation was one in which not only did nationalist self-determination movements, armed and unarmed, emerge throughout western empires, but the growing ranks of newly-independent states also articulated in global politics the legitimacy of these struggles by still colonised peoples. It is in this global context that in Sri Lanka, following the enactment of the unabashedly Sinhala Buddhist 1972 constitution, the core organising demand of long running popular Tamil mobilisation against state repression evolved from federal autonomy to *national* self-determination and independent statehood. As the landmark Vaddukkoddai Resolution, passed in 1976 by the unified Tamil political parties, states: the "restoration and reconstitution of the Free, Sovereign, Secular, Socialist State of Tamil Eelam, based on the right of self-determination inherent to every nation, has become inevitable in order to safeguard the very existence of the Tamil nation in this country." The endorsement by Tamils of the Vaddukkoddai Resolution - by voting overwhelming for the Tamil United Liberation Front, which campaigned solely on the basis of its commitment to this – reflected not only

the social depth of Tamil nationalism, but of nation and nationalism as obvious frameworks for popular resistance to state oppression.

Second, Cold War super power competition for patronage of client states and/or insurgent movements also facilitated this overall legitimacy - whilst also providing a choice of avenues of great power support for both client states and insurgents. For example, from the 1960s the African National Congress in South Africa drew significant military and political support from the Soviet Union while the Apartheid government and its counterinsurgency were firmly backed by the West. Yet these Cold War dynamics also frequently had the effect of reducing, effacing or suppressing the discursive nationalist, ethnic and race aspects of civil wars to the statist and ideological dynamics of the Cold War. This was despite the greater complexity of these conflicts, their simultaneously ideological and identitarian dimensions, and their continuities (as well as discontinuities) before, across and beyond the Cold War period of supposed bipolarity (see Wimmer 2004; Leader Maynard 2015). In Sri Lanka, for example, despite the manifest and widespread Tamil support for national self-determination – indeed, because of it (Miller, 2015), from before but especially after the start of the war in 1983, western states strongly reinforced the state's counter-insurgency not only against the Tamil insurgents, but the broader Tamil nationalist movement (see Rasaratnam, 2016). The rationale of this western support was that Sri Lanka, now headed by an enthusiastically neoliberal and pro-West government was a key frontline in the defence of capitalism against communism (Nadarajah, 2018).

However, as the Cold War entered its final stage in the 1980s, there was a marked upsurge of scholarship on nationalism, much of which arrived as a critique of orthodox tendencies on the Left or Right to reduce nationalism and ethnicity to either these Cold War ideological dimensions, to class or 'poverty' dynamics, or simply to neglect the phenomenon altogether (see, for example, Anderson 1983; Nairn 1979, 1997; Gellner 1983). In this period, it is also notable that a substantial proportion of scholarly writing about nationalism, particularly on the Left, remained impartial, discerning, or sympathetic to many decolonial nationalist self-determination movements, a tendency that continued in the wake of the Cold War, but in ever diminishing

circles (e.g. Blaut 1987; Nairn, 1981, 1997; Laffey and Weldes 2008).

After the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and to a great extent because western scholarship, policy and practice increasingly became in thrall to an accelerating, ebullient and globally expansive liberalism, newly confident of its universal mission as the matchless historical vehicle of cosmopolitan global order (e.g. see Fukuyama 1992), nationalism became increasingly marginalised - though not ignored *per se* - in scholarship, policy and practice. For liberals, ethnicity and nationalism, and specifically their conjuncture in ethnonationalism, were increasingly seen as atavistic, exclusive and particularist forms of identity that were resistant to, and threatening to, the progress of liberal democratic peace and its conceptions of a universal order based on globally integrated market democracies and plural and inclusive civic-secular-cosmopolitanism (for a critique, see Calhoun 2002, 2007). If nationalism was to be encouraged at all, it was to be the (state-based) 'civic' nationalism supposedly characteristic of Western Europe and the US, and not 'ethnic nationalism', supposedly characteristic of the non-West parts of the world. This civic nationalism, or as Jurgen Habermas has put it, 'constitutional patriotism', was preferable as it was deemed to be shorn of what is seen as the emotional and affective forms of belonging associated with its non-civic, ethnic other (e.g. see Habermas 2001; Ikenberry 2006, 2011). However for many scholars, even this civic form of association, would be framed as transitional in a world where nationalist belonging of any kind is seen as increasingly diminished by the accelerating spread of globalising and integrative transnational connections and the proliferation of hybrid identities thrown up by these processes.

In this context, in which nationalism was categorically contrasted with and opposed to liberalism in both scholarship and policy, 'nationalists', particularly 'ethnonationalists', became not only self-evident obstacles to peace and conflict resolution in their country, but, more broadly, as threats to achieving a liberal (peaceful) world. It is in this context that the Tamil *national* liberation struggle became integral part of a global challenge to progress. As the then US Ambassador to Sri Lanka, Ashley Wills, put it in a speech - delivered at the Jaffna library - in 2001: "Those in Sri Lanka who advocate separation of the state long for ethnic purity,

a genetic and geographical impossibility. Worse than that, it is an atavism, a denial of the harmonizing, connecting forces at work in the modern world. These ethnic hygienists, or separatists, are about the past, not the future or at least not a future that we should wish for our children." It is in this context that the Tamil insurgency *and* the wider Tamil nationalist movement became seen self-evidently as the foremost obstacle to peace and liberal progress in Sri Lanka.

Although the reasons why the dramatic shift in disqualifying nationalism - in both scholarship (see below) and policy praxis - occurred at this particular historical juncture is worth examining in more detail, as it is explicitly in relation to this post-Cold War orthodoxy that the present moment of proliferating nationalisms is usually explored. In the wake of the Cold War, the more aggressive, universalising liberalism invigorated by the collapse of super-power rivalry and 'defeat' of communism reached its academic zenith in the shape of globalisation theory. Perhaps the key element to globalisation theory is an assumption that world politics is undergoing a transformation (rapid or gradual, US-led or decentred, depending on perspective) from a Westphalian system of unitary, territorial nation-states to universally expanding forms of integrative, polycentric, supranational, transnational and global forms of liberal governance built on institutional and rule-bound cooperation (see Scholte 2005; Held et al. 1999; Held and McGrew 2002; Ohmae 1999; see also Ikenberry 2010). In these perspectives, state power and the territorial borders that delimit the state system is either being eradicated altogether or, failing that, reduced to merely one amongst a plurality of significant political actors. As such, for globalisation and cosmopolitan theorists, including more critical types, nationalism is framed as a form of atavistic, statist identification entirely beholden to an increasingly obsolescent Westphalian territorial nation-state system (e.g. see Linklater 1998), and a monolithic identity predominantly instrumentalised by states and their elites as a legitimating strategy for the pursuit of state power and resources. Moreover, by 'instrumentalised' we mean that nationalism is framed as an (exclusive) identity that elites manipulate but one which, for those that utilise the framework, is actually devoid of any meaningful or deeper sense of attachment or sociality at wider levels of society.

It is in this way that nationalism is therefore framed as the very antithesis of globalisation, the dark side of the inexorable expansion of a plural and cosmopolitan liberal order, and frequently as a negative reaction to these globalising dynamics (Kaldor 2004). Relatedly, with the sites and contexts of focus and engagement of nationalist and ethnic politics increasingly held to be concentrated in what are framed as the conflict zones of the global south, in explicit contrast to the liberal zone of the West, nationalism as an object of scholarly inquiry became inseparable from the wider ambition for, and policy engagement towards, realising globalisation itself. That is, studying nationalism was explicitly a problem-solving endeavour. This encompassed not only social forces in conflict contexts, such as Sri Lanka, but those elsewhere, such as the Tamil diaspora in the West (for a critique, see Laffey and Nadarajah, 2012).

### **The Disqualification of Nationalism**

It is in the above discussed context that nationalism assumes increasingly negative status in its treatment in a wide range of increasingly converging social science approaches including liberal, constructivist, rationalist, New Wars, micro-conflict and economic ones. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to go into any detail about these diverse frameworks, what all of these analytical approaches share and reproduce as a general orthodoxy, albeit in different ways, is an understanding of nationalism, particularly ethnonationalism, as a statist, elite-centric and instrumental ideology with predominantly cosmetic, rhetorical force and a deep and thoroughgoing association with armed conflict.

To explain further, these new frameworks assume and describe a world where elites, whether connected to existing states or to the quasi-state projects of insurgent movements, utilised nationalism and ethnicity as a flag or badge to recruit and mobilise followers and to legitimate their quest for other rational, material interests such as the capture or maintenance of state power, wealth and resources, in the process unleashing violent othering processes in the form of ethnic cleansing and genocide (Kaldor 2010, 2013). Thus grievance and social justice claims connected to nationalist identity are increasingly dismissed as “romantic” or “exaggerated” and, at best, as cosmetic ideational “narratives”, whilst the genuine dynamics of conflicts superficially labelled

‘ethnic’ or ‘nationalist’ were seen to be primarily based on material motivations and/or conditions, including the quest for wealth and power on the part of elites or poverty and lack of (liberal) development on the part of the wider populace (e.g. see Collier and Hoeffler 2002, 2004; Brass 1997; Kalyvas 2003). What is also apparent during this period is a deep association of nationalism with forms and dynamics of masculinist patriarchy (e.g. Nagel 1998; Enloe 2000). Meanwhile, scholarly attention to diaspora politics has also been negative and ultimately based on statist, territorial conceptions of politics and their rigid divisions between inside/outside, international/national, with the transnational politics of ‘long distance’ nationalism seen as externally disconnected, irresponsible and exacerbating of ethnic divides in ‘home’ states (e.g. Conversi 2012; Anderson 1992).

### **An Alternative Engagement of Nationalism**

These readings of nationalism remain flawed for a number of reasons. First, this model neglects the long durée transnational and social, rather than statist, dimensions of nationalism. As a number of more insightful scholars have noted, there is no necessary opposition between globalisation and nationalism and, in fact, nationalism is itself one of the processual vehicles and outcomes of the globalisation process (e.g. see Goswami 2002; Duara 2006; Hutchinson 2010). This is evident in the global and regional relational proliferation of nationalisms across the world and in the role of diasporas in the transnational reproduction of nationalist movements and in forms of governance. Additionally, and this intersects powerfully with the transnational dimensions, although nationalism is often state-seeking and also reproduced through state practices, it cannot be reduced to the state form and has a powerful social existence and force beyond state apparatuses. These dimensions were and are clearly at work in Tamil nationalism, but should not be considered novel. They are clearly exemplified in the social and transnational dimensions of numerous anti-colonial nationalisms from the eighteenth century onwards that were set in motion by global imperial dynamics which triggered social mobilisations, informed by the confluence of both local forms of identity and what were then often seen as radical liberal and republican ideas and practices.

Nationalisms always maintain both a global and regional relational and co-constitutive force. If we

take East Asia as a classic and simple example, Chinese, Korean and Japanese nationalisms have been constituted by both their relationships to Western imperialism and to each other (e.g. see Duara 2006). Tamil nationalism exists in a whole series of co-constitutive and relational connections that bring together colonial dynamics, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, the role of India, Tamil Nadu, the Tamil diaspora and numerous Western states and societies. Such entanglements of global, transnational and 'nationalist' dynamics are also clearly apparent in the current Brexit imbroglio, where the burning question of the Irish border is produced by and caught up in the legacies and ongoing dynamics of British imperialism and nationalism, loyalist Ulster nationalism, Irish republican nationalism, contestations over EU identity and belonging, and the associated multi-layered struggles over governance (see Gormley-Heenan and Aughey 2017).

Although there is little doubt that elites do 'use' nationalism in an instrumental fashion, the dominant interpretation of nationalism primarily through instrumental frameworks of power is incomplete. It remains highly presentist, statist, elite-centric and neglectful of the historical dynamics and effects of nationalist mobilisation over the longer term (Nadarajah and Rampton, 2015). These dynamics of nationalist mobilisation constitute and reproduce nationalist conduct and practices at wider social levels than simply the elite level, including amongst subaltern groups (see discussion in Rampton 2011). In that sense, nationalist dynamics and practices are generative of social orders, and consequently the behaviour of elites is also governed by prevailing 'grids of intelligibility' (Dillon and Reid, 2009: 85-6). Moreover, elite-centric studies of nationalism often succumb to what is termed the 'resonance' or 'reception' issue (Ozkirimli 2005; Hall 1980), in so far as they fail to engage with why non-elite, subaltern groups not only receive and reproduce nationalist discourse but also how this process may result in contested interpretations and practices that may still intensify the overall nationalist effect (see Rampton 2011). This refined and more complex understanding of nationalist discourse also emphasises the profoundly generative and deep-seated impact, rather than merely cosmetic, empty, rhetorical dimensions of nationalism. Such perspectives also tend to depart from standard, individualistic frameworks of power and identity, understanding the way in which power

and identity are widely diffused and reproduced through social orders as sets of practices that encompass not only elites but wider social strata (See Bourdieu 1990; Rampton and Nadarajah 2017).

Standard accounts also tend to reproduce moral judgements of good and bad identities, based on antithetical divisions between liberal cosmopolitanism and nationalism overall; between civic and ethnic nationalisms; and between nationalism in the West and those in the non-West. Not only are such conceptions deeply Eurocentric but they are also unsustainable (see, e.g., Shulman 2002; Spencer and Wollman 1998; Yack 1996). What these critiques often indicate is the deep interweaving of ethnic and civic elements, such that whatever differences exist between civic and ethnic forms, these are of degree rather than separation. Moreover, this is regardless of where these identities are centred - whether in the East, West, North or South. In fact, what occurs more frequently in North American and European contexts is that civic-secular-cosmopolitan frameworks frequently mask, sometimes very thinly, the subliminal privileging of a dominant, white, male and culturally authentic subject, and its associated national, Eurocentric values and practices. As a result, new foundations of 'othering' are reproduced in the differences between these (implicitly or explicitly) Eurocentric cosmopolitan-civic-secular identities and their (usually ethnic and/or religious) 'others'. Moreover, despite the continuing treatment of nationalism as a transitional 'populist' deviation from the liberal cosmopolitan trajectory, what this also underlines is the long relational and co-constitutive relations, rather than dichotomous separation, between liberal and nationalist social orders. The mainstream scholarship's claims that nationalist, or for that matter religious, identities are always and everywhere masculinist and gender oppressive also miss the extent to which nationalist or religious forms of identity and movements based around them, can also be vehicles for reinvigorated feminist agency, and quests for emancipation (e.g. see Gowrinathan 2014; Herr 2003; Mulholland et al. 2018). What we are arguing here is that nationalism, in the abstract, is not essentially good nor bad, repressive or emancipatory; such assessments are reliant both on the context in which nationalisms manifest, and on the normative lens one adopts to one or other political outcomes towards which nationalist projects mobilise.

## The 'Return' of Nationalism

What all of the above therefore reveal is the implicit or sometimes explicit normative agenda that, *a priori*, negatively judges nationalism, particularly when it is associated, first, with ethnic aspects of identity, second, with the non-West and, third, with armed conflict. Given the highly problematic, unstable and unsustainable nature of these divisions, what is therefore required is a very different ethical register for discerning the relative (and relational) qualities of a considerably diverse variety of nationalisms at work globally today.

Such an endeavour comes at a deeply pressing yet paradoxically auspicious moment in world history. Over the past decade, we have witnessed a veritable deluge of nationalist movements that defy the generally accepted stereotype of nationalism, and its associated conflicts as a phenomenon predominantly restricted to the global south. The global North has witnessed a resurgence, if not explosion of parallel nationalist dynamics in and across a myriad of North American and European contexts, evident in the rise or intensification of 'nationalist' and 'populist' parties and regimes, whether of centrist, right and left wing ideological persuasion. The list is too long to cite in full, but includes JuntsX and ERC in Catalunya, AFD in Germany, PIS in Poland, FPO in Austria, Fidesz in Hungary, the PVV in the Netherlands, M5S and Lega Nord in Italy, Front National in France, Syriza and Golden Dawn in Greece. In the UK alone there has been the rise of diverse 'nationalist' actors, including the Scottish National Party (SNP), the UK Independence Party (UKIP), and its offshoot, the Brexit Party, alongside the expansion of Sinn Fein's power base in Ireland (North and South). Interwoven with all of these, of course, are broader contestations over the content and rules of inclusion/exclusion of a potent British nationalism which has long defined both mainstream political contestation and aggressive policing of social order, especially since the War on Terror began. Moreover all of the European actors above and the expanding constituencies they represent are situated within, and constituted by, broader social contestations that are at once locally grounded and transnationally connected.

Meanwhile, the long struggles by diverse Indigenous peoples in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States to resist their ongoing subjugation and forcible assimilation by these English-settler states not only intensified after the end

of the Cold War but have come to explicitly prioritise the principle of 'self-government'. In other words, first, it is precisely in the era of 'globalisation' and the anticipated decline of identity-based political demands associated with it, that self-government became the organising principle of Indigenous resistance - within the liberal West itself. Moreover, while all these struggles manifest in locally grounded forms, self-government, as an overarching principle, nonetheless begins with identifying as a nation and positing it as the appropriate collective "self" in self-determination and self-government (Cornell, 2015). In the words of a senior official of the Aboriginal community, "[The Australian government] may not recognize us as a nation, but we're going to act like a nation, in every way we can," (cited in Cornell, 2015: 1). Acting like a nation, moreover, entails a specific logic - "a turn way from a focus on changing central government policy and toward Indigenous agendas and action: from a focus on changing what 'they' do to a focus on deciding what 'we' do—and doing it" (Cornell, 2015: 6). Second, against the supposedly inexorable de-territorialisation of social relations and politics consequent to 'globalisation', Indigenous resistance not only places intimate relations between land, nature and social existence at the core of Indigenous identity itself, but, invoking this historic connection - one violently interrupted by settle colonialism - places the (home)land as the indispensable territorial basis for Indigenous (national) self-government and self-determination (Cornell, 2015: 4).

That the rise of these diverse nationalist movements and parties in the West has also been accompanied by seismic shifts such as Brexit in the UK, the election of Donald Trump in the US, and the continuing consolidation of the explicitly nationalist regime of Vladimir Putin in Russia, only underlines the potency and global sweep of the phenomenon, given the emphasis in the diverse political projects, in both West and non-West, on platforms of nation, nationalism and territorialised governance. As Andreas Wimmer puts it in a recent commentary on the present historic moment, "In both the developed and the developing world, nationalism is here to stay," (2019: 34). However, the sheer diversity of nationalisms constituting the current global resurgence also produces an imperative to differentiate between them for both theoretical analyses and policy praxis.

### **Tamil nationalism today**

A decade after the end of Sri Lanka's war and the defeat of the LTTE, Tamil nationalism remains a potent transnational force, and one that defies the aforementioned orthodox frameworks of scholarly engagement with nationalism. Moreover it is an evolving and dynamic phenomenon. On the one hand, it that has significant continuities with its past - in particular that in the post-Cold War era of the LTTE, it's de-facto state, and the expansion of Tamil diaspora mobilisation from the late 2000s. On the other hand, it also has significant departures, which are co-constitutive with the wider global context, on the one hand, and, on the other, the specific post-war context of the Sri Lankan state, profoundly beholden to an intensifying Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as state doctrine and policy framework, that is deeply resistant to any meaningful steps towards a dialogic reconciliation or reform of state and governance structures in ways responsive to either demands for Tamil autonomy and self-government or, for that matter, wider liberalisation as envisaged in western support for its war against the LTTE (e.g. International Crisis Group, 2017).

Despite the military annihilation of the LTTE in 2009, the 'shock and awe' of the Sri Lankan state's coeval systematic killing of tens of thousands of Tamil civilians, and then internment of hundreds of thousands of Tamils in militarised camps with attendant terror, torture and rape, and the expansive decade-long military-civil programme of securitised pacification in the Tamil homeland, Tamil nationalism remains today the predominant framework for Tamils' political action, whether in the Sri Lanka or in diaspora locales. Indeed Sri Lanka's post-war context has been defined by ongoing and intensifying forms of transnational Tamil nationalist mobilisation, including protest and civil disobedience; nationalist memorialisation such as Heroes Day and Mullivaikkal/Genocide day; electoral support for Tamil nationalist parties; the generation of new activist centres and organisations of transnational self-government; expanding transnational networks of humanitarianism, rights advocacy and protection, coordination for political action, and also knowledge production – for example, transnational archiving and memorialisation of the Tamil nation, mapping and recording of ongoing processes of Sinhalisation and militarisation in the NorthEast, and local and international conferences

(see, for example, Rasaratnam, 2016; Seoighe, 2017; Vimalarajah and Cheran, 2010; Walton, 2015).

These practices and relations reveal the deeply transnational and social, rather than territorial or statist, nature of Tamil nationalist mobilisation. What is also undeniably discernible in the context of the passing of the LTTE, the apex institution of Tamil nationalism for a quarter century, is the socially embedded (rather than simply elite-instrumental) aspects of Tamil nationalist practices. No longer can the force of Tamil nationalism be attributed to the coercive power of the LTTE's quasi-state security apparatus, as it often was both by the Sri Lankan government and by numerous international policymakers and scholars. What is also apparent, and can no longer be explained away through reference to the coercive power of the LTTE, is the agency of Tamils, including women and youth, in the reproduction of Tamil nationalism in diverse sites across the North-East and diaspora locales. Moreover, defying the inside/outside dichotomy inherent to scholarly theorisation of nationalism (e.g. 'long distance nationalism'), what is also apparent since the passing of the LTTE is the social embeddedness of transnational interaction, which has been energised after the war through these forms of civil mobilisation, activism, resistance and protest (Gowrinathan 2014; Rasaratnam, 2016). In short, these forms of activism and engagement are reinforcing the ties and webs of a deeply 'responsible', connected and intersectional politics grounded in the Tamil nation and its homeland, as well as challenging and transforming the existing class and status hierarchies of (global) Tamil society.

Finally, the Tamil nationalist example, just like the Catalan nationalism case, deeply challenges the idea of nationalism as always and everywhere based on a singular and monolithic relation between nation, territory and (existing or desired) state, characteristic of the traditional nation-state model. From the mid-2000s and beyond, diaspora Tamil protesters in the UK, for example, flew the Tamil Eelam flag, on the one hand and the Union Jack in the other, underlining the wider transnational, open-to-the-world, multifaceted and heterogeneous character of this form of subaltern nationalist resistance. The same can be seen in the Catalan nationalist context, where Catalan and EU flags are juxtaposed in activist and political platforms, such as Omnium Cultural and the Catalan Referendum Manifesto, that mobilise beyond and

across traditional political, territorial and socio-cultural divisions. The point here is that it not a question of being *either* a Tamil nationalist *or* a Canadian nationalist, but also *both* - or neither. Conversely, all can be a Tamil or Catalan nationalist!

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we draw out some implications of the above for scholarship of nationalism, and for the political practices of Tamil nationalism.

Although the transnational and social force of nationalism is as undeniable today as it was at the height of decolonisation struggles in the twentieth century, its current global upsurge well demonstrates that, first, it can no longer be classed as a phenomenon characteristic of the global South and in this way serve to contrast the non-West with the West. Second, neither can nationalisms be pigeon-holed in the traditional Eurocentric division between civic and ethnic forms. Third, and most importantly, nationalism can no longer be engaged through the instrumental, territorial-statist and elite-centric frameworks that became orthodoxy after the Cold War. As this paper has emphasised, nationalisms are always and everywhere deeply relational assemblages and sets of socially-embedded practices.

One clear register that can – and, we argue, should – serve to apprehend nationalism in politics – whether local, national, international or global - is attention to the coordinates and distributions of power, domination and resistance that exist in the relations between nationalisms and other identity-related assemblages. Where such relations are deeply conflictual they also inevitably do not exist on a level playing field but reveal profound inequalities, disparities and injustices that are sewn into and reproduced through these identity relations. Thus rethinking nationalisms also makes imperative a need to think well beyond conventional normative registers (e.g. liberalism-good/nationalism-bad) if any sense is to be made of the myriad of nationalisms and why they are flourishing today. It is only through such an appreciation that the various kinds of nationalism can be sorted into their oppressive and dominant forms on the one hand, and, on the other, into dynamics of emancipatory resistance and social justice.

In this sense, Tamil nationalism and the long and continuing dynamics of conflict in Sri Lanka, cannot be apprehended through anything other than recognising it as a form of subaltern resistance to a hegemonic and domineering Sinhala Buddhist

nationalism that has been and continues to be reproduced through Sri Lankan social and state apparatuses and reinforced by powerful international actors (see Rampton and Nadarajah 2017). Tamil nationalism emerged long before the LTTE, as reaction to explicitly Sinhala Buddhist nationalist state and nation building since the 1950s. And it had become socially embedded well before the onset of the island's war, as demonstrated by the results of the 1977 election, a de facto Tamil plebiscite on the Vaddukkoddai Resolution (Bose, 1994; Krishna, 1999; Rasaratnam, 2016). Long after the war's end, Tamil nationalism not only endures without the LTTE, but is resurgent, drawing together practices, institutions, and social relations spanning the Tamil homeland and diaspora locales far afield.

Throughout much of this long history, understanding of this rationality of persistent Tamil resistance to Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist hegemony has been distorted by orthodox scholarly accounts of nationalism that ultimately serve to obscure and delegitimise its standing as a transnational and socially embedded struggle for justice. In that way, these orthodox accounts have had profound consequences for oppressed peoples everywhere, Tamils included. In particular, they have served to naturalise on the field of politics the a priori disqualification and denunciation of any articulation of territorialised group rights and demands, including in contexts of resistance to state persecution and genocide. In so doing they also have served to discipline such resistances, including that by the Tamils (see, e.g., Nadarajah, 2009). In the common sense underpinned by this orthodoxy, to be recognised as, or labelled, a nationalist was to be marginalised, even annihilated, from the field of legitimate political debate and action. Yet almost two decades after US Ambassador Ashley Wills (see above) described the Tamil demand for national self-determination as “an atavism, a denial of the harmonizing, connecting forces at work in the modern world”, millions of Scots and Catalans are demanding independent statehood for their peoples. And explicit in these resurgent demands is the aspiration than independence for Scotland and Catalonia also enabled membership of the European Union.

The present proliferation of nationalist projects, both hegemonic and resistant, and their powerful effects, including seismic shifts in global politics, not

only serve to expose and challenge the flaws in these orthodox frameworks, they also put into question the efficacy of political action and demands for justice that centre on prioritising individual and citizenship rights over and *against* collective rights. State-led persecution and repression of Tamils in Sri Lanka is geared today, as it always has been, towards annihilating the potential of Tamil *collectiveness* to thwart the establishing of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist social order. In that sense, first, the abject failures of international efforts to encourage, cajole, educate, and sometimes coerce the Sri Lankan leadership and polity into liberal reform and political accommodation with the *Tamils* should hardly be surprising. Second, and more significantly, what is clear is that Tamil nationalism today, established as it is in diaspora locales across North America and Europe as well as the Tamil homeland, has achieved an unassailable context for reproducing Tamil collectiveness – the nation, and articulating the attendant demand of national self-determination. While the globalisation, as it were, of Tamil nationalism has put it beyond the annihilatory reach of Sinhala Buddhist nationalist hegemony, it also is located now in a global context where collective demands for territorialised self-government can no longer be denounced and dismissed out of hand as simply aspirations to ethnic purity.

This is not to deny the rise of racism, xenophobia, and attendant savage violence in the global present. However, in contexts such as Sri Lanka these have been integral to ‘liberal’ governance throughout the Cold War *and* the subsequent era of supposedly inexorable liberal globalisation. However, what is important for the Tamils and other peoples resisting oppression is that arguments for *national* self-determination on the basis of collective self-rule in a homeland can no longer be dismissed out of hand as an atavism in an interconnected world. It is in this sense that we argue here that nationalism has returned from the margins to the centre of world politics.

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