ONE

The Strange Death of Political Anthropology

What happened to the anthropology of politics? A subdiscipline which had seemed moribund in the 1980s has moved back to the centre of anthropological argument. Political themes – nationalism, conflict, citizenship – inflect exciting new work across (and beyond) the disciplinary spectrum. Where have these themes come from and what issues do they raise for anthropology in general? This book seeks to take stock of the recent political turn in anthropology, identifying key themes and common problems, while setting an agenda for work to come. In the pages that follow, I do not argue for any particular theoretical orthodoxy, but instead try to stage a dialogue between critical social and political theory and – anthropology's great strength – equally critical empirical research. The empirical research I concentrate on comes predominantly from one part of the world, South Asia, especially India and Sri Lanka, where particularly fruitful conversations have taken place between activists and intellectuals, and amongst representatives of different academic disciplines – especially history, political theory, and anthropology.

These conversations have taken place in years of upheaval. The critical events in India include the rise of Sikh separatism in the Punjab in the early 1980s, culminating in the assault on the Golden Temple in Amritsar in 1984, followed soon after by the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the wave of anti-Sikh violence which followed it; the destruction of the Babri

Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, and the Hindu–Muslim clashes which followed that; and the rise to national power of the right-wing Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In Sri Lanka, violence against the minority Tamil population in 1984 precipitated a decline into civil war between the government and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE). Indian intervention in 1987 sparked further schisms, this time between the government and a radical Sinhala youth party, the Janata Vimukti Peramuna (JVP): in the late 1980s thousands were killed or disappeared in this dispute. The war with the LTTE rumbled through the 1990s until both sides agreed a ceasefire in 2002, since when low-level violence has continued in parts of the country. Nepal, which supplies a third strand of material for my argument, has in the same period seen a self-consciously democratic revolution, and the rise of violent Maoist insurgency, as well as the bizarre slaughter of the king and other members of royal family in 2002. Unruly times, indeed.

We live in a world in which it has become brutally apparent that our collective survival depends on the ability to understand, and sometimes to anticipate, the strange world of other people's politics. (And, yes, the first problem is pinning down who 'we' might be, and asking just who 'other people' are, in formulations like this.) To achieve this, we need to pay sympathetic attention to the workings of apparently different versions of the political in places with different histories, and apparently different visions of justice and order. Anthropology is an academic discipline apparently well suited to this task, and in recent years it has made notable contributions to the interpretation of, among many other topics, religious violence in India, civil war in Sierra Leone, post-Apartheid processes of reconciliation in South Africa, the 'magical' aura of the secularist state in Turkey, and Islamic visions of democracy in Indonesia.[1]

[1] For example Richards on war in Sierra Leone, Wilson on truth and reconciliation in South Africa, Das and Hansen on religious violence in India, Navaro-Yashin on Turkey, Hefner on Islamism in Indonesia (Das 1990a; Das 1995b; Richards 1996; Hansen 1999; Hefner 2000; Hansen 2001b; Wilson 2001; Navaro-Yashin 2002).

The themes of this work – democracy, secularism, citizenship, nationalism and the nation-state, war and peace – are the big themes of political modernity. They are, though, somewhat different from the central themes of the subdiscipline known as political anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s, as a glance through the index of Joan Vincent's authoritative *Anthropology and Politics* (Vincent 1990) will confirm. Something has changed. In 1996 Vincent herself introduced a short overview of the field with the valedictory observation that political anthropology had been a 'late and comparatively short-lived subfield specialization within social and cultural anthropology' (Vincent 1996b: 428). The political turn in anthropology since the 1980s, which is the subject of this book, has been fuelled by external intellectual influences, from poststructural theorists of power, most obviously Michel Foucault, to postcolonial critics of the politics of representation, most notably Edward Said. It has, though, equally been shaped by global political developments, like the resurgence of religious and ethnic conflict in different parts of the world in the post-Cold War era. A casual reader of Vincent's later anthology on *The Anthropology of Politics* (Vincent 2002) would be hard pressed to identify what intellectual unity bound the short extract from Edmund Leach's micro-analysis of land conflict in 1950s Sri Lanka, with Gayatri Spivak's closing piece, which offers a poststructural commentary on Marx, the Enlightenment, and the politics of girls' schooling in rural Bangladesh (Leach 2002 [1961]; Spivak 2002 [1992]). Each of these perfectly sums up the intellectual-political sensibility of its time: the first is scrupulously empirical and morally detached from the people whose machinations it analyses, the other is equally scrupulously theoretical and overtly morally engaged with its subjects. Something indeed has changed.

Let me, though, start my story where it started for me: in Sri Lanka in 1982.

Before the underpants, obviously enough, came the sarong. In the early 1980s Cyril de Silva was a minor government official in an out of

the way village in Sri Lanka. He owed his position to his links to the ruling political party, the United National Party (UNP), which had come to power in 1977. As a man of local substance, his normal style of dress was the postcolonial bureaucratic trouser. But when his party's candidate won the 1982 Presidential election, Cyril celebrated flamboyantly in his off-duty clothes, which meant his sarong. At his house, which served as the informal party offices for the village, he and his friends spent the day of the election results engaged in serious drinking. In mid-afternoon, they spilled out into the road: they sang, they danced, Cyril climbed on a signboard at a road junction and harangued the crowd with a ribald speech. Finally, with his friends cheering, he tucked his sarong into his underpants and danced down the street in an impersonation of the failed opposition candidate in the role of a demon.

A couple of months later, when his party won an extension to their parliamentary majority in a contentious referendum, Cyril shed what few inhibitions he still had. This time he dropped his sarong altogether and danced down the street in his underpants.

As they say in Sri Lanka: what to do? As a witness to the first of these scandals, and an audience as friends excitedly whispered to me about the second, I was a fledgling ethnographer with a problem. Empirically, the political was an inescapable feature of the social landscape in which I was carrying out research. Put simply, it dominated everyday life in this corner of Sri Lanka in the early 1980s. Theoretically, I had no obviously adequate language with which to capture the exuberance and unboundedness of a moment like this. I address the inadequacies of the available theoretical languages – the by-then almost moribund tradition of classic political anthropology and the emerging wave of resistance studies – in the next chapter. Here I want merely to register my problem twenty years ago, because this book is the late product of a long coming to terms with the questions raised by Cyril's exhibition: questions about the political and questions about the potential role of anthropology in understanding the political.

Intellectually, it all started for me in Sri Lanka, and some of the examples that follow come from there, but in order to make sense of these examples I have had to look further afield. My period of looking has, of course, coincided with a wave of growing interest in other people's politics. This interest has shown itself in fruitful interdisciplinary conversation between anthropologists, sociologists, historians, political theorists, and those political scientists not trapped in the parochialism and formalism that have so disfigured the academic understanding of the political. Rather too much of this conversation has probably been provoked by the spectacle of political violence – the other unresolved problem I brought back from my first Sri Lankan fieldwork – and not quite enough by issues of poverty, of representation, and of the close relationship between the political structures of a postcolonial modernity and the attendant contours of social hope. Many of my examples are taken from India, and derive in part from the conversations I have had, not as an anthropologist, but as a regional specialist talking to friends from Delhi, Kolkata, Dhaka, and Kathmandu. In the years I have worked on these themes I have, though, also engaged with colleagues working in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and various outposts of the post-socialist world. Some of their concerns run throughout the book, but I engage them most directly in the concluding chapter, where I try to sketch out the themes I see as central to the newly emerging anthropology of the political.

Politics and Culture

This is also a book about politics and culture. At the very first – still in Sri Lanka ruminating on my puzzle – I thought my problems required nothing more than a case for including a cultural dimension in our understanding of politics. But as I worked on the themes I have explored in this book, I realized it was more complex and more important than that. In the past twenty years, the abstractions labelled 'politics' and 'culture' have had a curiously close relationship in anthropology. The so-called 'politics

of culture' – the self-consciousness about needing, having, and protecting one's culture, found in arguments on nationalism and multiculturalism – has undermined innocent anthropological references to culture and cultures. But, equally, the recognition that politics always happens in a culturally inflected way also undermines the naïve formalism found in a great deal of political science, not to mention much of the earlier work done in political anthropology.

This book, then, concerns the way in which the politicization of culture has destabilized anthropologists' assumptions about cultural difference, and the language we use to talk about it. But it also concerns the way politics operates in different cultural and historical contexts, and the need for anthropologists to distance themselves from the reductionist models of the political which dominate much academic writing. Of course these issues have taken on new significance since the collapse of the twin towers in September 2001. Suddenly the politics of cultural difference is high on everyone's intellectual agenda. In this context we might expect anthropological accounts of other people's politics to command a special authority in public discussion. On the whole, though, they do not, and popular understandings of the politics of cultural difference have been dominated by models of quite remarkable crudity.

Given the sheer unexpectedness of the events of September 11, it was extraordinary how many commentators, both academic and journalistic, claimed to have seen it coming all along. The version of 'we-told-you-so', most often heard in the mainstream media referred back to an article by a Harvard political scientist, Samuel Huntington, published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993. Taking for his title a phrase from the historian of Islam, Bernard Lewis, Huntington spoke of a new world where conflict would not be primarily ideological or political-economic, but cultural: a world where we could expect (it was claimed with hindsight) more events like those in Manhattan on September 11, because what motivated those events was what had motivated both sides in the war in former Yugoslavia, and

would motivate states and individuals in increasing numbers in the future: it was 'the clash of civilizations' (Huntington 1993).

Almost from its publication, critics have been lining up to point out the inevitable empirical weaknesses in Huntington's breezily confident mapping of the world's recent conflicts, and there seems little point in rehearsing the familiar contradictions and counter-factuals. (What about Northern Ireland? Iran and Iraq? Are Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka members of two civilizations or one? And so on.) One reason for taking Huntington seriously is that, in providing a simple, somehow intuitively 'right', explanatory grid for making sense of a suddenly rather scary world, there is a real chance that his essay could be one of the most striking social scientific examples yet of Robert Merton's notion of the 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (Merton 1957 [1937]). If enough members of the foreign policy crowd, in Washington, London, Paris, or Berlin, believe that the world really is destined to split along 'civilizational' lines, then the likelihood is that they will act in ways that exacerbate, assume, and perhaps eventually *create* something like one of Huntington's 'cultural fault-lines'. Which is exactly what we have had to endure in recent years.

So critics need to do more than find fault at the level of detail: they also need to show, somehow, that there are other ways of rendering our world intelligible. One purpose of this book is to map out an approach to understanding other people's politics, which does not deny the real differences in values and history that animate political agents in different parts of the world, but equally does not presume that those differences are deeper or harder to reconcile than they may actually be. This is the second reason for starting with Huntington. His central hypothesis is stark and clear. In the new world we are entering: 'The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be *cultural*' (Huntington 1993: 22, my emphasis). Although, as I shall explain later in this chapter, the very idea of 'culture' has become the object of some suspicion in anthropology in recent years, nevertheless if anthropologists

have any academic business which is properly theirs, it is the business of cultural difference. And so, if any academic discipline should come into its own in a world where 'culture' appears to lie behind more and more conflicts, then it should be anthropology.

At the heart of Huntington's argument lies a set of assumptions about culture, values, and the possibility of translation, and much of my argument in the first half of this book will concern, broadly speaking, issues of translation. For Huntington, cultural differences can be bundled up into 'civilizational' differences, with 'civilization' defined as 'the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species' (Huntington 1993: 24). Differences between civilizations are 'basic':

> The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear. They are far more fundamental than differences among political ideologies and political regimes. (Huntington 1993: 25)

Huntington is not, then, arguing for complete incommensurability, for radically different vocabularies to describe 'individual', 'group', 'citizen', 'state', etc. He is arguing for different understandings of the 'relations between' these terms, understandings which are 'fundamental' because the product of long histories. He continues:

> V. S. Naipaul has argued that Western civilization is the 'universal civilization' that 'fits all men'. At a superficial level much of Western culture has indeed permeated the rest of the world. At a more basic level, however, Western concepts differ fundamentally from those prevalent in other civilizations. Western ideas of individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state, often have little resonance in Islamic, Confucian, Japanese, Hindu, Buddhist or Orthodox cultures. (Huntington 1993: 40)

Here it is the very 'concepts' which are said to differ, and 'Western ideas' are said to have 'little resonance' in other cultures.

This suggestion would seem to fit with two different strands of academic thought, one rather old and conventional, one more recent and apparently radical. In anthropology, at least since the 1960s, it has been widely argued that people in different cultures have radically different ideas about what it is to be a person, about the relationship between individual and collectivity, about the significance of differences of gender or age (e.g., Carrithers *et al.* 1985; Strathern 1988). In India, where many of my examples originate, society was described by an earlier generation of anthropologists as essentially hierarchical rather than egalitarian, and social relations were said to be oriented to the social whole rather than to the (mostly unacknowledged) individual (Dumont 1980). The other, more recent and radical, argument which echoes this part of Huntington's case focuses on the alleged universality of liberal principles. The 'universal' subject of post-Enlightenment political theory, we have been repeatedly told in recent years, is not universal at all – 'he' is gendered, white, European, heterosexual – and the appeal to universalism conceals the way in which marks of culture, race, gender, class, all work to exclude certain people from power. In this case, that academic grouping which Richard Rorty (Rorty 1998) has recently labelled the 'cultural left' finds itself singing in uneasy harmony with the hard-nosed pronouncements of the foreign policy hawks.

Meanwhile, other voices intrude on the debate. Lee Kuan Yew, fomer Prime Minister of Singapore, is quite clear about how little resonance Western political values have in Asia. Lee has spoken of 'the fundamental difference between Western concepts of society and government and East Asian concepts', while his Foreign Minister has warned that 'universal recognition of the ideal of human rights can be harmful if universalism is used to deny or mask the reality of diversity' (both cited in Sen 1997: 9, 13). Lee's views, like those of the equally authoritarian former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, and the official ideologues of the

People's Republic of China, have been the subject of much debate and academic hand-wringing (see Bauer and Bell 1999). But probably the most compelling reason to treat the 'Asian values' argument with suspicion is the strong odour of *realpolitik* which accompanies it. Popular movements in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar, not to mention China itself in 1989, have all made strategic use of the rhetoric of democracy and rights; authoritarian rulers like Lee challenge the 'authenticity' of such rhetoric from below, but are happy to accommodate themselves to other, equally 'Western', political constructs, not least the very idea of the nation-state itself. The issue of translation and translatability is, to put it mildly, politically inflected.

Yet there is another way in which we might interpret the mystifying plausibility of Huntington's argument, and it is one that introduces a central theme of this book. The historic moment of 'The clash of civilizations' came immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall, as other conservative ideologues celebrated the final triumph of liberalism and the 'end of history'. Functionalists on the left argued that this position was unsustainable. Put crudely, it could be argued that America, as the sole triumphant super-power, needed a new enemy and needed it badly. For generations, the American political imaginary had been grounded in the Manichean divide of Cold War anti-communism. In the words of one American icon, Marlon Brando, in *The Wild One* in answer to the question 'What are you rebelling against?' – 'What have you got?' It could be argued that there is nothing especially American in this. Earlier in the century, the German political philosopher Carl Schmitt argued that at the very heart of the political lay the distinction between friend and enemy (Schmitt 1996 [1932]): it followed that the liberal project, forever oriented to the reasonable resolution of political differences, would founder on its own contradictions. The new Manicheans, whose war on terror is also a war on the liberalism it purports to defend, are fuelled by the politics of the friend/enemy distinction, their practice one more manifestation of the agonistic heart of the political.