The Securitization of Fear in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka

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Fear is a potent political resource that is at once an expression of vulnerability to geopolitical threats and a rationale for security measures against them. It is produced through tropes of nationalism rooted in economic marginalization, loss of territory, and anxieties about invasions of home. Such anxieties give rise to the *securitization of fear* used to underwrite the allocation of resources to fortify borders and manage risk. The securitization of fear and its geopolitical uses and abuses in the context of disaster, conflict, and human displacement demand further attention. This article examines two expressions of fear that have significant implications for broader research agendas in political geography. First, in post-tsunami Sri Lanka, the implementation of "buffer zones," or no-build setback areas along the affected coastlines after the tsunami vividly illustrates how efforts to enhance public safety can stir feelings of discrimination, tension, and fear. Humanitarian remedies that are not cautiously conflict-sensitive can unwittingly generate fear and mistrust. Second, the politics of fear intersect with the provision of international aid, which is increasingly premised on vulnerability "at home" in donor countries to make it politically relevant. Once created, such crises are offset by aid to locations that represent geopolitical threats. Unraveling the ways in which fear is produced and framed to justify violence, exclusion, and hatred is a pressing political and intellectual task within geography. *Key Words: aid, fear, nationalism, Sri Lanka, tsunami.*

The tsunami of 26 December 2004 led to extraordinary devastation and destruction for people of the Indian Ocean Basin region. Aid from overseas was unprecedented; more than $13 billion was pledged, with $5 billion coming from private individuals and companies (*The Economist* 2005).[1] Several of the states affected by the tsunami had been host to long-term conflicts before the disaster, raising the question of what impact the tsunami and related reconstruction aid might have on conflict (Le Billon and Waizenegger 2006). More than two years later, the results are mixed. In Aceh, the Indonesian Government signed a peace agreement with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in August 2005 that was still holding early in 2007. In Sri Lanka, developments since the tsunami have intensified the country's prolonged political crisis (Uyangoda 2005). Government responses to the tsunami and the politics of aid distribution generated feelings of discrimination and mistrust among Muslim and Tamil communities, which were hardest hit. Although not directly attributable to the tsunami, conflict between the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) has escalated, resulting in the resumption of war.

Responses to the tsunami have not taken place in a political vacuum. In Sri Lanka, "Struggles over interethnic justice, neoliberalism, economic distribution, the disempowerment of women, caste bigotry and such have shaped the [Sri] Lankan political landscape in significant ways over the last decades . . . even the tsunami cannot wipe out the imprint of these fault lines" (Nesiah, Nanthikesan, and Kadirgamar 2005). The devastation of the tsunami and the geographies of aid that followed overlay long-standing geopolitical tensions and political geographies of displacement (Hyndman and de Alwis 2004; Nah and Bunnell 2005). People displaced by the war in Sri Lanka, for example, were displaced again by the tsunami. Exacerbating this situation, many international nongovernmental organizations neglected to consult their national and local counterparts in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami (Couldrey and Morris 2005; Institute for Policy Studies 2005).

I examine the politics of fear and vulnerability in post-tsunami Sri Lanka as part of a larger project in political geography to unravel the production of fear and its political corollaries. I do so in two parts. First, I trace geographies of fear and enmity *within* Sri Lanka generated in the aftermath of the tsunami through the government's policy of buffer zones, or no-build zones, established early in 2005. This geography of fear also has a transnational dimension, traversing international borders as well as different nations within Sri Lanka.

Second, extending this analysis, I demonstrate that international aid is closely linked to geopolitical fears that traverse international boundaries. Both buffer zones and international aid use fear to rationalize their implementation and unwittingly *produce* anxiety and conflict in their wake.

The use of extraordinary measures to secure borders against geopolitical threats, such as unwanted migrants, is not particularly new (Mongia 1999). The production of crises, including the fear and xenophobia they instill, remains a pressing concern because they legitimate grounds for exceptional interventions (Agamben 1998; Mountz 2004). States produce crisis and fear to obtain consent for securitization measures. Probing the ways in which fear is made and used in contexts of disaster and aid is crucial to contesting the violence, exclusion, and hatred they produce.

The Production of Fear

> Sleepless in the early hours, you make a nest out of your own fears—there must have been survival advantage in dreaming up bad outcomes and scheming to avoid them. This trick of dark imagining is one legacy of natural selection in a dangerous world.
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> —Ian McEwan, *Saturday*, 2005

> The expansion of fear also comes from geopolitical fear-mongering and intense conflicts from Darfur to Iraq. It comes from our growing apprehensions about inequality, social injustice and political instability across the globe. . . . Fear plays many roles in consolidating the nation and in legitimating government actions.
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> —Victoria Lawson, "Natural Disaster or Space of Vulnerability," 2005

The tsunami of late 2004 generated an unprecedented global outpouring of aid that raises interesting geographical questions as to why people cared to give so much to tsunami relief in comparison to other kinds of humanitarian emergencies. Fear is one explanation for this philanthropic impulse given the stark witnessing of "white death" that occurred on television screens worldwide (Olds, Sidaway, and Sparke 2005). Just as "our deaths" appear to matter more than "their deaths" in Iraq and Afghanistan (Hyndman 2007), the valence of "white death" was greater than indigenous death after the tsunami. Media coverage of the victims and survivors of the tsunami, many of them Euro-American tourists, generated a frightened sentiment among audiences in the global North that "it could have been me." Although this fear of the tsunami is geographically selective and racially skewed, it was transposed into a hopeful if charitably unequal moment of unprecedented philanthropy (Jeganathan 2005). The tsunami created a space of exceptionalism and crisis: blameless victims captured on camera stirred fear in those who witnessed the devastation. Yet, in comparison, the destruction and loss of life from the immense earthquake that struck Pakistan in 2005 hardly registered among private donors of the global North (Grundy-Warr and Sidaway 2006).

Making Nationalism

The production of fear can be traced to the rise of nationalisms. Vulnerability cultivates fear, sometimes for political purposes. Fear has been incited through strategic tropes of nationalism that stir feelings of threat and potential loss, as then-Serbian-President Slobodan Milosevic so successfully managed in his 1989 speeches about Kosovo, a historical Serbian homeland allegedly taken over by ethnic Albanians (Glenny 1992). In so doing, he sowed the seeds for his plan to ethnically cleanse the province of Kosovo of ethnic Albanians a decade later. Militarized Serbian nationalism also confronted Croatian nationalism when Croatian leaders followed Slovenia's lead in 1991, declaring independence from Belgrade and the country of Yugoslavia, but claiming territory that was home to many Serbs. The subsequent conflict in Croatia and Bosnia from 1992 to 1995 was a war of competing nationalisms over territory and people in which fear was used to fuel hatred and violence. The destructive power of nationalism was most evident in Bosnia-Herzegovina, a fledgling state struggling for existence against the wishes of Belgrade and its remnants of Yugoslavia (Ó Tuathail 2006).

In Sri Lanka, nationalism incites fear among Tamil, Muslim, and Sinhala ethno-national groups. The framing of conflict has been predicated primarily on oppositional tropes of Tamil-Sinhala relations, but at different times the Sri Lankan Muslims have been allies to each side. School textbook representations of Sinhala rulers in relation to their Tamil opponents, for example, subscribe to a fairly obvious state-sponsored Sinhala nationalism as part of the national curriculum (Siriwardene et al. 1982). In a subsequent analysis of school texts, de Alwis (1998) challenges the "us-them" binaries behind these chauvinistic stories, and yet notes their importance in inculcating children with specific imaginaries of nation. She demonstrates that tales of military vulnerability generate fear, followed by sentiments of courage and victory in the name of the nation. These nationalisms have become vehemently militarized and perceived as "ethnic" hatred, despite more subtle historical

geographies of fear. Where marginalization, exclusion, and related vulnerability produce fear, violence is one response.

The production of nationalism in Sri Lanka is also linked to World Bank–induced reforms to liberalize the economy in 1977 (Hyndman 2003). Before 1977, state socialism allowed the government to funnel funds to specific groups, making concessions especially to the Sinhalese rural middle and lower classes in order to be returned to power (Stokke 1998). After independence from Britain in 1948, political power was organized according to class more than to national identity or ethnicity (Jayawardena 1990). Neoliberal economic policies signaled the end of the concessions that had held ethnic and class alliances together. Private investment began to flourish among some groups despite the conflict, but Tamil areas in Sri Lanka's Northeast and Sinhala areas in the rural South remain largely excluded from this prosperity (Sivanandan 1990).

In this context, economic marginalization produced fear and uprising among two groups excluded from the spoils of prosperity under a new neoliberal regime. The first was comprised of Sinhala youth from rural agricultural and middle classes who later formed the JVP (People's Liberation Front), and the second was made up of a cadre of Sri Lankan Tamils, namely the Tamil Tigers, who armed themselves against the government (Gunasinghe 1987). Both groups used militarized nationalism and violence to advance their struggles.

Random violence that invokes public fear and kills unsuspecting civilians is one response to exclusion and marginalization. Such militarized violence characterizes the LTTE's bombing of public places and people during the mid-to-late 1990s. More recently, in 2006, targeted attacks by the LTTE resumed, as did violent expressions of Sinhala chauvinism against Tamils. The Sri Lankan army and police have also been responsible for a litany of abductions, deaths, and other human rights violations, especially in the Eastern Province, since the war began in 1983. These acts of violence have fueled oppositional nationalist movements on both sides of the majority Sinhala/minority Tamil divide. Militarized nationalism, whether Tamil or Sinhala, is about spatializing fear.

Under Siege: Home and Native Land

Alison Mountz (2003, forthcoming) and William Walters (2004) argue that security measures transcend the political borders of any single nation-state; such measures are organized increasingly on a transnational basis. Mountz shows how the state operates far beyond its territorial borders through airline carrier sanctions, offshore screening of passengers by airline liaison officers, and visa restrictions to exclude asylum seekers and other migrants. Walters introduces the complementary concept of "domopolitics" to suggest the central place of the home (domus) in geopolitical discourse:

> Domopolitics implies a reconfiguring of the relations between citizenship, state, and territory. At its heart is a fateful conjunction of home, land and security. It rationalizes a series of security measures in the name of a particular conception of home. ... The home as hearth ... as *our* place, where we belong naturally ... home as a place we must protect.
>
> —(Walters 2004, 241)

Home is rendered as a secure, reassuring place characterized by trust, togetherness, and familiarity. By definition, people from unknown places must be invited "home." A bifurcated sense of security, represented as both prosperity (economic) and risk (political), requires different treatments on the part of the state. Discourses of neoliberal globalization are not inconsistent with state discourses of securitization: let in skilled, elite migrants but keep the suspicious, uninvited ones at bay. This is what Matt Sparke calls "securitized nationalism ... the cultural-political forces that lead to the imagining, surveilling and policing of the nation-state in especially exclusionary but economically discerning ways" (Sparke 2006, 153). The endangerment trope of invasion produces fear and is underwritten by securitization, a governmentality based on mistrust and fear of the uninvited other (Bigo 2002).

The securitization of fear is a politically powerful resource for states that need legitimate grounds for extraordinary measures, such as violent exclusion from their territories. Yet "government practices of border control do not simply defend the 'inside' from the threats 'outside,' but continually produce our sense of the insiders and outsiders in the global political economy" (Amoore and de Goede 2005, 168). The securitized nationalism Sparke identifies, the discursive distance it produces, and its implied boundary between "us" and "them" represent a deeply geographical problem that allows fear to be fostered and to fester if left unchallenged. Both the ethno-nationalisms of Sri Lanka and the securitized nationalism of home are militarized geopolitical projects that spatialize fear in specific ways.

After a note on Sri Lanka's political context, the remainder of the article examines two ways in which fear is deployed in spatially strategic ways in the Sri Lankan context: first, through an evolving government policy of "buffer zones," and, second, through the use of fear in creating a kind of domo-nationalism in the global North that promotes particular geographies of aid. I contend that the buffer zones have exacerbated feelings of

discrimination and nationalism along the coasts of Sri Lanka, fueling tensions and conflict in the country, and that international aid to Sri Lanka is both an antecedent to conflict in the country and a tool for managing the risk of such conflict spilling over into donor countries. Both cases show how fear is produced by and through specific political geographies of insecurity.

The Sri Lankan Political Landscape

Two key moments of political geography begin to illustrate the relations of fear and mistrust among particular sectors of Sri Lankan society. First, on 23 July 1983, members of the LTTE ambushed an army patrol on the Jaffna Peninsula, a predominantly Tamil area, and killed thirteen soldiers. In the hours that followed, government troops in Jaffna took revenge and killed fifty-one unarmed Tamil civilians (Swamy 1996). In Colombo the next day the government decided to publish, broadcast, and televise the news about thirteen soldiers being killed by the LTTE (aka Tamil Tigers) while blacking out news about reprisals by the armed forces. By 25 July, anti-Tamil violence had spread throughout the city, enabled by the government's decision and by the police who largely stood by and witnessed the looting of Tamil businesses, murder of Tamil civilians, and widespread displacement of Tamil residents in the capital.

Later, in 1990, more than three hundred Muslim men and boys were prostrate in prayer at the Meera Jumma Mosque when a power cut threw the mosque into darkness and LTTE cadres opened fire and killed 140 men and boys, shooting most of them in the back. In Eravur two weeks later another 173 Muslim men, women, and children were murdered in an effort to ethnically cleanse Muslims from Tiger-controlled territory, or at a minimum displace them from their homes to shanty villages along the beach, between lagoon and sea (Ismail 1995).

The war in Sri Lanka has been characterized as one of violent competing nationalisms between the LTTE and the Government of Sri Lanka's armed forces since the pogroms of 1983 (Jayawardena and de Alwis 1996). But Sri Lanka's present is an expression of a long history and geography of struggle well-documented by Sri Lankan and Sri Lankanist scholars (Abeysekera and Gunasinghe 1987; Spencer 1990; Jeganathan and Ismail 1995; Thiruchelvam 1996). The conflict has spawned large-scale displacement within the country and well beyond its borders, where a significant Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora has emerged from this country of just under twenty million people (Daniel 1997; Fuglerud 1999). The death toll as a result of the conflict exceeds sixty-five thousand people.

In February 2002, a ceasefire was signed, allowing the economy to be rebuilt and enabling the LTTE to engage with the government and wider society as a political entity rather than as a separatist movement or "terrorist organization" (J. Perera 2005). In June 2003, with the prospect of peace ripe in the minds of international donors, a conference was held in Tokyo to finance the reconstruction of war-torn Sri Lanka, at which US$4.5 billion was pledged for the "Regaining Sri Lanka" strategy. The LTTE did not attend the conference, which aimed to provide financial incentives to peace. Much of this funding was held back because the government and LTTE could not agree on how to distribute the funds. Resolving governance issues between these federal-provincial scales has become one of the most pressing issues in both the pre- and post-tsunami period. Plentiful international aid begs the question of how, by whom, and on what it should be spent.

Ceasefire violations escalated in 2004 and political assassinations reached a critical peak in 2005. After buffer zones were implemented early in 2005, tsunami reconstruction has taken place alongside and in concert with rising political tensions among ethnic groups and bipartisan party politics. More than a thousand people were killed in 2006, including an unprecedented attack on seventeen staff working for an international relief organization who were murdered en masse in August (Apps 2006).

The Case of the Buffer Zones in Post-Tsunami Sri Lanka

> When the buffer zone made its entrance after the waves had left behind the destruction [in January 2005], it was known by another name, less popular—set back zone. It most certainly has lived up to that title.
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> —Amantha Perera, "The Buffer Zone Fiasco," 2005

In January 2005 the Sri Lankan Cabinet of Ministers legislated buffer zones ostensibly as a public safety measure against the potential devastation of another tsunami (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2005; Jansz 2005). In the densely populated South, dominated by a Sinhala majority and international tourism, a 100-meter buffer zone was established. In the Tamil- and Muslim-dominated Eastern Province, where tsunami-related devastation and damage proved greatest, a 200-meter buffer zone was declared. In both areas, the high density of population and scarcity of land made the setbacks highly contentious. At the time, the Opposition noted that Clause 14 of the Sri Lankan constitution guarantees