

A Matter of Principle: Humanitarian Arguments for War in Iraq

Edited by Thomas Cushman, University of California Press, 2005, 320 pp.

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Turn to the Politics section of a large bookshop in London and you will have no trouble finding ‘exposes’ of the post-September 11 world, and the Iraq war in particular. Noam Chomsky, John Pilger, Michael Moore and Tariq Ali dominate the shelves, each offering a variation on the same theme. And for the past three years the op-ed pages of western newspapers, particularly those of liberal bent, have been home to thousands of columns opposing the war. If one relied only on the traditional media for intellectual stimulation then a very simple political division emerges between a left opposed to the armed removal of the Saddam Hussein regime and a right who supported George W Bush’s invasion and occupation policy. No-one could be blamed for presuming that for someone to identify themselves as a liberal or a socialist was to identify themselves as anti-war.

On occasions however, like the child before the school play who can’t resist checking if there really are lots of people out there, the curtain covering the left has been tugged open and an impudent face has poked through. British readers of *The Guardian* were frequently challenged by the views of David Aaronovitch, a former communist and supporter of the Labour government, who was unable to bring himself to oppose the removal of Saddam. Nick Cohen, for years a stinging critic of Tony Blair and his government from the left, has used his columns in *The Observer* and *The New Statesman* to scrutinise and criticise the anti-war movement. And, despite the fact that *The Independent* has re-branded as a stridently anti-war paper, its columnist Johann Hari made the case that few wanted to hear – that the Iraqi people would welcome the overthrow of the murderous fascist dictatorship that had suffocated them. And, on the internet, weblogs such as that of Marxist Professor Norman Geras have made it their daily duty to respond to anti-war arguments in the media, and to make the case for viewing the invasion as an anti-fascist war of liberation.

While going against the general drift of the left, these British commentators have at least been making their argument in a country with a pro-war centre-

Democratiya 1 | Summer 2005

left government headed by a Prime Minister who has managed, on occasion, to present the case for war in what used to be the language of the left – of liberation, freedom, democracy, solidarity and anti-fascism. In the US the terrain was even more difficult: a right-wing Republican president of unusual inarticulacy and an administration with noted links to the oil industry and direct lineage to the bloodstained US foreign policy of the Reagan era. Yet, even in the US, heads have been popping through curtains. The best known is Christopher Hitchens who has appeared to relish taking on the views of Chomsky, Moore et al and has been the most strident and unapologetic of all on what he has called the ‘pro-regime change left.’ Paul Berman, whose book *Terror and Liberalism* represents the most articulate and convincing case that ‘another left is possible’ (and necessary) and the magazine Berman is associated with, *Dissent*, have demonstrated that liberalism does not mean accommodation with tyranny.

And now *A Matter of Principle* brings together 23 voices of critical support for the liberation of Iraq from both sides of the Atlantic. The editor, Thomas Cushman, Professor of Sociology at Wellesley and Editor of *The Journal of Human Rights*, has provided evidence to the broader intellectual community that despite the dominance of the liberal media by anti-war opinion, there have always been (at least) two sides to the argument. For those on the left who have wondered, perhaps in private desperation, if there was anyone on their side, the book is proof that an anti-tyranny and pro-democracy left still exists.

But Cushman’s collection is not a manifesto of this pro-war left and nor is it a ‘reader’ designed to arm young supporters with crib notes for student union argument. In truth, the pro-liberation left is not a movement, or a party, and it is debatable whether it can even be referred to as a collective. *A Matter of Principle* is rather a detailed snapshot of the state of the evolving discussion within multiplex pro-liberation left.

Given the nature of publishing, the debate has moved on since many of these arguments were made. For instance, the collection does not include the views of those who were opposed to the invasion in March 2003 but who have since found themselves alongside Hitchens and Berman arguing for solidarity with Iraqi civil society against the bloody Ba’athist and Islamist counter-revolution and their increasingly unprincipled supporters in the west.

HATCHETT |The ‘Pro-Liberation Left’

And not only the debate has moved on in the past year – the situation on the ground in Iraq has also changed. The elections and subsequent disputes over the constitution (both of which put pay to the anti-war claim that the US was merely aiming to replace Saddam with a more compliant dictator) are not a focus of the arguments in the book. Nor is the increasing evidence gained in the past year of incompetence and lack of detailed planning and clear-headed strategy from the Bush administration. Also missing is an account of the descent of the anti-war movement into open support for the mass murderers of the ‘resistance’ whose determination to halt progress in Iraq has led to 12 months of bloodshed instead of ‘nation building’ in Iraq.

Instead the book deals, as its title suggests, with matters of principle. Perhaps the most striking chapter in terms of first principles is an interview with the Polish intellectual and anti-Stalinist dissident Adam Michnik. The former leader of the Solidarity trade union movement, now editor of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, cuts to the heart of the matter by, as he puts it, ‘looking at it through the eyes of the political prisoner in Baghdad.’ He says, ‘It’s simply that life has taught me that if someone is being whipped and someone is whipping this person I am always on the side of those who are being whipped. I’ve always criticized US foreign policy for forgetting that the United States should defend those who need to be defended.’ And Michnik has some refreshingly succinct words for those on the anti-war side who while claiming to support the notion of violent overthrow of Saddam’s regime were unable to give their consent to George W Bush ordering his troops to carry out that act. ‘Even a bad government guided by a bad ideology can enter into a just war,’ he says. ‘I think you can be an enemy of Saddam Hussein even if Donald Rumsfeld is also an enemy of Saddam Hussein.’ These arguments are as valid as they are precise.

One section of the book is titled ‘Solidarity’ and includes contributions from East Timor democrat Jose Ramos-Horta, Labour MP and long standing human rights activist Ann Clwyd, Australian columnist Pamela Bone as well as Johann Hari. Each discusses the principle of taking the side of the oppressed against the oppressor. Each brings a different focus and perspective but surely it is the very fact that such arguments need to be made that stands out. That siding with the victims of fascism and supporting their liberation is considered a deviant minority position on the modern left cuts to the heart of the current division.

Democratiya 1 | Summer 2005

Another section of the book is given over to critiques of liberal neutralism and leftist anti-imperialism. The most stimulating argument comes from Philosopher Jonathan Rée:

‘What the Iraqis needed, I had long thought, was something rather more than gentle reform; they needed a left-wing coup and suddenly the gate to it had swung open. It was a paradox, to say the least, that the opportunity was being created by the United States under a reactionary president, but that did not make it wrong: it was what leftists used to call dialectics, though fluke might be a better word. Iraq’s foolhardy defiance of a whole sequence of UN resolutions seemed to provide a good enough pretext for what needed to be done. For the most unexpected of reasons, the long-awaited hour of revolution was at hand. I soon realized that I was almost alone in calling the prospective event a revolution.’

Rée touches on the prospect of failure in Iraq. While he generally spurns the fashion for facile historical analogies he does make the following point:

‘The left is in danger of a complete loss of nerve when confronted with the appalling costs of action and the sobering thought that the costs of inaction may be even greater. Of course, it is possible that the revolution (or the war) will turn out badly. If it does, this outcome will not prove that it was a bad cause but, rather that it was a tragedy comparable to that of the Spanish Civil War...’

An important inclusion in the book is a section on European attitudes to the war. Too often the debate over Iraq has focused on divisions within the English-speaking world while assuming, and effectively dismissing, Europe as being a unified block behind Chirac and Schröder. John Lloyd looks at the war in relation to the EU’s overall foreign policy outlook while the complexities of the French, Danish and German debates are examined separately and should enlighten those in the UK and the US who have been tempted to paint the anti-war camp as either a reflection of the dominance of pacifism in Europe or of anti-Americanism.

The collection ends with two speeches from Tony Blair which demonstrate that whatever one thinks of his domestic agenda and his political history, he has become a conviction politician prepared to put his reputation (and at times his job) on the line for his unfashionably principled position.

HATCHETT |The ‘Pro-Liberation Left’

Valuable as this book is one hopes that a second edition is already being planned. The past 18 months have witnessed the struggle in Iraq – still one between the forces of reaction and those of liberty – change its form. No longer is the central question whether or not you were in favour of the violent overthrow of Saddam’s dictatorship. Now the main issue is whether or not you support the United States and Britain continuing to defend the gains of that revolution and to assist Iraqi democrats in their fight against a vicious enemy and so create the foundations for lasting democracy. There are other questions: why has the revolution failed to establish itself, and to what extent the strategy (or lack of one) of the Bush administration and the US military is to blame? And what of the decision of the ‘Marxist’ leaders of the Stop the War Coalition in the UK, and similar groups elsewhere, to view fascism as a legitimate ‘resistance’ to bourgeois democracy? This is such a remarkable adaptation of even Leninist tactical flexibility that it surely merits a book in itself. And what of the failure of many liberal co-passengers of the anti-war movement to distance themselves from the turn to fascism of their leaders (the slogan ‘Not in My Name’ would have sufficed)? What does this failure tell about the contemporary left?

Although rapidly developing events have left this book unable to answer these questions, Cushman’s labours should be appreciated by all those who have felt the need to do more than disassociate themselves from the Chomsky-Pilger worldview. This stimulating and diverse series of arguments make *A Matter of Principle* an important collection for anyone with an interest in the debate over the Iraq war, regardless of their views on the merits of the decision to invade.

As for those who have taken a stand against the tide of leftish opinion it is down to us whether or not this book will be seen as a historical curiosity, reflecting the views of a small minority of dissenters, or will come to be seen as capturing an important moment in the rebirth of a principled, anti-tyranny, democratic left committed to universal values.

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