

# Thinking Peace: Revisiting Analysis and Intervention in Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

In the two decades since the end of the Cold War, there has been increasing international concern, particularly amongst Western states, with securing global liberal peace (Fukuyama 1992; Mandelbaum 2002). Since this normative goal was laid out comprehensively in the UN's Agenda for Peace (Boutros-Ghali 1992), a wealth of theoretical and policy-based thinking has emerged on how to end the 'internal' wars of the global South. New strategies, practices and research disciplines have proliferated, including facilitative efforts such as 'conflict resolution', 'conflict transformation' and 'peacebuilding' on the one hand and hard-power interventions under logics such as 'humanitarian' protection, 'failed' or 'failing' states and even 'state building' on the other.

However, despite years of research, analysis and praxis, it is clear that there is a huge gap between the continuing 'grim reality' of persistent intra-state wars, and what international interventions in them have been capable of delivering (Ropers 2008). Nonetheless, the prevailing philosophy, theory and practice of liberal peacebuilding has remained largely unchanged. This is despite research such as the Joint Utstein Study of Peacebuilding (Smith 2004) and the work of Goetchel and Hagmann (2008), which point out several deficiencies in contemporary peacebuilding strategies, including inconsistent understandings of 'peace' itself; overly optimistic policy designs; interveners' inability to adapt to changing conflict dynamics; prescriptive and instrumentalist logics; a lack of 'local' involvement and so on.

It is in this context that systemic approaches to conflict analysis promise greater efficacy in the study of protracted conflicts and, thus in the shaping, strategizing and planning of appropriate peace interventions. Certainly, with their strong emphasis on holistic considerations of conflict *systems*, these approaches arguably ought to be more productive than those which focus more narrowly – say, on war economies (Collier 2000; Berdal/Malone 2000), 'poverty' (Brainard/Chollet 2007), or restoring 'security' i.e. counter-terrorism (Byman et al. 2001). However, the focus here is on how analysis in general, and systemic analysis in particular, nonetheless needs to guard against inadvertently reproducing prevailing orthodoxies, especially when it informs, and is informed by, unfolding international interventions to end a given conflict.

We make three interrelated arguments here. Firstly, despite their considerable promise, systemic approaches are no less likely than conventional analyses to be shaped by the *analyst's* own value-judgments, doctrinal assumptions and what Peter

Senge (1990) terms 'mental models'.<sup>1</sup> Conventional approaches, including those listed above, often spring explicitly from the tenets and assumptions of liberal peace, a particular conception of peace that has become taken-for-granted in international peace-building. These analytical approaches tend to take a mechanistic, even if supposedly research driven, approach to understanding conflicts, as well as the possibilities and bases for external interventions in them. Crucially, these approaches fail to account for, let alone critically question, the analyst's own subjective value judgments in arriving at analytical conclusions which then inform, drive and sustain policy. Systemic analysis is not immune to this weakness and must therefore also be undertaken with considerable care and critical self-reflection. To be clear, we are not saying analysts' values are necessarily 'wrong', invalid or inappropriate, but that these values can profoundly shape (or distort) analysts' perceptions of the dynamics of a conflict and the actors involved. We also argue that when informed by the tenets and assumptions of liberal peace, a systemic intervention is unlikely to produce results different to a more conventional approach.

Secondly, analysis must situate international actors – including those intervening for peace and those analysing conflict for this purpose – as an *integral* part of the conflict system, rather than as one-step-removed 'externals'. Instead of belonging to a distinct 'outside' environment, foreign actors pursuing peace, especially states, are often already embedded in the conflict in various capacities: as providers of aid and military assistance to the state or non-state actors, as backers of some political parties and sponsors of selected civil society groups, and so on.

As such, they are internal to the conflict system, affecting its dynamics through their routine actions. International strategies of 'conflict transformation', 'peacebuilding' or 'state-building' are powerful interventions seeking to actively shape conflict sites towards a future that the *interveners* consider an appropriate one. Often pursued through tools such as sanctions, incentives and conditionalities (Griffiths/Barnes 2008), these interventions alter a conflict site in myriad unpredictable ways that are often neglected by analysts predisposed to see conflict systems as largely 'internal' to the country in question.

Moreover, as an agent informing, and thus shaping, external interventions, the analyst must recognize he or she is, just like other intervening actors, clearly internal, not external, to the system under study. To do otherwise risks systemic thinking arriving at conclusions which, especially when appearing 'commonsensical' at the time, serve to legitimate the rationales and actions of powerful actors, both internal and external, and de-legitimate those of weaker ones. The question then, as Oliver Richmond (2007) points out, is not 'how peace?', but 'whose peace?' Dichotomies such as 'insider-partial/outsider-neutral,' taken-for-granted in peace and conflict studies are based on erroneous assumptions about a conflict's dynamics and the range of actors involved in it.

Thirdly, 'analysis' cannot be a one-off exercise conducted ahead of intervention, but must remain an ongoing process, one that closely follows the evolving dynamics of

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1 As Ropers (2008, 8) succinctly puts it, mental models are broadly conceived of as ways of "capturing how an individual or group makes sense of its environment." In that sense, as discussed later, this paper is focussed on the mental models of conflict analysts rather than protagonists.

the conflict system and interventions in it. What we mean here is this: not only should results of interventions be evaluated against the analysis that informed them, but that analysis *itself* must be revisited to incorporate the outcomes of intervention. For example, if sanctions applied to change conflict parties' behaviour instead produces resistance, the logic of that resistance should feed into renewed analysis of the *conflict system*, and not just into evaluation of international policy *implementation* (i.e. how the desired behaviour can yet be brought about – say, by intensified sanctions). Is resistance to a particular 'solution' the same as resistance to 'compromise' or to 'peace' itself? Does the analysis accurately account for the specific rationale of that resistance? The same goes for conflict actors' willing compliance with international desires and demands: are they embracing a shared vision of peace, or simply playing to international expectations while advancing their original goals through new strategies in new circumstances? In either case, why? In short, given that the dynamics of conflict sites are not static or settled, neither therefore should be analytical conclusions.

Drawing on the 2001-2006 Norwegian-led international intervention to end Sri Lanka's protracted ethnopolitical conflict, we show how analysis can reproduce taken-for-granted (mis)understandings of the conflict. Prevailing international attitudes to Sri Lanka had long held the conflict to be *fundamentally* linked to one of two competing, extreme goals – a unitary state and two separate states. Hence, in 2001 federalism was posited by key members of the international community, and their local counterparts, as the 'ideal', even obvious, solution.<sup>2</sup> As argued below, the idea of federalism as a self-evident solution to Sri Lanka's crisis is rooted in the tenets and assumptions of liberal peace, and was determinedly pursued with minimal regard to local perceptions and articulations. To be clear, we are not saying federalism is not a solution; but rather that how this idea was arrived at sprang from a set of assumptions, which then drove international policies on how to pursue a federal solution. For example, once federalism became the 'obvious' solution, actors in the conflict system became easily categorized as either 'pro-peace' or 'anti-peace' primarily on their acceptance of, or resistance to, federalism. International incentives and sanctions were applied accordingly, drastically changing the balances of power within the conflict system.

What was crucially ignored in the analysis was *why* some actors were opposing federalism, and indeed, why others were supporting it (the importance of this lacuna is underlined, as we show, by how many of the then 'pro-peace' actors subsequently also rejected federalism). In other words, what was not taken seriously, even if sometimes noted or inventoried, were the competing logics informing inter-communal relations and forming the root of conflict and violence. We suggest that had the analysis been undertaken with a focus on the ongoing *process* of ending conflict – rather than a specific outcome (i.e. a specific 'solution') – as well as the shifting power differentials between local and international actors, and the powerful influence of the prevailing liberal peace orthodoxy, the inevitability of the fiasco that later unfolded in Sri Lanka would have been apparent.

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2 For example, a statement on 'The need for a national debate on the federal idea' issued by the Centre for Policy alternatives (CPA), a leading liberal/neoliberal Sri Lankan think-tank, on behalf of 1,000 delegates of 25 organisations who met in Colombo on Feb 6, 2006, pointed out: "we believe [...] that a federal Constitution offers a reasonable accommodation or compromise in a conflict where one side is committed to a unitary state and the other a separate state."

Our contribution proceeds thus: In the next section we outline what we mean by ‘systemic thinking’. Amid the different schools of thought (see discussion in Ropers 2008), we take systemic thinking not as a methodology or tool but an analytical approach, a ‘way of thinking’. We also critically discuss what is often taken-for-granted about conflict in developing states (i.e. that it is an ‘internal’ phenomenon) and ‘peace’ (i.e. that this is self-evidently ‘liberal peace’), as well as noting some of the flawed assumptions that flow directly from these conceptions. In the following section we discuss the practices of abstraction and assumption necessary and inherent to analysis and the centrality of analysts’ own ‘mental models’ to their work. In both sections, we illustrate our arguments with reference to the Norwegian-led international intervention in Sri Lanka, especially the identification of federalism as the ‘ideal’ solution to the protracted conflict there. We conclude with some qualified suggestions.

## 1. Thinking About Conflict Systems

To begin with, we see systemic thinking, after Danny Burns (cited in Neuweiler/Körppen 2008, 31), as an ‘attitude’ which informs how we approach analysis of conflict systems, how we discern ‘causes’, how we conceptualize ‘solutions’, how we include or exclude aspects, factors, actors and issues, and, above all, how as analysts we position *ourselves* in the conflict system. Drawing on earlier work by Berghof Peace Support (Wils et al. 2006; Ropers 2008), our discussion is informed by aspects of systems thinking that draws on constructivist and cybernetics-based thought: the centrality of system dynamics<sup>3</sup>, mental models and narratives<sup>4</sup> and, in particular, second order cybernetics. Unlike Norbert Wiener’s systemic approach (first order cybernetics) which sees the observer and observed as two distinct entities, Heinz von Foerster (1974) and Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979), pioneers of second order cybernetics, emphasize the impossibility of ‘neutral’ observation i.e. how observers are, or become, part of the system under observation. This is clearly so when analysis drives interventionist policies and practices. Every observation of a system is itself an intervention in it and there is no separation between the external (observer) and internal (observed) actors, especially once interventions in the conflict system begin. In short, the commonly assumed category of ‘neutrality’ ascribed to the observer is thus untenable.

We recognize that systemic thinking, in particular second order cybernetics and systems dynamics, can contribute to a better understanding of the complex conflict web – which, as noted earlier, extends well beyond the territorial limits of the conflict state. Systemic thinking urges analysts to look beyond the conflict’s self-evident dynamics and to consider seriously local and international rationales and their interplays. Our point, however, is that this does not necessarily happen. Thus, while recognizing the

3 This concept brings to the fore that social processes function in a non-linear manner and are interconnected through network structures and feed-back loops (i.e. circular causality – see Körppen/Ropers’ elaboration of Basic Principles of Systemic Thinking in Neuweiler/Körppen 2008, 29).

4 Based on Senge’s approach (1990, also see discussion in Flood 1999), this recognizes the importance of different narratives and understandings of the conflict that often lead to controversies around root causes i.e. ‘conflict about conflict’.

utility of systems thinking in comparison to other approaches, we also caution that it must be undertaken with care and self-awareness on the part of the analysts if it is not to end up simply making implicit the sometimes explicit assumptions of other methods that systemic analysis seeks to improve upon.<sup>5</sup>

Such difficulties are exemplified by how conflicts such as that in Sri Lanka are conceptualized at the outset: as ‘internal’ conflicts. As Mark Duffield (1998, 97; see also Hettne 2001, 32) has pointed out, the term ‘internal’ or ‘intra-state’ war is itself misleading. Not only have other states – neighbours or distant powers – often long been involved in such conflicts, either indirectly, via proxies or favoured local actors (including the state in question), or directly, but a variety of armed challengers to the state have often relied on external linkages and global networks for the military, economic and political sustenance of their projects, as has the conflict state itself. Moreover, as the burgeoning field of post-colonial scholarship makes clear, many of today’s conflict sites, and interventions in them, are consequent to and sometimes shaped fundamentally by colonial experience. Sri Lanka is no exception, given that identities, power-distributions and the structure of the state itself have been profoundly shaped by centuries of European colonial rule and decades of post-independence international engagement.<sup>6</sup>

With regard to system boundaries, this means so-called ‘externals’ are in fact very much part of the conflict system. Firstly, this is exemplified by the discernible impact of international practices such as the ‘War on Terror’ or global aid networks. In many analyses these are reduced to merely the constraints they imposed or the opportunities they made available to ‘local’ actors (as in ‘sanctions, conditionalities and incentives’), rather than being understood in terms of the powerful system-wide influences these externalities were having. Secondly, international actors are integral to a conflict system in so far as they act in pursuit of their own values and perceived interests, often building capacities and shaping ‘local’ dynamics towards ends they (externals) deem the best outcome for conflict and its resolution. Crucially, for the discussion here, many of the leading states and international financial institutions involved after 2002 in producing ‘peace’ in Sri Lanka had already long been involved in the protracted and high-intensity conflict there by providing support to the state, both material (financial, developmental, military etc.) and intangible (political support, expert advice, training etc.)<sup>7</sup> These routine relationships with the state are important given that the character, structure and conduct of the state are fundamental to understanding the conflict’s dynamics.

For convenience, however, we use ‘external’ and ‘international’ actors as interchangeable labels in relation to the conflict system. It is worth noting that even the category ‘external actors’ or ‘international community’ needs to be disaggregated if one is to make sense of the seemingly disjointed, uncoordinated or contradictory (see

5 Indeed, there is no guarantee systemic analysis will automatically lead to strategies for effective intervention in support of peace. On the contrary, due to the recognized dynamic nature of conflict, uncertainty, unpredictability and unintended outcomes should be central assumptions of an analytical framework. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter, that this is usually not the case should raise serious questions about how far ‘peace’ can be strategized or steps to overcome conflict programmed.

6 From a post-colonial perspective, even these intervening states and their relationships to actors in conflict sites like Sri Lanka have also been profoundly shaped by the colonial experience.

7 See for example Creekmore et al. (2009); Lunstead (2007).

Goodhand/Klem 2005) actions of its members. Oliver Richmond notes that the term ‘international *community*’ itself indicates an important assumption “that there exists a body of actors with sufficient consensus and will to be able to bring about peace in conflict zones – according to how this community conceptualizes peace, of course” (2007, 14). With regards to Sri Lanka’s conflict, we use the term ‘international community’ to refer primarily to the grouping of Western states (and Japan), and those non-state actors associated with them, including intergovernmental organizations (such as the World Bank), non-governmental organizations and other hybrid structures concerned with a range of issues such as ‘human rights’, ‘development’, ‘peace’ and so on.

## 2. Liberal Peace

It should be recognized that international interventions in the global South in the last two decades have pursued a largely Western liberal conception of peace, one which, as is criticized (see Richmond 2007; Paris 2002), is rarely reflected on by its advocates and practitioners. The essential elements of ‘liberal peace’ are (specific conceptions of) peace, democracy and free markets – Mandelbaum (2002) characterizes these as “the ideas that conquered the world” – or, as a key study on Sri Lanka endorsed by the World Bank and other donors puts it, “liberal democracy and market sovereignty” (Goodhand/Klem 2005). In this logic, not only does the combination of democracy and free markets constitute the bar to future violent conflict (‘Liberal’), they are also the means by which the ‘conflict-ridden’ societies of the global South are to divest themselves of their debilitating antagonisms and other lacks, and thereby attain a state of perpetual peace (‘Peace’). Whilst a detailed dissection of liberal peace is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth noting that the term embodies specific, and contestable, conceptions of ‘peace’, ‘democracy’ and ‘free markets’. It is also worth noting that attempts to produce this ideal, for example in African locales, have perversely had the reverse consequences to those envisioned (Willett 2005). Nonetheless, in the past two decades, this transformatory logic has been embedded in countless policy documents and research analyses by Western states and their associated organizations, institutions and agencies to such an extent it has come to constitute the ‘commonsense’ of international intervention in Southern sites. This is especially so in instances of bringing about transition from war to peace. As Roger Mac Ginty (2009, 52) notes,

“the manifestation of the liberal peace are most visible in situations of internationally supported peacebuilding and post-war reconstruction. Here the levers of the liberal peace include: western encouragement (or coercion) to reach a peace deal, direction in writing a new constitution, assistance in establishing and advising political parties, a donors’ conference to fund and direct post-war reconstruction, help in holding electoral contests [...] programmes of capacity-building for the state and civil society, the introduction of good governance targets and the attaching of economic reform conditions to any reconstruction assistance.”

The Sri Lankan case is a classic example of how the liberal peace was followed in myriad intervention strategies, including all of those listed above. Crucially, for the discussion here, for many ‘externals’ – as well as ‘internal’ – proponents of liberal democracy and market sovereignty, federalism was seen as the ideal way to ultimately

bring about ‘good governance’. In this context, it is worth noting, as Mac Ginty (2008, 143) points out, how a set of global power dynamics are embedded in the liberal peace:

“Liberal peace [is] the concept, condition and practice whereby leading states, international organisations and international financial institutions promote their version of peace through peace-support interventions, control of financial architecture, support for state sovereignty and the international *status quo*.”

Liberal peace turns on a specific ideal of the modern state, its citizen and its society which, when established, is held to lead to the emergence of a peace in that country and, once rendered ubiquitous, to a pacific, liberal world order. This has profound consequences for how places like Sri Lanka are viewed from the outset. Most importantly, even before the ‘internal’ dynamics of a conflict are looked at, the shape of what the final ‘peace’ *should* be is already known: a single, liberal democratic state with a market economy. Crucially, liberal peace requires the rejection of the primacy of ethnicity in individuals’ interactions with each other and its replacement with a sense of civic citizenship and a democratic ethos. In this logic, in societal terms, ‘Sri Lankans’ are held, a priori, to constitute a single multi-ethnic national collective that has come to be fractured along ethnic and/or religious lines due to past ethno-nationalist mobilization, ascent to state power of illiberal (in economic and political terms) parties and, of course, protracted armed conflict. Producing liberal peace therefore means the erosion of *ethnopolitical* identities and the remobilizing of the members of such groupings into a single multicultural and pluralist collective with a civic identity – one centred, moreover, on a responsive and robust state equipped with democratic mechanisms for peacefully resolving disputes.

This is taken for granted as both necessary and possible, despite very different ‘local’ conceptions of the island’s human collectives and their relationships to each other. ‘Tamil’, ‘Muslim’ and ‘Sinhala’ are long-sedimented identities that inform, and are reproduced by, local practices, including those of the state, myriad actors in ‘civil society’, including the influential Buddhist clergy, business patterns, media reporting, etc. The central contradiction at the heart of Sri Lanka’s protracted ethnic conflict is between two distinct political rationalities (Dean 1999) – or ‘ways of thinking’ – as to *what the basis for power-relations between the communities on the island should be* (Nadarajah 2010).<sup>8</sup> While space precludes a detailed discussion, brief outlines are presented here. One political rationality, positing the Tamils and Sinhalese as both ‘founding races’ of the island (Wilson 2000), calls for equitable power-sharing between these collectives.<sup>9</sup> For convenience, this is labelled ‘Tamil rationality’ here,

8 The term ‘political rationality’, in contrast to ideology, philosophy, nationalism, and so on, reflects the concept of a broad and long-standing political logic informing wide-ranging and even seemingly contradictory decisions by political actors. A political rationality is “any form of calculation about political activity i.e. about any activity which has as its objective the influence, appropriation, redistribution, allocation or maintenance of powers of the government of the state or other organizations” (Dean 1999, 210). The concept is drawn from the extensive work by scholars developing Foucault’s notion of ‘governmentality’ (1991). See, for example, Miller/Rose (1990), Rose/Miller (1992), Hindess (1993), Barry et al. (1996), Rose (1999), Larner/Walters (2004).

9 This political rationality sees Tamils and Sinhalese as two equal (i.e. equally valuable), rights-bearing *collectives* i.e. irrespective of whether these collectives are ‘races’, ‘peoples’, ‘nations’ etc., they are the same type, are equally valuable and *are the entities between which power should be shared* (Rasaratnam 2009). This thinking informed the platforms of the All Ceylon Tamil Congress (which sought power-sharing at the centre

though it is noted that many others, including some Sinhalese, share this thinking, while some Tamils do not. The other rationality which has informed the conduct of the Sri Lankan state and Sinhala polity since independence conceives the island as the preserve of the Sinhala people, which are held to be its original inhabitants, and the Tamils as late arrivals (De Votta 2007; see also Krishna 1999; Bartholomeusz/De Silva 1998; Kapferer 1988).<sup>10</sup> For convenience, this is labelled ‘Sinhala-Buddhist rationality’ here, though it is shared by many others, including some ‘internationals’, but not some Sinhalese. Indeed, it can be argued that the conflict itself constitutes efforts to render permanent and unchallengeable one or other of the competing ordering of relations between these collectives (Nadarajah 2010).

Crucial to understanding Sri Lanka’s conflict is that these competing conceptions, which position the island’s collective identities in different relations to each other, are deeply embedded in everyday life. Not only do they inform the practices, rituals and doctrine of the state, they cleave party politics, civil society activity and media (Orjouela 2003; De Votta 2004; Nadarajah 2005). As Danny Burns argues, it is important to look at both formal and informal levels of the conflict system and “to make central what happens in the corridors, the pubs and children’s play spaces, to engage with social norms and to surface flows of power” (2007, 39). However, in much conflict ‘analysis’ undertaken in service of liberal peace, those local articulations which appear not to accord with its tenets are dismissed wholesale, without serious interrogation of their origins, bases or logics, as ‘illiberal’ and problematic ‘nationalisms’.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the ceaseless reproduction of these identity-relations or hierarchies through myriad, widespread and sedimented daily practices, and hence their resilience to liberal peacebuilding, are therefore rarely foregrounded in analysis. Rather, focus is directed towards the relative strengths of those actors seen as problematic for liberal peace.<sup>12</sup>

Just as crucial is how ‘the state’ is consequently conceptualized in analyses of ‘internal’ conflict. For liberal peace, a conflict state is a territorialized social container located on a continuum between anarchy and collapse on one the hand and a perfect market democracy on the other. Producing ‘lasting peace’ therefore entails moving the state in question further towards this ideal through a variety of transformative measures. This is also been seen as unquestioningly possible; no state or society is too far

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between the Sinhalese on the one hand and the Tamil-speaking communities – i.e. all the non-Sinhala communities, on the other; this is the so-called ‘50-50’ idea), the post-independence Federal Party (seeking power-sharing between two federal entities, based on Tamil and Sinhala homelands in the Northeast and the South respectively) and, later, the TULF and LTTE, seeking two independent states (ibid.).

10 Sometimes said to be based on a ‘mytho-history’ narrative outlined most vividly in the Mahavamsa – ‘Great chronicles’, this rationality has been summarized thus: “the Sinhalese majority regards the new [post-independence] nation as a space that properly belongs to itself, one in which purportedly various but lesser outsiders ought to know their place” (Krishna 1999, 57, insert added). See especially Kapferer (1988) and Gunawardana (1995), also Little (1994) and Bartholomeusz (2002).

11 As an aside, it is worth noting how this also reduces ‘local ownership’ of peacebuilding effectively to privileging those (thought to be) subscribing to liberal peace over those (seen to be) opposing it.

12 For example, the relatively small, overtly Sinhala nationalist parties, the JVP and JHU, often appeared in international analysis as the sole custodians of such sentiment. This was erroneous as their hostility to power-sharing resonated strongly with, arguably, the majority of Sinhala voters and was manifest in media, civil society agitation and so on. In other words, the adoption of Sinhala nationalist policies and rhetoric by mainstream parties deemed to be ‘pro-peace’ were not taken as consequential. All Sinhala parties swiftly rejected federalism in the twilight of the peace process.

beyond the pale to be engaged and transformed into this ideal, the only question being *how* this is to be done. What is clear in this conception is, firstly, that armed challenge to a state, even in “situations of repressive or divisive governance” (OECD 2001, 62), is not acceptable; and secondly, the territorial integrity of the state is inviolable, no matter how popular internal demands for self-determination may be or how problematic the state’s conduct towards a section of its citizenry.<sup>13</sup> As such, apart from the state, any actors who have the capacity for organized violence are an anathema and, rather than the logics of racial hierarchy/equality embedded in a conflict system, it is the presence or existence of these actors which constitutes the locus of ‘conflict’. The attendant, but implicit, question is how the state, as problematic as its governance may be, is to be bolstered against violent challenges to its authority.

All this has specific consequences for how analysis of ‘internal’ conflicts is *approached*. In 2001, Sri Lanka appeared – a priori – as a democratic multi-ethnic state struggling to overcome its economic inequalities and unite its people in the face of ‘competing nationalisms’ (Goodhand 2001) and an armed challenge from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In this frame, the main obstacle on the path to peace (read economic development and electoral democracy) becomes conflict itself, and by extension, the LTTE and its ‘separatist’ struggle. In contrast, the Sri Lankan state was straightforwardly conceptualized as a central agent *for peace*, and thus deserving of robust and multi-faceted international support. However, an alternative understanding of the state and the conflict, one which resonates more clearly with unfolding dynamics today, is summarized by Camilla Orjuela:

“Sri Lanka could be seen as a textbook example of an ethnic conflict, where economic, political and cultural deprivation and grievances of a minority have provoked a violent rebellion against a *state* that has come to be seen as representative of only the majority ethnic group” (2003, 198, emphasis added).

The point here is the centrality of the *ethnopolitical* dynamics of the Sri Lankan conflict, something which is often backgrounded amid a focus on ‘conflict actors’, ‘armed groups’ and ‘security’. The discriminatory policies of successive post-independence Sinhala-dominated governments and the concomitant embedding of majoritarianism in state structures has been discussed in several scholarly works (see for example Bose 1994; Krishna 1999; Bartholomeusz 2002; De Votta 2004) and occasionally in some donor studies (World Bank 2003; JBIC 2003) and will not be expanded on here.<sup>14</sup> It suffices to note here that, as scholarly literature sets out in detail, the post-independence state has long been engaged in the *pursuit* of a political vision of the island that is at odds with the liberal peace. Nonetheless, in 2001 not only was the ‘liberal peace’ clearly the goal of the Norwegian-led initiative, the state was understood by international actors as a willing agent of liberal peace (Goodhand/Klem 2005, 65, 67-68).

13 Even the UN-established International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), looking at situations where external interventions which violate state sovereignty may be warranted by the conduct of the state concerned, warns that any external intervention should not encourage demands for secession and, indeed, even intervention based on the ‘responsibility to protect’ can only be on the premise that such demands are rejected (ICISS 2001, 25).

14 We have reviewed much of this extensive literature and critically analysed the assumptions inherent to 2001-2006 international intervention in Sri Lanka elsewhere (see Nadarajah/Vimalarajah 2008).

This chapter does not take a normative position on ‘liberal peace’ itself, but instead argues that taking its tenets for granted engenders a number of specific, and often erroneous, assumptions when it comes to *analysis* of conflicts in the global South: firstly, that these conflicts are largely closed, more-or-less *localized* systems (i.e. conflict dynamics are internally produced and sustained); secondly, what constitutes *peace* (by which we don’t necessarily mean ‘the political solution’) is self-evident and that this is universally understood; thirdly, external intervention in these conflict systems is not only desirable, but also *possible* (i.e. liberal peace can indeed be ‘made’ by outside action); fourthly, foreign analysts and interveners are, by definition, external to the conflict itself and therefore clear-eyed and, apart from being committed to ‘peace’, are *objective*; fifthly, that interveners remain *external* to the conflict system even after their interventions begin; and sixthly, that the solution interveners advocate would *resolve* the conflict if only they were steadfast in ensuring conflict actors to go along with it. As Goetschel and Hagmann (2009, 61) point out,

“three of the most prominent ‘peace orthodoxies’ of civilian peacebuilding concern the tacit assumptions that peace is an uncontested idea, that peace can be achieved by dint of planned bureaucratic interventions and that liberal democracy equals peace.”

We do not, of course, intend to exhaustively examine or offer remedies for these problems. Rather, we seek to demonstrate that systemic analysis, undertaken with explicit and critical awareness of these assumptions as informing external intervention and analysis, can engender more productive, if sometimes unpalatable, understandings of conflicts. Such self-conscious analysis can also make possible critical appraisal of ‘solutions’ and interventions to produce them that are otherwise held to be both self-evidently appropriate and viable.

### 3. Abstraction, Mental Models and Power

Any analysis, including those based on systemic thinking, constitutes a process of abstraction, inference and deduction by which sense can be made of the complex web of interactions that comprise a conflict site. In this sense, systemic approaches, which seek to capture the totality of the interactions that constitute a conflict, undoubtedly promise greater analytical completeness than conventional approaches that focus on, for example, the supposed ‘interests’ or claimed ‘ideologies’ of the main protagonists. Nonetheless, in any analysis, as Sankaran Krishna points out, “abstraction is never innocent of power. The precise [...] abstraction in each instance decides what aspects of a limitless reality are brought into sharp focus and what aspects are, literally, left out of the picture” (2001, 403). As Krishna also argues, the point is not whether to abstract or not – “it is an unavoidable moment in the constitution of knowledge” – but rather, “to be vigilant as to what abstraction simultaneously conceals as it reveals” (ibid.). We argue that the mere privileging of conflict actors’ ‘mental models’ and the use of ‘conflict maps’ (see discussion of both in Ropers 2008) in systemic thinking does not lessen this risk even if this improves the possibility of analytical completeness. The systemic analyst, like any other, has to contend with the plethora of claims, counter-claims, evidences and propaganda that underpin the discursive contestations within which people

fight and die. Our point is that, like any other observer, systemic analysts also bring to bear their own conceptual frameworks, value-judgements and a priori 'common-sense' that are just as contingent and socially constructed as those of the actors embedded within the conflict system. As Peter Senge points out,

"mental models are conceptual structures in the mind that drive cognitive processes of understanding. They influence people's actions because they mould people's appreciation of what they see. People therefore observe selectively. Mental models most often invisibly define our relationship with each other and with the world in which we find ourselves. Limiting the vision of what can be done. They hold back learning by restricting possible ways of conceptualising things. Mental models occupy our mind and shape our actions and are based on assumptions about reality" (cited in Flood 1999, 22).

Of course it is not a revelation that analysts have 'mental models' too. Rather, our point is that these shape their work and its output. Crucially, as noted above, this is not just a problem of how peace is conceptualized, but also how the analysis of the *conflict* itself is approached in the first place. Analysis, even in the service of 'peace', is therefore not immune from Krishna's reminder that "the precise nature of our abstractions depends on the productive ends toward which they are deployed" (2001, 403). Consider, for example, how analysts go about sorting local actors into binary categories such as 'pro-peace'/'spoiler' or 'moderate'/'extremist'. Thus, despite international actors' – and especially analysts' – often explicit intention of 'not taking sides', this does not mean their actions do not come to have this result, especially when they set out to pursue a specific outcome (federalism, say) as a self-evident basis for building 'liberal peace'.

The international intervention in Sri Lanka has been described by one study as a "more robust and multi-faceted international response to conflict and peace dynamics than has historically been the case" (Goodhand/Klem 2005, 10). Despite over two decades of protracted conflict and three earlier decades of intensifying ethnopolitical strife, Sri Lanka was held to be a self-evident opportunity for "an internationally supported success story in liberal peacebuilding" (ibid., 67). This robust, multi-faceted intervention also implied substantial investment in studying the conflict, its drivers and dynamics for peace.<sup>15</sup> Notably, these analyses were undertaken in a specific context of "a comprehensive [international] programme of peace support in Sri Lanka" (Ropers 2008, 3, insert added), of which they were a key part. Moreover, the unfolding international intervention – a 'more robust and multi-faceted' one than before – centred around the production of a federal Sri Lanka as a commonsensical 'compromise' solution to a conflict between two extremes: a unitary state and two independent ones.<sup>16</sup> Given the differing understandings of the conflict held by those on the island, federalism – particularly without elaboration of its specific form – was not necessarily capable of addressing what they differently considered the core issues to be. Nonetheless, in the early days of the peace process, the idea that federalism was the ideal, indeed the only

15 For example, donors funded two 'Strategic Conflict Assessments' (Goodhand 2001; Goodhand/Klem 2005). Notably for the discussion here, a pronounced effort was also undertaken to apply systemic thinking to making the transformation of internal conflicts more effective (Ropers 2008, 2).

16 Kelleher and Taulbee (2005, 71) quote a Norwegian deputy foreign minister on Norway's role as facilitators: "As facilitator, Norway's role is to assist the parties in their efforts to reach a political solution. A significant part of our effort focuses on promoting understanding between the parties: we spend much of our time acting as a channel of communication and helping them to find common ground between their respective positions."

solution was widely accepted and forcefully *promoted* by international actors, including powerful Western states and associated NGOs, organizations and agencies.

In this context, any analysis of the conflict was plausible insofar as it contributed to the case for federalism. Arguments that questioned the efficacy of federalism or drew other conclusions were discounted as not credible or even marginalized as not ‘pro-peace’. Our point is how even attempts at applying systemic thinking to Sri Lanka do not transcend this orthodoxy. For example, Nobert Ropers (2008), in an otherwise insightful paper engaging with the field of systemic thinking alongside a detailed reflection on the Norwegian-led peace initiative in Sri Lanka, nonetheless bases his analysis on a conventional understanding of the conflict i.e. as one of two competing goals or, as he sees it, *solutions*: a unitary state and two independent states.<sup>17</sup> Also conventionally, he attributes these ‘positions’ respectively to the “[Sri Lankan] government as well as the majority of Sinhala mainstream parties”, on the one hand, and “the Tamil nationalist parties and particularly the LTTE” on the other (ibid., 19). The compromise ‘solution’ to the *conflict* is held to be located somewhere between these extremes. The significance of this line of reasoning is amplified when Ropers argues that “by *starting from solutions rather than causes*, this [systemic] analysis [has] brought to light new creative options” (ibid., 3, emphasis, inserts added). It is worth noting again how the identification of a particular ‘solution’ must presuppose a particular understanding of the ‘problem’.

This is the thrust of our argument: although Ropers’ paper seeks to engage, amongst other things, with “the structural and contextual features which influence the conflict and determine its dynamics” and with “parties’ understanding of the conflict and their needs for conflict resolution” (ibid.), *it does so in ways that are deeply rooted in the values of the liberal peace*. The ‘creative options’ Ropers’ analysis brought to light, for example, do not include the possibility of two independent states being an *acceptable* solution to the conflict’s core issues but as one clearly on the limits – because it is one of two furthest from ‘compromise’. Furthermore, the limits between which compromise is framed are the stated goals of the two main protagonists (the Sri Lankan state and the LTTE). In other words, even this effort at systemic analysis has not gone beyond the basic assumptions which frame conventional analyses of Sri Lanka.

In other words, rather than taking seriously the ‘structural and contextual features’ that led to the eruption of violence in the first place, Ropers’ analysis effectively frames the conflict *primarily* in terms of the main protagonists – a conceptualization made explicit in his uncritical adoption of the tetralemma schematic. Firstly, it is what the main protagonists demand, and their relative power, that decides the framework for understanding the potential solution, rather than the underlying ‘structural and contextual features’. Using the tetralemma to visualize the respective demands of the conflict parties, moreover, serves to further write out the dynamism and the multiplicity of conflict issues; the conflict is reduced to the sole contradiction between the state and the LTTE. In other words, analysis still centres on the most powerful actors, rather than the structural factors which led to their emergence. As the brief outline of the underlying

17 This categorization is extended to the numerous other actors in the conflict system by these positions being elaborated thus: “only a sustained unitary state or a moderate version of devolution is an acceptable” solution to the former, while “only a high level of (internal) self-determination or the creation of a separate state” to the latter (Ropers 2008, 18).

rationalities and their reproduction through myriad routine daily practices suggests, the presence of one or other actor (with the exception of the state), does not explain a protracted conflict. The point is underscored today, in the wake of the military defeat of the LTTE: if it was the structural features of the conflict that led to federalism being the 'ideal' solution in 2001, then this must be the case even after the defeat of the LTTE, but today there are almost no international actors prepared to even mention the term federalism, let alone call for this solution. In other words, if structural drivers are taken seriously, then firstly, the defeat of the LTTE will lead not to peace, but to a pause in violence followed by the emergence of a new militancy and another round of conflict; and secondly, unless the drivers of conflict have *changed*, federalism must still be the 'right' solution. In this context, it is worth recalling how in liberal peace terms, it is the armed challenge of the LTTE itself that was considered the primary obstacle to peace.

What is not seriously engaged with, even if competing 'discourses' (Frerks/Klem 2004) are enumerated, is *why* 'extreme' constitutional goals (a unitary Sri Lanka and an independent Tamil Eelam) are being sought by local actors. In other words, for their advocates, what are these two constitutional forms meant to *serve*? What *use* are they over other forms, what problems are they meant to solve for their advocates, and what aspirations do they embody? Until such questions are answered, a unitary state or an independent state are merely abstract political forms; and the explicit goals of the protagonists come to be taken, as in Ropers' analysis, as the self-evident *ends* of conflict between which 'compromise' is to be made (i.e. the specific purpose or benefit of these 'solutions' for their protagonists then become irrelevant to analysis and are possibly a matter of speculation). In other words, unless these contextualizing questions are posed and answered by analysts, the real 'drivers of conflict' become all too easily masked *by the analysis itself*.

## Conclusion

Systemic analysis undertaken with an awareness of the liberal peace biases of international interveners and analysts could have brought to the fore crucial reasons why federalism, then regarded by international actors as an 'ideal' solution for Sri Lanka's protracted conflict, actually exacerbated rather than attenuated the crisis. Single-minded international promotion of federalism as a commonsense 'compromise' solution to Sri Lanka's protracted ethnopolitical contradictions was not only based on erroneous assumptions about the contradictions underlying the conflict, but *in itself* constituted a heavy-handed intervention that destabilized the delicate 'no war, no peace' disequilibrium that had emerged with the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. In other words, a close examination of Sri Lanka's conflict dynamics, which went deeper than a focus on the two main protagonists' stated goals and looked at the *rationales* within which an independent state and a unitary state are sought and fought for, would have predicted the futility of raising a non-specific federalism as a solution and, especially, applying international pressure for it to be accepted. To be clear, we are not saying federalism is *not* a solution to Sri Lanka's crisis, but rather that unless the protagonists understand-

ings of the conflict and, especially, lasting peace are engaged with, the pursuit of an abstract notion of federalism can be expected to trigger intense resistance from both 'sides', albeit through different logics. This is not to advocate one form of federalism over another, but to argue that international interventions cannot hope to produce lasting 'peace' unless they explicitly address these competing political rationalities (Nadarajah 2010). Our call here is not against international intervention per se, nor for a normative rejection of the fundamentals of liberal peace (i.e. liberal democracy and market economics). But we ask for a more nuanced, self-conscious, pragmatic, and thus effective international action based on a thorough understanding of a given conflict's complex history, its interrelated variables, the mental models of internal *and* external actors, the dominant political rationalities in the conflict zone, the legacy of past peace initiatives (such as earlier efforts to raise federalism in Sri Lanka) and, especially, the considerable impact of the prevailing international environment of the time.

Setting aside the many claims of their hidden reasons, it is clear from international actors' efforts towards 'making peace' in Sri Lanka that their understandings of the conflict's underlying dynamics were deeply flawed and, crucially for the arguments presented here, were driven by prevailing orthodoxies concerning liberal peace, what prevents its genesis, and how it should be yet brought about. To arrive at more nuanced understandings of conflicts like Sri Lanka's, therefore, analysts, including systemic thinkers, must reflect on their own assumptions and value-systems, and thus critically question their own roles and impact within the conflict system. What appears unproblematically, even commonsensically, to be a compromise solution for a given conflict may, with good reasons – in their own logics – not be seen as such by local actors who are often operating in different political rationalities to that of the analyst. What appear, or are claimed to be, the bases for the conflict may mask the deep-rooted crises of antagonistic identities, contested territories and power differentials that can only be revealed by a detailed analysis that takes account of the analyst's own mental model. As such, even the assumption that there *is* a compromise solution and all that is required for peace is to identify it is also questionable: what appear to be zero-sum dynamics can be precisely that.

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