



## The political geography of war's end: Territorialisation, circulation, and moral anxiety in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka



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### A B S T R A C T

#### Keywords:

War  
Territorialisation  
Circulation  
Transition  
Resettlement  
Sri Lanka

This article argues that territorialisation and circulation are centrally important to the transition that takes place at the end of a war. It does so with a case study of Trincomalee, a multiethnic region on Sri Lanka's east coast, after the end of the ethno-separatist war in 2009. Post-war territorialisation comprises the consolidation of the government's military victory through the establishment of military zones and sacred sites, the construction of strategic roads and shifts in the ethnic settlement patterns. There are, however, a number of contingent counter-forces that unsettle the common interpretation that this is orchestrated 'Sinhala colonisation'. The angle of circulation directs us to flows and influences that become manifest when the curtailment of war (checkpoints, frontlines, collapsed infrastructure, surveillance) comes to an end. This propels a peace dividend - access, security, mobility - but also incites concerns among all ethnic communities about exposure to the moral decay of a globalised world. While territorialisation and circulation may appear to be opposites, they are in fact a conceptual pair. The two terms expose a field of tension that has much to contribute to the geographical literature on war endings, which has neglected the significance of postwar shifts in circulation thus far.

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The end of war is a confusing time. It marks the closure of a period of tremendous human suffering and the beginning of an uncertain future. New rules of the game are articulated, and this produces winners, losers, new forms of order, and unforeseen consequences. This article uses the case of post-war Trincomalee, a multi-ethnic region on Sri Lanka's east coast, to highlight the importance of two inter-related geographical processes in the transition after war: territorialisation and circulation.

The literature on war endings and so-called 'war-to-peace transitions' has burgeoned since the mid-1990s. Geography has followed suit with several insightful forays into different dimensions of such transitions, including return and resettlement processes (Dahlman & Ó Tuathail, 2005), securitised post-war forest management (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011), the spatial erasure associated with genocide (Tyner, 2009), and the spatial politics of post-war power sharing (Jeffrey, 2006). While we are far removed from a consolidated body of work on the geography of war endings, these scholarly contributions provide a useful springboard for exploring the many spatial changes spawned by a military victory, a peace accord, or a combination of both.

This article aims to deepen this geographical scholarship by putting territorialisation and circulation at the heart of the equation. In the case of post-war Trincomalee, territorialisation comprises the consolidation of military victory through the demarcation of zones, claims on religious sites and the construction of strategic roads. Circulation refers to the opening up of a previously isolated region to external influences due to lifted restrictions and improved infrastructure. Both dynamics create anxieties and controversies, but in rather different ways. Paradoxically, the region's transition encompasses forms of enclosure through the spatial consolidation of military victory, as well as a process of opening up. While territorialisation has received some attention in the literature on war endings, circulation has largely been neglected. My central contention is that the conceptual pair of territorialisation and circulation is pivotal to understanding the great diversity of processes that take place at the end of war.

### The political geography of war endings

Geographical research on war has gained new momentum in recent years. Alongside attempts at unravelling the global interconnections, boundaries and spaces of exception associated with the 'War on Terror' (Gregory, 2010; Gregory & Pred, 2006;

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Kobayasi, 2009), scholars have explored contextualised empirical landscapes of armed conflict. Military offensives, displacement, hardening of societal fault lines, settlement politics, and symbolic apportionment of space are among the processes that shape war-time geographies. At the extreme end, political violence may completely overhaul or erase human landscapes, through 'ethnic cleansing' (Dahlman & Williams, 2010; Ó Tuathail, 2010; on Bosnia-Herzegovina), 'terror-induced deterritorialization' (Lunstrum, 2009; on Mozambique) or genocide (Tyner, 2009; on Cambodia). But landscapes of war may be shaped in more gradual, structural ways as well. Studies have appeared of Israeli government actions in relation to Palestine, including the construction of the wall, settlement schemes and land tenure (Alatout, 2009; Yiftachel, 2002), which have been criticised as attempts at 'biopolitical control' (Parsons & Salter, 2008), and 'graduated incarceration' (Smith, 2011). Another well-studied case – not an all-out war, but very violent nonetheless – concerns the urban landscapes of Hindu-Muslim violence in India: the way riots and attacks on religious sites erase adversarial spatial markers, harden boundaries, and 'purify' spaces (Banchetta, 2000; Berenschot, 2011; Chatterjee, 2009). These studies of the landscapes of violence are complemented by conceptual work on the way competing forms of order and sovereignty become manifest in armed conflict. The convoluted geographies of armed conflict have been characterised as multifarious 'governable spaces' (Watts, 2003) and 'warscapes' (Korf, Engeler, & Hagmann, 2010).

To sum up, common spatial orderings that surface in these diverse geographical case studies include securitised landscapes (frontlines, walls, checkpoints, and interrupted flows), competing forms of spatialised authority (adversarial territorial claims, governable spaces and projects of sovereign rule) and embattled demographic geographies (displacement, settlement politics, and hardening social boundaries).

What does the end of war do to spatial orderings? Is there something specific about post-war geographies? Interestingly, there is no established body of work that confronts these questions directly. There are, however, several good scholarly starting points for exploring them. The edited volume *Reconstructing Conflict* by Kirsch and Flint (2011) is perhaps the most encompassing effort to date. The volume carries the subtitle *Integrating War and Post-War Geographies* and it rightly posits that the war-peace dichotomy is a false one. There are manifestations of peace in war zones, and peace may comprise a thin veneer for suppressed conflicts and imposed pacification. Rather than an objective difference in conditions, the divide between war and peace is a discursive expression of power (Kirsch & Flint, 2011, pp. 13–19).

Several authors have pointed out that post-war societies embody hegemonic power relations: military might translates into more domesticated forms of order and subjectivity. In line with the literature on liberal peace (Duffield, 2001), countries undergoing international efforts of 'post-war reconstruction' or 'state-building' may be seen as frontiers of global neoliberal capitalism. Post-war governments also craft geographies through surveillance and control, the nurturing of state institutions and citizenship, or more subtle spatial means, such as the use of urban planning for nationalist bravado: street names and reconstructed archaeological sites glorifying victorious versions of history, while projecting stable and orderly futures (Nagel, 2002; Robinson, Engelstoft, & Pobric, 2001). Much in line with the blurred boundaries between war and peace mentioned above, Stephen Graham (2009) argues that any urban environment is a potential battle space today. After all, contemporary security doctrines now conceive of any global citizen as a potential threat and high-tech surveillance techniques travel with ever-greater ease from long-time war zones like Palestine to Western airports and neighbourhoods.

State territorialisation in peripheral areas tends to emphasise control and surveillance as well. Peluso and Vandergeest's (2011) research on Southeast Asia examines how military strategies like depopulating forests, encouraging in-migration of loyalist groups, changing land use and vegetation, and surveillance infrastructure (roads, high-tech maps) cumulate into a post-war geography that benefits state interests: clearly demarcated and largely unpopulated forests, the concentration of potentially oppositional populations in administered settlements, and established military presence in strategic locations. Brottem and Unruh's (2009) work on post-war Liberia complements these conclusions: war-time displacement left forests empty, thus enabling land use planners to work with a 'clean slate', disregarding customary land mechanisms. Similar research on Laos (Baird & Le Billon, 2012; Lestrellin, 2011) reminds us that domination and state territorialisation are never absolute, however. Localised land struggles, steeped in genealogical memories, may interfere with centralised programming, and people's everyday practices produce contingent counter-territorialisation.

The moving around of people and the reshuffling of struggles over land has political ramifications. This becomes particularly clear in the geographical scholarship on the post-war transition of former Yugoslavia. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the internationally imposed Dayton accord prescribed ethnic cohabitation. In an attempt to redress the legacies of enmity and 'ethnic cleansing', internationally supported schemes ventured to remix ethnic populations and craft a democratic state with functioning liberal institutions and federal checks and balances. However, these efforts got entangled in socio-economic counter-forces, persistent concerns about insecurity, and electoral pressures that mobilised against the spirit of Dayton (Dahlman & Ó Tuathail, 2005; Jeffrey, 2006). Similar tensions over boundaries, ethnic enclaves, and violence aimed at consolidating sovereign spaces occurred in Kosovo (Dahlman & Williams, 2010).

The scholarship on the geography of war endings thus covers a wealth of issues, but is also rather fragmented. Cutting through the variety of thematic insights and the contextual diversity, three important observations stand out. Firstly, war endings comprise shifts, transitions and uncertainties, but also involve structural continuity. The power configurations manifest in military victories or peace agreements shape the political geography that follows in their wake. Secondly, the location of populations plays a central role in post-war spatial politics. The settlement patterns of identity groups are pivotal to visions of peace and national unity (e.g. ethnic remixing), claims to sovereignty, territory or autonomy (e.g. ethnic enclaves; administrative boundaries; electoral geography) and the surveillance of unruly peripheries (e.g. moving people from forests to administrable villages). Thirdly, attempts at crafting post-war hegemony are prone to contingencies, counter-forces and localised variegation. People after all, are not simply pawns of the state's bio-political schemes or military calculus. They are also social, cultural and economic actors who navigate different kinds of force fields. Post-war landscapes are therefore not simply a derivative of the order that prevails on the battlefield or the peace summit.

The concepts territorialisation and circulation are well-positioned to bring together and further develop the diverse geographical literature on war endings. Territorialisation touches on many of the above-mentioned studies, though the term is not always invoked explicitly. The notion of circulation, however, barely features at all in any of the geographical writing on societies emerging from war. This is peculiar. Given that the regulation and crafting of flows is central to warfare (smuggle, propaganda, checkpoints, frontlines), it seems strange to neglect the role of circulation in the post-war context.

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