In recent years anthropology has rediscovered its interest in politics. Building on the findings of this research, this book offers a new way of analysing the relationship between culture and politics, with special attention to democracy, nationalism, the state, and political violence. Beginning with scenes from an unruly early 1980s election campaign in Sri Lanka, it covers issues from rural policing in North India to slum housing in Delhi, presenting arguments about secularism and pluralism, and the ambiguous energies released by electoral democracy across the subcontinent. It ends by discussing feminist peace activists in Sri Lanka, struggling to sustain a window of shared humanity after two decades of war. Bringing together and linking the themes of democracy, identity and conflict, this important new study shows how anthropology can take a central role in understanding other people’s politics, especially the issues that seem to have divided the world since 9/11.

Jonathan Spencer is Professor of the Anthropology of South Asia at the University of Edinburgh. His previous books include A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble: Politics and Change in Rural Sri Lanka (1990); Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict (1990), Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology (co-edited with Alan Barnard, 1996), and The Conditions of Listening: Essays on Religion, History and Politics in South Asia (co-edited with C. J. Fuller, 1996),
NEW DEPARTURES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

New Departures in Anthropology is a book series that focuses on emerging themes in social and cultural anthropology. With original perspectives and syntheses, authors introduce new areas of inquiry in anthropology, explore developments that cross disciplinary boundaries, and weigh in on current debates. Every book illustrates theoretical issues with ethnographic material drawn from current research or classic studies, as well as from literature, memoirs, and other genres of reportage. The aim of the series is to produce books that are accessible enough to be used by college students and instructors, but will also stimulate, provoke, and inform anthropologists at all stages of their careers. Written clearly and concisely, books in the series are designed equally for advanced students and a broader range of readers, inside and outside academic anthropology, who want to be brought up to date on the most exciting developments in the discipline.

Editorial board

JONATHAN SPENCER, University of Edinburgh
MICHAEL LAMBEK, University of Toronto
SABA MAHMOOD, University of California, Berkeley
OLIVIA HARRIS, London School of Economics
Anthropology, Politics, and the State

Democracy and Violence in South Asia

JONATHAN SPENCER

University of Edinburgh
For Janet and Jessica for everything
## Contents

`List of illustrations`  |  page  x  
`Acknowledgements`  |  xi  
1  The Strange Death of Political Anthropology  |  1  
2  Locating the Political  |  19  
3  Culture, Nation, and Misery  |  48  
4  Performing Democracy  |  72  
5  States and Persons  |  96  
6  The State and Violence  |  118  
7  Pluralism in Theory, Pluralism in Practice  |  143  
8  Politics and Counter-politics  |  168  

`Bibliography`  |  186  
`Index`  |  200  

© Cambridge University Press  
www.cambridge.org
List of illustrations

1 ‘We are a caste of politicians’ (All India Yadav Mahasabha Convention, 1999). Photo: Lucia Michelutti. page 21
2 The ‘dirty work’ of politics (village meeting, West Bengal). Photo: Arild Ruud. 23
3 ‘Vote for this’ (Communist slogan, West Bengal). Photo: Mukulika Bannerjee. 73
4 ‘I can do anything’ (J. R. Jayawardene at Presidential election rally, Sri Lanka 1982). Photo: Jonathan Spencer. 75
5 The work of counter-politics (Batticaloa, 2006). Photo: Jonathan Spencer. 169
Acknowledgements

This book is the product of many conversations over the years. Parts of it have been presented in seminars and workshops in Cambridge, Colombo, Edinburgh, Gothenberg, Harvard, Heidelberg, London, New Orleans, Oxford, Paris, and Peradeniya. I am grateful to the late Raj Chandavarkar, the late Neelan Tiruchelvam, Radhika Coomaraswamy, Goran Aijmer, Arthur Kleinman, the late Richard Burghart, Robert Gibb, Mattison and Gill Mines and Mayfair Yang, Tudor Silva, Sudipta Kaviraj, and David Washbrook for their hospitality on these occasions. The annual meetings of the South Asian Anthropologists’ Group have not only provided an audience for parts of this work in progress on more occasions than I care to remember; they have also kept me in touch with some of the most exciting and fresh research from emerging scholars, research which has in some cases found its way into the chapters that follow. I am especially grateful to three of its most active members, Mukulika Banerjee, Lucia Michelutti, and Arild Ruud for kindly allowing me to use photographs from their own path-breaking research on South Asian politics. The arguments in this book grew (in rather unpredictable and unruly ways) out of the Malinowski Memorial Lecture which I gave at the London School of Economics in 1995: my thanks to the Department of Anthropology, and especially Chris Fuller and Jonathan Parry, for the invitation to deliver that lecture, and much else besides over the years. My friends in the Centre for South Asian Studies at Edinburgh, especially
Acknowledgements

Paul Dundas, Tony Good, Hugo Gorringe, Roger and Patricia Jeffery, and Crispin Bates, have provided a constant source of interdisciplinary stimulation, while my colleagues in Social Anthropology have been supportive and stimulating in appropriate proportion. I have been especially lucky to have worked alongside a small group of people in Edinburgh who have been doing genuinely path-breaking anthropological work on broadly political topics, notably Thomas Hansen, Iris Jean-Klein, Heonik Kwon and Yael Navaro-Yashin, Tony Good, and recently Kimberley Coles and Toby Kelly. I must also thank all the wonderful graduate students I have worked with in Edinburgh, especially in recent years Premakumara de Silva, Sharika Thiranagama, and Becky Walker.

In conversations over the years, a number of academic friends have – sometimes, I suspect, unwittingly – convinced me that the idea of a book on this theme was not entirely barmy: notably, at different times, Mukulika Banerjee, Richard Burghart, Veena Das, Thomas Hansen, Sudipta Kaviraj, Sunil Khilnani, and David Washbrook. Thomas found time in his breath-takingly full life to read a complete draft and provide helpful suggestions at an especially psychologically vulnerable moment.

The immediate stimulus for this work was the award of a Research Fellowship from the Nuffield Foundation. I am grateful to them for their wonderfully un-bureaucratic and patient support. My original fieldwork in Sri Lanka was carried out with the support of the then Social Science Research Council (now the ESRC), and return visits since 1991 have been supported by University of Edinburgh research and travel funds, and the British Council.

Parts of chapter two first appeared in *Journal des Anthropologues* 92–3: 31–49 (2003), and parts of chapter four were published in *Political Ritual*, edited by A. Boholm (Gothenburg, IASA, 1996), and a longer version was translated into Spanish as 'La democracia como sistema cultural' (Democracy as a Cultural System) and published in *Antropologica* 7: 5–28. An early version of chapter seven was presented to an international meeting in Colombo to celebrate the life of the Tamil politician and
Acknowledgements

human rights activist Neelan Tiruchelvam who was assassinated by a suicide bomber in 1999. A copy of that presentation was subsequently published without permission in a daily newspaper in Sri Lanka, provoking a lengthy rebuttal from a leading nationalist ideologue, published under the heart-warming headline: Spencer Sponsors Tamil Racism. ‘Cheerful laughter is our response’, as Brecht’s Galileo put it on another, not entirely dissimilar, occasion.

Charles Hallisey and Jayadeva Uyangoda have been with me through thick and thin, and it is fair to say that both this book, and its author, would not be in the shape they are in today without their remarkable capacity for friendship. Janet Carsten and Jessica Spencer have been there throughout the writing, and have endured the consequent moments of abstraction as best they could. When I realized parts of the argument were as old as Jessica herself I was reminded of a story about my old teacher Barney Cohn. When a veteran Chicago graduate student bumped into Barney one day and excitedly told him that he thought he was almost ‘finished’ on his dissertation, Barney replied ‘Sometimes you shouldn’t try to “finish”. Sometimes you just have to stop.’
In the West, we are used to the idea of government within the framework of the state and through the medium of specialised political and legal institutions (e.g., parliament, police, and law courts). Such forms are now found worldwide, but this has not always been so, and even today, many peoples living within modern states rely to a great extent on other mechanisms for the maintenance of law and order. In societies where people live in closely-knit communities and rely heavily on each other for economic assistance, the local maintenance of good social relations can be a matter of life or death. Asian studies and political anthropology more generally. Spencer’s writing style and the clarity and persuasiveness of his analysis make this broadly conceived work a valuable contribution to the field. Source: Nations and Nationalism. ‘Blurred Boundaries: The Discourse of Corruption, the Culture of Politics, and the Imagined State,’ American Ethnologist 22: 375–402. Hacking, I. 1999. The Social Construction of What? Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.