"Our Duty to Act": Brown Sahibs in Universal Suits.
The Story of the Abortive Coup d'etat in 1962

MICHAEL ROBERTS

pamphlets
OUR DUTY TO ACT: BROWN SAHIBS IN UNIVERSAL SUITS* A REVIEW ARTICLE ON THE ABORTIVE 1962 COUP IN SRI LANKA

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OUR DUTY TO ACT: DRUNK SAILING IN OIL/EROSAL

SUITS: A REVIEW ARTICLE ON THE ABORTIVE 1985
COURT IN SRI LANKA

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1985-86 WINTER
The year 1956 is rightly regarded as a major junction in Sri Lankan history. At the general elections that year, a coalition of parties known as the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP), in which the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike was the major partner, achieved a landslide victory. This victory marked a populist upsurge of the vernacular educated and underprivileged mass of the population against the privileged few—a minority which was regarded as being both Westernised and conservative. In particular, the SLFP saw itself as the vanguard and instrument of the “the common people of (the) country, the rural people”—that is to say, the rural Buddhist Sinhalese-speaking masses.1 Interlaced with this movement against privilege was a virulent expression of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Its demand for a rapid switchover to Sinhala as the language of administration was at once a symbolic statement and an instrumental blow against the old structures of discrimination.2

Such demands heightened the fears and reservations of the Sri Lankan Tamil minority (nearly 11 percent of the population in 1953) and brought both the Sinhala Buddhist activist and the MEP government into conflict with the Tamils. The anti-Tamil riots of mid 1958 were one consequence—an outcome which in its turn led to a period of emergency rule and the use of the armed forces to restore order.

Bandaranaike’s premiership was also marked by internal dissension. A small extra-parliamentary faction engineered his assassination in 1959. When general elections were held in 1960, several parties, viz. a reconstituted SLFP. The right-wing United National Party (UNP), Philip Gunawardana’s MEP, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party entered the fray with hopes of gaining a majority so that the ‘no contest’ electoral arrangement between the Left parties and the Left parties and the MEP-SLFP which had been of such instrumental value in 1956 was not operative at the first of these elections. The UNP recovery led to the revival of a limited electoral coalition at the second general election in July and, in the event, the SLFP returned to power with an outright majority of seats. The new premier, Mrs. Bandaranaike, a reluctant recruit to high-level politics, leaned heavily on a few trusted advisers, among them N.Q. Dias (no relative) and her nephew, a young lawyer, Felix R. Dias Bandaranaike. From the start, her government entered upon, or was forced to engage in, a series of confrontations: with the local Catholic population who protested against the nationalisation of denominational schools in late 1960, with the Sri Lankan Tamils who organised a satyagraha, in February 1961 against the government’s language policy, and with the Left parties and trade unions who activated a series of strikes in late 1961. In consequence of the Tamil satyagraha, the government resorted to emergency rule, mobilised the volunteer army units
(i.e. the Reserves) and stationed army units in the Tamil districts. The emergency powers were also utilised against the trade union agitation; and when the port workers' strike paralysed Colombo harbour the army was employed to keep it functioning. The left parties and unions engaged the government in a series of conflicts. The general strike of 5th January was met with government coercion. Another strike was scheduled for late January. In the circumstances, there is a sense in which such clichés as “a beleaguered government” and “the country in turmoil” are apt descriptions of the state of politics in late 1961 and early 1962.

It was at this point of time that an inter-service cabal of army and police officers was poised to effect a coup detat. A leak at the eleventh hour, however, led the plotters to abort their plans.³ Thirty individuals were eventually arrested; four became crown witnesses, 24 were eventually brought before a trial-at-bar functioning under the terms of an act of retrospective legislation, and 11 were convicted.⁴ Their appeal against the conviction was taken before the Privy Council in Britain (whose appellate jurisdiction over Ceylon remained in force till the new Constitution of 1972; cf. Australia) and was overturned on the ground that the retrospective statute was unconstitutional. By that stage an UNP government had been returned to power at the 1965 elections. So, the convicted plotters were released. They returned to civilian life and, in some cases, to lucrative jobs.

Here, then, were a collection of coup plotters who were neither dead, nor in prison, nor in power. And their prime targets (the SLFP) were no longer in power either. This was an ideal situation which Donald L. Horowitz seized upon. In the year 1968 he interviewed most of the participants who were readily accessible, i.e. those who had not died or emigrated. Only one person refused to be interviewed, though another attached so many limitations that his interview yielded little information on his values or motives, Horowitz's primary interest. Thus Horowitz had as his major data-base prolonged interviews with a majority of the participants, 22 individuals in all.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Arrested</th>
<th>Interviewed</th>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>24 charged</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4 Crown</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2 ?</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1 other participant never arrested</td>
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<td>23</td>
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The interviews were conducted on the understanding that the anonymity of their statements would be protected and the publication of results would be
delayed for several years, an assurance which Horowitz has adhered to. It was also agreed that the interviews would not touch upon “still-sensitive issues”; while Horowitz himself “focused on personal history and personal motive, rather than . . . coup tactics and logistics” and deliberately excluded “the issue of ultimate responsibility for the coup plot” (pp. 226-27).5

Readers should note that neither the commanders of the army, navy or airforce not the Inspector General of Police (IGP) were directly involved in the lot. It was “a conspiracy of the second echelon” (p. 126). The most senior officers were the Commandant and Deputy Commandant of the Volunteer Forces (Col. Maurice de Mel and Col. F.C. “Derek” de Saram, the former a regular army officer on secondment) and one of the Deputy I.G.P’s, C.C. “Jungle” Dissanayake. In addition, a former D.I.G.P., Sidney de Zoysa, and the former commandant of the navy, Royce de Mel (a brother of Maurice), both of whom had recently been forced to retire under government pressure, were implicated. The other participants were mostly volunteer or regular army officers of the rank of lieutenant colonel, major or captain; superintendents or assistant superintendents of police who were proteges or subordinates of either Jungle Dissanayake or Sidney de Zoysa; and 5 civilians, among them two civil servants.

Again, readers can get some inkling of Horowitz’s principal findings from a table in which he depicts the “articulated grievances”. In itself, of course, this tabular representation does not do justice to the author’s analysis, but it is reproduced here so as to introduce the range of “grievances” and “motives” expressed by the respondents.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 8.1: Grievances cited by coup respondents</th>
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<tr>
<td>Unrest, strikes, no “discipline”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethno-religious discrimination</td>
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<td>Power of Felix Dias Bandaranaike</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danger from Left</td>
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<tr>
<td>General conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politicians pandering to mob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools takeover</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear for democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Middle class hardship 27 (6)
Economic conditions 18 (4)
Harshness repressing protest 18 (4)
Misuse of armed forces 14 (3)

X = 8.6; S.D.F. = 3.03

The rich corpus of opinion gathered from prolonged interviews provides a foundation from which Horowitz reviews several generations of theories relating to the causes of military coups in the Third World. These are mostly generalisations constructed from empirical cases. These range from functionalist theories of system breakdown to those that stress the role of the military, a corporate element that intervenes when political chaos reigns, or when civilian governments intrude upon their domains; and to those that stress the political ambitions of individuals or factions. Horowitz finds most of these scholarly treatises to be far too unilinear and monist in their contentions. He leans towards an eclectic position: “Structure and motive... are compatible enough to be complements in explanation, instead of alternative components of competing schemes” (p. 15). He argues that coups are likely to be “a multi-phenomenon” and that, in the present undeveloped state of theoretical development, “the province of case studies is not to judge conclusively between competing versions of explanation, but to illuminate their contingent and partial character” (pp. 18-19). Accordingly, he conceives his Sri Lankan case study as an attempt to inform theory by “making distinctions among classes of cases” and by challenging “the simplicity and rigidity of abstract models (pp. 19, 20). Thus his chapters are designed to test various possibilities, the various categories of motive, that have been attributed to coup makers:

Personal and Familial and Factional Motives: Chapter 5
Corporate Motives: Chapter 6
Social Allegiances and Segmental Motives: Chapter 7
The Political System and Coup Motives: Chapter 8

Given the puerile or overambitious nature of much of the political science literature on coups, Horowitz’s general goals are not difficult of achievement. I will therefore confine my overview to the analysis of the Sri Lankan case. At the same time, I will marshall these details in a critique of the author’s interview methodology — an issue which has significance beyond the particular case.
We are only too familiar with the dangers associated with an investigative approach restricted to working through the conceptions and choices of actors: the possibility of ending up with an extreme voluntarist view of social action which also appraises the import of action solely in terms of intentionality; the likelihood of retrospective rationalisations of past actions; and, in the case of such issues as plots, the problem of reticence or, alternatively, of loquaciousness — a problem, in fact, that is especially attached to the Sri Lankan cultural context insofar as embellishments and tall stories are part of ‘everyday’ conversation and verbal interplay among the “middle class”. On the other hand, the sounding of subjective perceptions can provide a corrective against a mechanistic application of structural and systematic theories; such soundings can counter the logical determinism and call attention to contingent and emergent events or processes.

Albeit ex post facto, the explanations of the social actors may also be useful in revealing their values and their modes of thought. Three insights can be gathered at both the explicit and implicit level. The latter is by far the most useful for the incidental significance and the taken-for-granted assumptions are those that, by definition, have not been dressed-up or fabricated. But even the blatant exaggerations may be grist for the analyst’s mill: they may enable the analyst to reconstruct modes of thought that are specific to the society, or societal segment, which the actors typify.

In pursuing these methods, however, recent methodological discussions have emphasised that an interviewer must be theoretically self-conscious about the manner in which his presence directs actor responses and must be attentive to the self-reflexive processes which guide both the actions of actors as well as their subsequent understanding of these actions. This is the hunting ground of phenomenology. Of relevance here, at the simplest level, is Schutz’s attentiveness to the ambiguity attached to the term “motive”. Two kinds of motives are distinguished: “in-order-to” motives and “because-motives”; the form “involve ends to be achieved” and “are dominated by the future tense”, whereas because-motives refer to the actor’s background or disposition and are dominated by the past tense. Of relevance too is the fact that in responding to questions at an interview, however conversational its procedural style, an actor is forced into self-reflection. In the case under discussion, we can assume that each interview involved a compounding of years (some in prison) of self-reflection. Such reflexivity, however, would have been at least partially conditioned by each respondent’s ‘reading’ of Horowitz as well as his reading of Horowitz’s view of the respondent.
Donald Horowitz is a white, a Westerner. Every one of the respondents was a fluent English-speaker and had been educated in the 1920’s-1940’s at schools where the influence of British mores were pronounced. They knew that the Western world set great store by the principles of individual liberty, equality of opportunity and the advancement through achieved merit; and a few of them, those of “lower middle-class” origin, had even profited from these principles. They also knew that the Western world abhorred religious and ethnic prejudice; and that political groupings based on ethnic identity or caste (“communalism” or “racialism” as the former was pejoratively described) were simply atavistic and primitive—for political parties should by definition be based on “principle” or the pursuit of economic interest.

Such an understanding of Westerners’ values was all the easier for individuals (such as our coupmakers) who had inculcated these values themselves to a greater or lesser degree, in the course of their careers. In this context, then, Horowitz’s very presence must have directed them towards expressions of contempt for the alleged ethnic and religious discrimination practised by the MEP and SLFP governments from 1956. In such manner they could paint the legitimate, elected government in a bad light — as “tyrants” (p. 130), as so detestable and so bad for “the people” that it was illegitimate. And their planned counter ‘revolution’, thereby, achieved validation.

It is instructive that, in retrospect in 1968, virtually every one of the plotters had no remorse nor doubts about the ‘rightness’ of their conspiratorial action in 1961-62 (p. 189). This brings us to a suitable juncture for the specific content of Horowitz’s findings to be introduced.

In chapter seven Horowitz investigates several possibilities: whether the plotters represented a conspiracy of disaffected Christians; and whether it was a “class” conspiracy — the concept of class being interpreted by him in the terms associated with stratification theory, viz lower middle class, upper middle class. He was surprised to find that only 6 of the 22 respondents advanced any (overt) class views (p. 135). So, in his view, class was not that important (pp. 135, 196). Few of the individuals felt that they had been personally discriminated against on religious or ethnic grounds. The Tamils and Christians certainly resented the discrimination to which their communities were being subject and “in some cases” this “contributed to their decision to join the plot, but in no case was this the major reason for joining “ (p. 143). What was striking for Horowitz was the degree to which those who were Buddhist Sinhalese shared the litany of grievances of the others.” “The prevailing orientation of the conspirator is best described as liberal cosmopolitanism” (p. 145). While “they were mostly Christians and their ideology was in some ways conservative”, they were, “above
all, cosmopolitans, men who believed that the increasing use of segmental affiliations to judge people was part — although only part — of what was deeply wrong with Mrs. Bandaranaike’s government” (p. 146).

Elsewhere, Horowitz highlights the series of “watershed events” which led the initiators of the plot to the conviction that it was within “the province” (a useful concept deployed by the author) of the armed forces to enter into the arena of politics in their own right, rather than being mere agents of the government — their role hitherto. We can allow them to present themselves.

“The country was going downhill”
“The country was going to rack and ruin”
“There was no discipline in the country. The average labourer was calling strikes all over the place. There was this communal and religious poison in the air”.

Things were going from bad to worse and it was our “duty to act before it was too late.”

This intention was to take-over and to then hand over the reigns of government to a predominantly civilian regime, to a “government of national safety”. In parenthesis, sceptics might note that this was in all probability their intention. and the assertion gains in credence in the light of recent gossip which ‘confirms’ the verandah-gossip of the 1960s to the effect that the Governor General, O.E. Goonetilleke, and the U.N.P. leader, Dudley Senanayake, had been informed of the plot without being actively drawn into it — a tacit consent which augured well for the stabilisation of the take-over.

The reflexive and retrospective understandings on the part of the coup-makers, as well as Horowitz’s verdict, can be juxtaposed with Marx’s warnings against the acceptance of the “independent existence” of ideas, a failing common to nineteenth century historians who did not treat ideas as the cultural production of ruling classes.

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of all members of society, that is expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represents them as the only rational, universally valid ones.

Marx was speaking here of revolutionary cases and treating the bourgeoisie as one such force in the context of his time (1840s). Mutatis mutandis, it can be made relevant for the understanding not the social representations of class, or class fractions, which attempt to put the clock back.

Without necessarily adhering to the wholly reflectionist view of ideology embodied in this particular statement from Marx, I believe it will help us to set
Horowitz’s rather facile conclusions in proper perspective. In particular, one simply cannot agree with his conclusion that “ethnic, religions and class grievances placed little role in moving the officers to action” (p. 18) and that “narrowly conceived class interests could not be said to be a motivating force in the plot” (p. 196). Rather, as I will elaborate shortly, social structure and ‘class’ was at the heat of the conflict.

Such an argument does not imply that the views of the plotters were fabrications nor convenient window-dressings. It does not deny their adherence, in 1961-62 as in 1968, to liberal principles, nor deny their opposition to the principle of discrimination (pp. 146, 153, 181). It is instructive that on the 1st January 1962 Sidney de Zoysa sent a reconciliatory note to his ex-friend and personal foe, Jungle Dissanayake:

Just a little thought for the New Year and may it soon be God’s will that you and I should meet often and laugh together in the way we used to. May 1962 see an end to persecution and the final triumph of decency of thought and living against the corruption that is tending to decay our very souls.13

My contention is that a different weight and a different interpretation must be attached to their seemingly genuine convictions on these matters — so that the convictions are functionally linked to ‘class’ interest.

One of the first steps in this re-interpretive process is to be attentive to the colourations attached to any interview process. These have been spelt out earlier. They enjoin us to take note of ‘the silences’ as well as ‘the said’. No coupmaker in his right mind would have presented himself to Horowitz as a person selfishly defending a privileged ‘class’ bastion. The more presentable parts of his assemblage of grievances would have those picked out for emphasis. And face to face with Horowitz, Western values invariably became the measuring stick in terms of which the presentation of self, and the understanding of self, was organised.

Western values were precisely the values which the MEP and SLFP governments had explicitly brought under attack since 1956 and began to undermine. In the period before 1956 the emphasis on “merit” was part of a complex structure of institutionalised discrimination. “Merit” was assessed in the English medium and the categories of knowledge valued in administrative recruitment were those to which in the vernacular languages provided few entries. The respondents would have known only too well that this was part of the corpus of privilege under attack. In emphasising the universalistic criteria and in their eloquent hostility to the alleged ethnic and religious discrimination of the Bandaranaike regime, they effectively glossed this fact of privilege. They thereby subsumed their segmental ‘class’ interests “in ideal form”: they gave
their class ideas “the form of universality” and represented them “as the only rational, universally valid ones”.

A second step in the re-interpretive process, therefore, is to be more fully attend to the socio-political forces which came into conflict in the 1950’s and 1960’s, a subject on which there is an abundant literature. It is against this background that historians of the period have been led to describe the plot as the work of “right-wing elements... of the armed services and the police” seeking to “re-establish the advantages of the privileged class”.

My reinterpretation of the material in Horowitz's book is in broad agreement with these prevailing historio-graphical conclusions: the abortive 1962 officers’ coup was a counter-revolution of a socially-privileged minority tempting to reverse the trends initiated in 1956. Such a view does not take us very far into the social structure. It establishes a dichotomy between “the privileged” (in power before 1956) and “the underprivileged”. Since several elements involved in engineering the 1956 turnover were manifestly from the “privileged” social order and very “middle class”, while several other previously underprivileged elements were, after 1956, in the process of scrambling up the partially reconstituted ladders into the ranks of the privileged “middle classes”, such a conceptualisation has a low mileage. A theoretically sophisticated review of Sri Lanka’s changing class structure in the post-war era has yet to be produced. In the circumstances, I can only offer a few suggestions — a preliminary thesis, what Weber would call an “Ansatze”.

The coup-makers stood for, and strode forward as, the strikeforce of a class fraction — a fraction of the “middle class” as well as a fraction of the bourgeoisie. The latter concept is used here in a Marxist sense and in contradistinction from the petit-bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The term “middle class” is employed in the sense in which it was (is) used in Sri Lanka in the 1950’s and 1960’s, as a concept rooted in subjective usage. As one would expect, this usage was (is) vague, amorphous and shifting. It denoted that we were in many ways a status group, encompassing not only the well-to-do plantation owners and merchants, the landlords, doctors and other gentlemen in the genteel professions, but also the majority of white-collar workers and most of the English-speaking Burgher community. The clearest marker of the middle class was a fluency in English and the wearing of Western dress; those who did not sport these attributes, and especially those who wore sarong and banian, were a residuary category (the barrier, however was becoming increasingly blurred through the emmiseration of the clerks). The middle class did not, therefore, include a number of merchants and small businessmen (urbedalalis) who did not posses the relevant cultural attributes, even though they had a modicum of
property and employed a few hands.

As such, the middle class subsumed and encompassed most of the indigenous bourgeoisie, whose capital was largely derived from commercials or plantation enterprises rather than manufacturing. It also subsumed the respected and self-employed lawyers, accountants, doctors and surveyors etcetera and the managerial executives who, as wage dependants, were in what Erik Olin Wright described as a “contradictory class location”, albeit in occupations that were an adjunct of bourgeois functions. The widespread self typification of more generalised labelling in terms of the “middle class” in fact, helped to obscure the capitalist structures of dependence and the processes by which these structures were reproduced.

Thus, when proletarians and other elements whose status was “low” in relation to the prominent levels of the middle class participated in the movement which turfed out the UNP in 1956, their assault on “privilege” (varaprasada) was constructed in socio-cultural terms just as much as in economic terms. Nor were they wholly or unambiguously opposed to the principle of privilege. They certainly revealed little opposition to the principle of property qua property. They also were, within both the MEP and the SLFP, the lieutenants, subordinates and clients of Maverick segments of the middle class and the bourgeoisie. Their gripe, therefore, was directed against the “who” of privilege rather than privilege per se: they were against the particular denationalised, Western and Christian elements who allegedly monopolised the corridors of privilege. In labelling the SLFP policies in the 1960’s as “Dompe socialism”, the Trotskyites were in fact pinpointing the limited goals of “the 1956 revolution”, while also lampooning the incongruity of socialist banners in the hands of traditional aristocratic families such as the Ratwatte and the Bandaranaike.

Attention to the social structure in this manner, therefore, permits one to take the long view and to depict the struggles in 1956-and-thereafter not only as a conflict between the underprivileged masses and “lower middle classes” on the one hand and the privileged “upper middle class” on the one hand, but also, and primarily, as an intra-class conflict both within the middle class and within the indigenous bourgeoisie (with the brown sahib fraction having the support of the British merchant capitalists). In other words, it was, in effect rather than in intention, a conflict over who should dominate and the modes which this domination should take. In these terms, and with the advantage of a longer retrospect, “the 1956 revolution: was more conservative than it is sometimes depicted to be. But that was not the way it seemed to many contemporaries in the late 1950’s and the early 1960’s. To both its spokesman and its principal targets, “1956” and the SLFP phenomenon seemed to be a wholly radical
transformation. One mark of this was the escalation of the Burgher exodus to Australia and elsewhere. Another mark was the twittering and tut-tuting of those attached to the old order of things: various incidents, such as the government’s approval of the invasion of the floor of parliament by a mass of people at one point in 1956, were viewed as a pandering to the mob”; the new trends were considered to be in contradiction to all that was decent and proper and “harbingers of social decline” (Horowitz’ paraphrase: p. 165); while the political turmoil of the period 1958-62 was viewed with disquiet. In contrast with the tranquillity of the period before 1956 (p. 173), this was “disorder” — disorder, moreover, which raised the serious threat of a Leftist seizure of power from an inept government (pp. 149, 174-75). The country, in this view, was “going to rack and ruin”. In this manner, the sectional interest of a class fraction was fused with that of the country. The section stood for the general, the universal, the people.

There is abundant evidence in Coup Theories and Officers’ Motives to support the thesis that the coup was a plot of those representing a fraction of the middle class as well as the bourgeoisie, the “brown sahibs” as I shall call them, adapting the satirical label designed by Tarzie Vittachi to depict the notable who succeeded the British in power and privilege. Thus, the artillery officers’ mess held steadfast to the principle of serving English food only, and banning arrack as well as rice and curry an index, in their view, of high standards (p. 83). The army plotters were horrified by the formation of a Buddhist association within the regular army at the instigation of a few officers, among them Colonel Richard Udugama (pp. 114, 136). The coupmakers, in common with the brown sahib class fraction, believed that since 1956 “a very low class of people” had become politicians and M.P.’s” (p. 164) and that the Buddhist priests, who had gained enormously in influence since 1956 were obsolete oracles of obscurantism (p. 163). The extent to which the conspirators expressed concern about the general social and political conditions, deplored the erosion of established standards and the indiscipline of the Ceylonese labour force, and pointed to the fact that “the average labourer was working about three hours day” (pp. 138, 142), therefore, was a mark of their class position as much as their conservatism.

Indeed, Horowitz discovered, not surprisingly, that English appears to have been the home language in about half the plotters’ childhood homes. In his own words, the conspirators were disproportionately urban and varied; “disproportionately old boys of the English-medium, often denominational, elite colleges; and disproportionately of the trouser-wearing, Anglicized, whisky-drinking, clubby-set that disrespected Buddhist priests, the sarong, the Sinhala-language and the culture of the island and drew its inspiration from another island 6,000 miles away” (p.88). During the rest of his book neverthe-
less, Horowitz permits this understanding to be submerged by both the "liberal cosmopolitanism" and the relative absence (allegedly) of class complaints in the litany of "articulated grievances" paraded by his respondents — "class" being conceived of in the narrow sense of the specific economic hardships of the middle class.

The coupmakers’ alarm and distaste for the way things were moving after 1956 was not confined within military and police enclaves. Indeed, these opinions were moulded by regular interaction with friends and other civilians in the clubs and drawing rooms of the middle class. Verbal presentations from eight of Horowitz’s respondents which re reproduced verbatim in his book provide graphic testimony to the manner in which the will to plan a coup was nourished, and constituted, by their class situation. I repeat two.

Everywhere you went, people were talking about the same thing. If you went to your club, people would ask you when you were gong to do something. They would say, “The country’s going to rack and ruin, and what are you doing about it? Are we going to lose our freedom, our right to speak.” Many people would say, “Our country is going on the rocks. Can’t something be done? Can’t you chaps do anything?”

Thus, in embellishment of the evidence in Coup Theories and Officers” Motives, one can note that ‘everyday’ conversations at funeral homes and elsewhere, and especially conversations with “the chaps” at such clubs as the S.S.C., the C.R. & F.C., the Kinross, the Havelocks RFC, the Twentieth Century Club, the Havelock Golf Club, and the B.R.C., were the seed-beds of the coup conspiracy. In such arenas, individual and class opinions were moulded into general, universal needs. It became their duty to act.

For this reason the social origins of the plotters is of less import than their existing social networks. In amendment of the widespread view that most of the plotters came from “wealthy and prominent Colombo families”, Horowitz discovered that only a few had such a background; rather “the center of gravity of the coup participants was solidly in the middle-middle class” and about half of their fathers “were either small businessmen or minor functionaries” (pp. 83-85. For several, therefore, access to good schooling in combination with individual talent had opened the way to some measure of social mobility. These processes had resulted in their cooptation into the brown sahib fraction of the middle class. In the 1950’s and 1960’s their aspirations and circles of friendship counted for more than their origins. They were, now, embraced by “the chaps.”

In this connection we are beholden to Donald Horowitz for revealing that “the boundaries between the armed force and society were exceedingly perme-
able” p. 193); and for explaining how this came to be so, even for Regular Army officers (the Volunteers being by definition civilians and part-time soldiers). Indeed, for aficionados of Sri Lankan historiography, Horowitz’s chapter on the armed forces is probably the most informative and revelatory chapter in the book, characterised as it is by a historical dimension. When the Ceylon Army was formed in 1949 its nucleus of officer was drawn from those commissioned in the 1930’s and 1940’s as officers in the Ceylon Defence Force (C.D.F.), a civilian force of reservists with a history going back to the nineteenth century when its composition was mostly European. After the creation of the Regular Army, the military capacity was supplemented by continuing the C.D.F., renamed the Volunteer Forces. Each regular Army unit was paralleled by a like unit of Volunteers.

The officer corps in the army was not directly and detrimentally affected by the political change in 1956. The coupmakers were therefore “drawn from an unreconstructed officer corp that still overrepresented the very groups that were the objects of the hostility that Bandaranaike had managed to marshal in 1956” (p. 75). Horowitz reveals, moreover, that on the army side most of the conspirators were drawn from either the Volunteers or a particular unit in the Regular Army, the Third Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, Ceylon Artillery, from 1949-1954. From his interviews, in fact, Horowitz discovered that Colnel de Saram was held in ‘unusual esteem’ by the participants and that he “was the main moving spirit on the army side” p. 107).

One can go further. Horowitz’s findings, in conjunction with the summary of the trial-at-bar, indicate that de Saram, Maurice de Mel and Douglas Liyanage were the principle initiators of the conspiracy; and that the involvement of both Jungle Dissanayake and Sidney de Zoysa was quite late in the day. This conclusion is in opposition to the contemporary (1962) estimates of primacy in middle class salons: for it was widely held in 1962 (personal knowledge) that Sidney de Zoysa “must have been” the prime mover, though Liyanage’s name was also touted by some.

A digression is in order here to indicate the reasoning behind such ‘popular’ opinions. de Zoysa was the favourite choice because it was believed that he had the ambition, the ruthlessness and the brains to mount such an operation. Admiral Royce de Mel, Jungle Dissanayake and de Saram were ruled out because they were considered “duds”, not brainy enough.25 This then is an instance of a typical cultural construction which lays bare an underlying emphasis on “knowledge”, which, modified by virtue of reference to a conspiracy, meant a strategic, masterminding knowledge. This emphasis, I speculate, is rooted in the Buddhist worldview, though it was supported and reproduced by
the modes of ideological domination pursued by Sri Lanka’s last colonial masters — for the British held themselves to be at the vanguard of scientific and technological progress and the epitome of modern civilization — and infinitely superior on this count.

In regarding the army and police officers and others who conspired to overthrow the SLFP government in 1962 as activists on behalf of a middle class fraction which desired to reverse the trends initiated by the political turnover in 1956, it is essential that one point should be held in mind: namely, that the plot did not occur immediately after 1956. That is, such a counter strike was not inevitable. Many contingent events in the years between 1956 and 1962 contributed towards the ‘production’ of the conspiracy. One of Horowitz’s distinct contributions is in bringing out these emergent, accidental events (see especially pp. 149-175) and indicating how they accumulated in ways which led the coupmakers to conclude that it was feasible to seize power and within their legitimate province to do so.

Among these events were the Sinhala Tamil riot of 1958. On that occasion it was the intervention of Sir Oliver Goonetilleke and the vigorous action of the armed forces and police which restored order. To this day, specific acts of commanding intervention by such individuals as Derek Aluvihare (G.A. Polonnaruwa) and F.C. de Saram are related in some middle class homes, especially among the Tamils who were at the butt end of the riots. It was at this point of time, too, that a few of the plotters first toyed with the idea of a coup (pp. 112, 122). But they obviously put the thought aside. The prolonged period of mobilisation in 1961-62 gave them, so to speak, a second bite at the cherry. It was during this period too, that the Third Artillery Regiment was ordered to the Jaffna Peninsula (by train) in pursuance of the government’s coercive discipline of the Tamil satyagraha resistance. Both its commanding officers, Col. Abraham and Lt. Col. B.I. Loyola, were Tamils. At embarkation time these two officers were ordered to remain behind. A sit-down mutiny was only averted by Abraham’s personal appeal (p. 113).

Another contingent event of some consequence was the emergence in late 1960 of Felix Dias Bandaranaike as a power in the land. A product of Royal College and 30 year of age in July 1960, he was only too well known to several conspirators. His hauteur and bombast endeared him to few, especially when coupled with his youth; indeed, his political career has been marked by an uncanny ability to unite disparate elements in hatred against him. The extent to which the coupmakers viewed his power with misgivings (see pp. 115-16, 144, 148-49, 157-59) is one of the significant findings in the book. A qualification needs to be attached to this emphasis however. This is one issue in which a
pronounced retrospective bias may have come into play. Felix Dias Bandaranaike took a leading part in bringing them to trial and was present at several interrogations. By 1968 he must have been the pet figure of hatred among several of the plotters.

III

In opposition to the drift of Horowitz’s conclusions, therefore, I have contended that the interests of a middle class faction of brown sahibs motivated the abortive coup of 1962. In doing so, I have suggested that the failure to give adequate weight to this class interest stems from the degree to which the author relied on the grievances expressed by the plotters during their interviews in 1968. I have not, however, suggested that their “liberal cosmopolitanism” or their emphasis on the principle of merit in bureaucratic organisation were ex post facto fabrications or embellishments. It has not been necessary for my interpretation to do so. On the contrary, both the conspirators’ attachment to these values and their secularised, transcendental, cross-communal identity are an index of their class position. These principles, institutionalised in a number of ways, supported a structure of privilege in the era before 1956. They supported, and validated, a bourgeois order. In expounding these principles to a person who would be expected to be sympathetic to anti-racial sentiments, the coupmakers were devalorising the SLFP and validating both their conspiracy and the pre-1956 order.

In the absence of written documents it is not easy to document what the coupmakers really thought in the period 1958-62 as distinct from 1968. In accepting the view that they were, in many, albeit qualified, ways, opposed to ethnic and religious discrimination, I am guided by three considerations. First, my own limited experience of middle class club and drawing room conversation in Colombo and Galle during this period. Second, the pronounced Anglophile sentiments which were expressed by several army plotters and incorporated into their pre-1962 practice in the officers’ mess: in itself, this suggests that they had also imbibed the Britishers contempt for casteism and communalism.

And finally, there is conclusive evidence of F.C. de Saram’s antipathy to communalism in his halcyon days of youth. This evidence concerns the Ceylon National Congress in the year 1938-40, when de Saram (born c. 1910) was about 28 years old. At that stage, in 1938, the Ceylon National Congress had been relatively inactive. Towards the end of the year a number of activists, several of them new to politics, set out to transform this loose confederation. This drive, initially signalled in late 1938, gathered momentum in late 1939 with the
formulation and approval of a new party constitution. The annual conference of the Congress in December 1939 was marked by an assault on “communalism” by such individuals as G.C.S. Corea, George E de Silva and Stanley de Zoysa. While such rhetoric was unchallenged, it was a different question when it was proposed that affiliated associations which were deemed “communal” should be evicted. This motion affected such organisations as the Ceylon Muslim League, the Jaffna Association, the Sinhala Maha Sabha and the Burgher Political Association. Easily the most important of these was the Sinhala Maha Sabha led by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike. The proposal was resisted by influential notables and the struggle ended inconclusively — in effect favouring the status quo and enabling the Sinhala Maha Sabha to remain formally associated with the newly constituted Ceylon National Congress.29

The opening shots in the campaign to rejuvenate the Congress were heralded by an (unsigned) memorandum entitled “What we can do”30 in late 1938 and by a letter placed before the annual conference on the 17th December 1938. As paraphrased in the minutes the letter asked:

whether Congress was going to function as a political party and (sic) to nominate candidates for election to the State Council and demanding a public declaration to that effect. The question was also asked whether action will be taken against members and affiliated bodies which work contrary to Congress.31

The signatories to this set of queries were A.W.H. Abeyesundere, J.R. Jayewardene, F.C. de Saram, C.C. Rasaratnam and C.P.G. Abeyawardena, every one of them men with legal training.

F.C. de Saram, in brief, was one of the Young Turks.32 As such, he served on the Executive Committee of the Congress in 1939 and 1940 and attended several Committee meetings.33 From this record we can readily conclude that he was opposed to communalism and insistent on adherence to political principle (as indicted by his proposal that, in the light of the Bracegirdle Commission’ report, Sir D.B Jayatilaka should resign from his Ministership as a matter of honour).34

F.C. de Saram’s stance in 1938-40 should be set in context. Such an orientation was quite typical of the Ceylonese educated at secondary schools in Colombo, or in such towns as Negombo, Panadura or Galle, during the 1920’s and 1930’s. By that stage, the generational ramifications associated with the influx of Tamils from the Jaffna Peninsula into Colombo were having their effect: a young Sinhalese schoolboy at an elite school in Colombo was likely to have pals who were Tamil (or, as before, Burgher or Moor). Such associations were all the more likely if one participated in sporting activities, especially team sport, at both college and club level. Indeed, in referring to the people of varied
(foreign) nationalities he had met during his golfing and sporting career, in the
course of his reminiscences in 1979 F.C. de Saram affirmed that “the sports arena
is the best leveller between man and man” and a locale where people of different
nationality mixed best. While ethnic identities were not obliterated by virtue
of such friendships, they were partially transcended. The process of Westerni-
sation, therefore produced an antipathy to overt, politicised expressions of
communal identity.

As one might expect, such expressions were the stronger among those who
had gone abroad, to Britain or elsewhere, for a part of their education. “F.C.,”
or Derek” a he was familiarly referred to, had returned (as a folk hero17) from
Oxford in 1936. It is instructive that the antipathy to communalism which he and
some of the “Young Turks” in Congress revealed in the late 1930’s was echoes,
even surpassed, by four other young men who had returned to the island by
the early 1930’s after completing their education abroad: viz. Philip Gunawardena,
Colvin R. de Silva, N. M. Perera and Leslie Goonewardene. These four became
the founding fathers of the LSSP which was established in 1935. The LSSP was
as totally opposed to the Sinhala Maha Sabha as it was to the Ceylon
National Congress. From the public platform at the LSSP’s annual conference
38 in December 1938, Colvin R. de Silva castigated the Sinhala Maha Sabha for
its “demagogic appeal to romantic racialism” and described it as:
* “an exaggerated mongrel”, a body representing “the alliance of the
degenerate aristocracy of the uplands with the upstart aristocracy of the low”;
* “the local variant of brown fascism”;
* “another form of bourgeoisie reaction”.

One can conclude by briefly comparing the subsequent careers of those
trotskysties with that of F.C. de Saram. As an army officer (c. 1941-1954) and a
partner in a law firm (1954-61) cum reservist, de Saram was insulated from the
popular political demands to which, as full-time politicians and trade-union
leaders, the others were subject.

By 1950 Philip Gunawardena had broken away from the main wing of the
LSSP (on personal and Marxist-sectarian grounds?) and was the leader of the
Viplavakara LSSP. His home-base and constituency was in the rural hinterland
of the Western Province. He appears to have had little difficulty in moving with
the groundswell of linguistic nationalism in the 1950s; and his party joined
Bandaranaike’s SLFP in the political alliance known as the MEP which swept
to (unexpected) victory in 1956.

The LSSP led by N.M. Perera et al, however, insisted in 1956 on parity of
status for both the Sinhala and Tamil languages, while yet supporting radical
policies which would breech the advantages held by the English-educated elites.
One can surmise that the LSSP leaders were as horrified as F.C. de Saram and his buddies were by some of the expressions of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in the period 1956-62, and especially by the 1958 riots. As one historian has remarked, their "cosmopolitan outlook... and their (the LSSP’s) enlightened advocacy of a multi racial secular polity proved to be profoundly disadvantageous": from being the principal parliamentary opposition to the ruling UNP in the late 1940’s they were reduced to being a weak third party in the early 1960’s as a consequence of the “1956 revolution: and all that it represented.” This circumstance forced the LSSP into a traumatic reappraisal of its language policy and political stance. After much internal debate in the period 1963-64, and at the cost of splits, the LSSP altered its policy and turned its face towards the Sinhalese majority. This shift in turn has contributed towards a sea change in the direction in which the energies of radical Tamil youth have been channelled. From the 1930s till about the 1960’s, young Tamils of radical persuasion tended to join the LSSP or the Communist Party. From the 1960’s, their overwhelming drift has been either towards the Federal Party (once transmuted into the Tamil United Liberated Front) or such militant underground organisations as those in the Tiger Liberation Movement.

This comparison of the political paths of N.M. Perera et al and F.C. de Saram calls our attention to the divisions within the middle class in Sri Lanka. The middle class generations of the 1920’s - 1950’s shared broadly similar Westernised upbringings and tended to adhere to a common stock of symbols. But they were also differentiated by their political ideologies (e.g. conservative and Marxist, Sinhala nationalist and Tamil nationalist). And the cut and thrust of political events, in their historical unfolding, could either solidify these differences, or modify the values and allegiances which individuals or groups had previously represented.

In deploying the class concept in the study of Sri Lanka’s politics, therefore, one is well-advised to take note of the segmentation within the middle class as well as the bourgeoisie. One must follow George Simmel in being attentive to the implications of cross-cutting allegiances and to the possibility that conflict might sustain continuities in the structure of domination, or in ideologies held, just as much as it generates change.


3 The decision to call it off appears to have been taken at the very last minute; and, in fact, down south, one of the LSSP M.P.’s (Neale de Aliwis) had already been arrested (see Trials at Bar No. 2 of 1962 Statement of Fact, Govt. Press, n.d.).

In Sri Lanka at that time rumour had it that one of the police officers concerned got cold feet, got drunk and disclosed the plot to his wife, Ms. Maya Senanayake, a daughter of a pro SLFP intellectual cum politician. This is confirmed in Ibid, pp. 15-16. More recently, I picked up the gossip; that the meetings at Lt. Col. Basil Jesudason’s house in Elibank Road had aroused a neighbour’s suspicions and had led Felix Dias Bandaranaike to put the Criminal Investigation “Department under S.S.” Jingle Dissanayake (D.I.G.P.) on the plotters’ trail. “Jingle” was Jungle Dissanayake’s brother, but the two were not on speaking terms.

4 Details from Trial at Bar (fn.5) and Horowitz, Coup Theories, pp. 77-80 and 223-25. Note that one police officer committed suicide (personal knowledge). Horowitz indicates that there were about 35 persons actively involved in the conspiracy, and that there were several others aware of what was going on. The commander of the army (a Sinhalese Catholic) appears to have been one of the latter.

5 In 1968 the leader of the UNP, Dudley Senanayake, was Prime Minister and the former Governor-General, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, was living in London. There had been persistent rumours to the effect that they were privy to the conspiracy. Clearly, then, this was one of the sensitive issues which Horowitz had to avoid.

6 I speak from personal experience as a member of “the middle class”. For a clarification of the subjective category, “middle class”, see the text below, pp. 681 of galleys.

7 These are partially rooted in the writings of George Herbert Mead and have entered the literature in the work of symbolic interactionists (e.g., Anselm Strauss and Herbert Blumer), phenomenologists (e.g. Jack D. Douglas) and ethnographers (e.g. Harvey Sacks, D.R. Watson, E.A. Schegloff.

9 According to Horowitz, 3 of the 24 defendants and 4 of the 23 respondents were Buddhists. One of these Buddhists, it would seem (pp. 99, 145), was F.C. de Saram — hardly anyone’s epitome of a Buddhist! This was probably a self-categorisation which ignores the fact that he must have been baptised and confirmed as a Christian, even though he did not adhere to Christianity as an adult.

However, note that Horowitz’s figures seem to exclude Stanley Senanayake and one of the crown witnesses, both of whom were probably Buddhist (it is significant that most of those who turned Crown witness were Buddhist).


11 Note that some of the conspirators were apprehensive about Sidney de Zoysa’s ambitions; and were even prepared to ‘bump him off’ should he reveal inclinations to take dictatorial control (p. 108).


14 See fn. 2 above.


17 Cf. Michael Roberts, “A New Marriage, An Old Dichotomy: The ‘Middle Class’ in British Ceylon”, in *The James Thevathasan Ruinam Felicitation Volume*, ed. by K. Indrapala, Jaffna, 1975, pp. 32-263. Since this was explicitly “a work of demolition”, it did not attempt to present an alternative taxonomy or a theorised set of tools for an understanding of the island’s social structure over time.


19 Examples of such middle class frictions or splinter-fractions (or segments) re: those kinsmen of the aristocratic Bandaranaike-Obeyesekere families and the Ratwatte family who were partial to the SLFP; the Vimara Wijewardena-Buddharakitta interest group; the karava Buddhist lobby associated with the Amarasingya of Galle, the Dias family in Panadura, P. de S. Kularatne and L.H. Mettananda; those attached to the plantation owner, Sarath Wijesinghe; the Salagama notables, C.P. de Silva, Stanley de Zoysa and some members of the Rajapakse family; and in the VLSSP, those around P.H. William de Silva and G.V.S de Silva.

20 The New Political Crisis (see fn.1), p. 20 Dompie was the constituency where Felix Dias Bandaranaike had been returned as an M.P. It was a rural area in which the Bandaranaike and Obeyesekere families, chief headmen of yesteryear, had their ancestral seats.

21 It was, nevertheless, a historical landmark which produced, or contributed towards, a series of profound changes; the nationalisation of the bus companies, oil
companies, insurance companies and most denominational schools; the escalation of Sinhala-Tamil conflict to the point where (now in the 1980s) the polarisation has even split asunder the Christian middle class the transformation of the UNP itself over a series of years especially in 1960 and after 1973); and the decline in both the parliamentary strength and political clout of the old Left parties. These are but a few of the changes set in train by what the 1956 election verdict stood for.

22 Funerals and weddings are central socio-cultural occasions in Sri Lankan society, irrespective of ethnicity and caste. They are often occasions for the exchange of confidences.

23 Kernely, _politics_ (see fn. 12), p. 199.

24 Though the coupmakers had a low opinion of all politicians as a social category it is significant that one of them referred to the “UNP chaps” (p. 155). It is extremely doubtful if this term would have been use in a inclusive way to describe most members of parliament elected under the SLFP ticket in 1956 and 1960.

25 Such a conclusion flew in the face of de Saram’s experience as a cricket captain at both club and international level, a captain renowned for his guile.

26 Aluvihare was not implicated in the 1962 coup.

27 This was, significantly, before the successful coup organised by Ayub Khan in Pakistan.


32 It appears that the most active members in this ginger group were J.R. Jayewardene, Dudley Senanayake (both appointed Joint Secretaries of the Congress in 1940), and C.P.G. Abeywardene and Stanley de Zoysa. Given Dudley Senanayake’s possible ‘involvement’ in the coup (supra, fn. 5), this political connection with F.C. de Saram (a longstanding friendship apart: both were members of the Sinhalese Sports Club) is of interest. Again, Stanley de Zoysa was a brother of Sidney de Zoysa. He was aligned with the SLFP in 1956 and became Finance Minister; but by 1960 had moved away from the SLFP.


34 Ibid. pp. 522-27.

35 Col. F.C. de Saram, “Reminiscences from about 1920 to the Present in the Main Relating to Golf” in the Royal Colombo Golf Club. 100 Years 1879-1979, comp. by Pam Fernando, Sam J. Kadirgamar and Reggie Candappa, Colombo: 1979, p. 80. A qualification should probably be added here: that this “liberal cosmopolitan” outlook would only be applied to those in proper Western attire and not to the “hoi-poli”. Quite recently, F.C. de Sram sought to evict from the Sinhalese Sports Club a local Bohemian who dared to lounge comfortably within its precincts in a sarong (personal communication from a friend).

36 Not the ethnic designations adopted by several sports clubs, e.g. the Burgher Recreation Club, the Tamil Union, the Moors Sport Club. Not the barriers between Moor
and other boys in Galle referred to in G. Chandrasoma’s fictional Out Out Brief Cand Colombo, 1981, pp. 9-12. This refers to the 1920’s and 1930’s and is informed autobiographical experience. It is matched by my own experience in Galle in the 1950

He had not only won a cricketing Blue, but had also notched a century against the touring Australian team.


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