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Why I didn't sign the Euston Manifesto

Editors: The Euston Manifesto has caused a stir beyond its modest origins and list of signatories, because for once the options for the left seem to transcend the choice between bankrupt Blairism, its prospective Brownite reincarnation and the predictable certitudes of the reactionary left. As one of the latter's most insistent critics, I might have been expected to have caught the Euston express. Indeed, I find that not only are many of its principles unexceptionable – who would not endorse 8) Against racism? – but the edge in principles like 2) No apology for tyranny and 6) Opposing anti-Americanism is very much in tune with what I have long argued, while the positive outlook in those like 10) A new internationalism, 11) A critical openness and 12) Historical truth also seems valuable.

Yet I will not be signing up to the Euston trajectory. This is not primarily because of my reservations about 7) For a two-state solution. Recognising 'the right of both the Israeli and the Palestinian peoples to self-determination within the framework of a two-state solution' may seem no more than a statement of the obvious – 'There can be no reasonable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that subordinates or eliminates the legitimate rights and interests of one of the sides to the dispute.' Yet this both embeds the exclusivist project of the Zionist state and overlooks the difficulties of achieving a Palestinian state that is more than a collection of Bantustans – difficulties that have led many towards the idea of a 'one-state solution.' For me this is a ground for scepticism.

What *is* central is Euston's studious refusal to grapple seriously with issues of war and peace. In its 'Elaborations' the Manifesto states

The founding supporters of this statement took different views on the military intervention in Iraq, both for and against. We recognise that it was possible reasonably to disagree about the justification for the intervention, the manner in which it was carried through, the planning (or lack of it) for the aftermath, and the prospects for the successful implementation of democratic change. We are, however, united in our view about the reactionary, semi-fascist and murderous character of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq, and we recognise its overthrow as a liberation of the Iraqi people. We are also united in the view that, since the day on which this occurred, the proper concern

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of genuine liberals and members of the Left should have been the battle to put in place in Iraq a democratic political order and to rebuild the country's infrastructure, to create after decades of the most brutal oppression a life for Iraqis which those living in democratic countries take for granted – rather than picking through the rubble of the arguments over intervention.

This opposes us not only to those on the Left who have actively spoken in support of the gangs of jihadist and Ba'athist thugs of the Iraqi so-called resistance, but also to others who manage to find a way of situating themselves between such forces and those trying to bring a new democratic life to the country. We have no truck, either, with the tendency to pay lip service to these ends, while devoting most of one's energy to criticism of political opponents at home (supposedly responsible for every difficulty in Iraq), and observing a tactful silence or near silence about the ugly forces of the Iraqi 'insurgency.' The many left opponents of regime change in Iraq who have been unable to understand the considerations that led others on the Left to support it, dishing out anathema and excommunication, more lately demanding apology or repentance, betray the democratic values they profess.

Yet none of the principles of the Manifesto address the nature of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq or the general issues it raises for future cases like Iran or North Korea. I have no problem in allying myself with some who supported the invasion – I fully understand why Iraqi exiles and international opponents of Saddam might have seen this as the only way to rid themselves of a vile tyranny – but I do have a problem with those who, after 3 years of its appalling consequences, are unwilling to learn from their mistakes in this case. I have a problem too with those who, while rightly denouncing the thugs of the Iraqi 'resistance,' have little to say about the casual – and in Hidathi, perhaps, deliberate – killing of innocents, the abuses of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, and other atrocities of recent US military interventions.

The general principle here is simple. War can never be the weapon of choice for promoting democracy and human rights. War is the begetter of terror and casual violence and the enemy of human freedom. The international duty to help the Iraqi people remove Saddam could not justify the resort to extensive violence against those same people. This duty did not allow Western governments to ignore the prohibitions against aggressive war and the necessity for positive United Nations authority entailed by international law.

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Recognising the hypocrisy of the 'anti-war' left (anti-American but too willing to condone the violent excesses of the US's opponents) gives no licence for a corresponding hypocrisy of the 'democratic' and 'pro-human rights' left (condemning suicide bombers but equivocal about US violence). The fundamental degeneracy of war is the most important single lesson of twentieth century history and opposition to war is not an optional extra for a progressive left-wing politics. Progressive, pro-human rights, pro-democracy politics must, to be consistent, be anti-war as well. The inability of the Euston Manifesto to squarely confront this issue only points up the difficulties of creating a new left politics. Until it resolves this problem, Euston appears part of the problem, rather than the solution.

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