

BUSH IN BABYLON

THE RECONSTRUCTION
OF IRAQ

BY TARIQ AL

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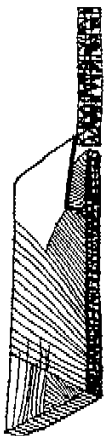
DISCUSSION ABOUT BOOK, IRAQ, EMPIRES & RESISTANCE

WITH

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The conquest of Iraq marks a new phase in the country's history and an ominous opening for the twenty-first century. In the West it has inaugurated a wide-ranging debate on subjects that had become unmentionable in polite society: empires and imperialism, civilisations and their discontents, capitalism and its stages, Europe versus America. And perhaps, unknown to all, an American Virgil, hidden deep in Christian country, is already hard at work composing a philippic in honour of the imperial chief (George Dubya?), which could begin with the concluding lines of the last of the Georgics:

... great Caesar fired his lightnings and conquered
by deep Euphrates.

Little Caesar, too, has captured by deep Tigris, but in capitalist time. Capitalism has lost its originality. It is doomed to repeat its past, albeit in changed conditions. What is new is not the American Empire, but its solitary existence. It is the first time in world history that a single Empire has become hegemonic. It was already the case after 1990, but attempts were made to camouflage reality with fine phrases: 'a new world order', the 'peace dividend', and 'a nuclear-free Europe from the

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Atlantic to the Urals', etc. All this provided a happy basis for Euro-American collusion. And a few years later when it was once again time to 'exterminate all the brutes', the Euro-American alliance, also known as 'the international community', remained untrifled. Disagreements did emerge before and during the Yugoslav war but were confined to private gatherings. The decision to occupy Iraq provoked more anger and bitterness between rulers and ruled, North and South than any single event since the last phase of the Vietnam War (1960-75). Could it be that the continental West European governments had only just realised that the Monroe Doctrine had now been extended to the whole world?¹⁰³

Academic and media apologists (often the same) for current US policies stress that this is the only way to stabilise the world and bring tyranny to heel. Far better for a country to become a US protectorate than remain an indigenous dictatorship. However, evidence for the benevolence of the United States or a happy compliance with its rule is only to be found in western Europe. Nowhere else. To imagine otherwise is to ignore the history of the twentieth century. Martin Luther King Jr spoke for whole continents when he stated that 'the greatest purveyor of violence in the world is my own country'.¹⁰⁴ This violence started long before the Russian Revolution, carried on during its peak and after its fall throughout the last century, and has christened the present one with the occupation

¹⁰³ The Monroe Doctrine, first elaborated during the tenure of President Monroe in 1823, was a warning to the European colonial powers not to expand any further in the western hemisphere. This was the prerogative of the United States, and the growing military muscle of the youngest imperial power was soon sufficient to deter raiding parties from the Old World. For this and much else E.J. Hobsbawm's *The Age of Empire* remains an invaluable point of reference.

¹⁰⁴ And the US state proved his point by approving his execution. For details on this sad story see William F. Pepper, *An Act of State: The Execution of Martin Luther King*, London and New York, 2002.

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of Iraq. Since historical amnesia is encouraged by official culture, to the extent where policy-makers themselves lost sight of Iraq's past when they assumed that they would be welcomed as 'liberators', it is worth listing a few of the more violent episodes involving the United States that marked the second half of the twentieth century. This tally begins with the decision to use nuclear weapons on Japanese cities, partially as a warning to the Soviet Union not to overreach itself.

- The use of nuclear weapons on the civilian populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Death toll: 2,00,000. Deaths from after-effects: not computed.
- The destruction of every building in North Korea during the 1950-53 war to destroy the whole infrastructure of the region. Death toll of Koreans (North and South): 900,000.
- The 1965 massacres in Indonesia, supported by the US intelligence agencies and carried out by pro-US military leaders. Death toll: over 1 million.
- The 1960-75 war unleashed against Vietnam and fought with the regular use of chemical weapons of which the effects of Agent Orange are still visible in the country. Death toll: 50,000 US soldiers; 2 million Vietnamese.
- The Third Oil War, 1990. Death toll: between 50,000 and 100,000 Iraqi soldiers.
- The effect of sanctions against Iraq. Death toll: up to 1 million dead.
- The 2003 war against Iraq. Not concluded.

The de facto US protectorates throughout the second half of the twentieth century have in the main constituted some of the most vicious dictatorships in the world. These were not simply 'bad Cold War habits' as apologists have tended to claim, since the Monroe Doctrine led to unceasing interventions in Central America to secure it for US corporate interests many decades prior to the victory of Lenin's Bolsheviks.

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1953: CIA helps remove Iranian democrat Mohammed Mossadeq from power as punishment for nationalising the country's oil. The Shah is put back on the throne. Massive repression of all opposition, but the mosques cannot be shut. Their doors stay open and they become centres of resistance to the regime.

1958: In order to prevent a general election, which it fears might produce a nationalist government, the CIA/DIA authorise first military coup in Pakistan. A decade of military rule leads ultimately to the break-up of the country in 1971.

1964: US Ambassador Lincoln Gordon masterminds plot for military take-over in Brazil. President João Goulart goes into exile. A slogan appears on a Rio de Janeiro wall: '*No More Middlemen! Lincoln Gordon for President!*' Widespread arrests and torture of leftists and trades-union militants.

1967: CIA operatives watch as a captured prisoner is shot dead by machine-gun bullets in Bolivia. His name is Che Guevara.

1973: US authorises General Pinochet's military coup in Chile. Elected president Salvador Allende is killed defending himself. Mass arrests and killings. Between 6,000 and 10,000 members of socialist and communist parties, peasant organisations and other left groups are 'disappeared'.

1975: US authorises Indonesian invasion of East Timor to pre-empt national independence after Portuguese withdrawal. By 1989 the occupying armies will kill over 200,000 Timorese, imprison several thousand, institute a form of slave labour, and loot the country.

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1975: US supports military coup in Argentina. General Videla declares that the enemy is within and the country must be purified.

1977: DIA approves new coup in Pakistan. The country's first elected leader is charged with murder and hanged. Public hangings and beatings brutalise the country's culture and the new dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, becomes a valued client and vital to the war in Afghanistan. Here lie the origins of al-Qaeda and other fundamentalist creations that are tearing the region apart.

1979: Closer links established with new Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, who is armed and supported during the war with Iran, in the course of which he uses chemical weapons against a Kurdish village. Close relations continue till 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

1982: US marines invade and occupy the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada, whose Head of State (the Queen of England) is irked that she was not informed. Reagan's Secretary of State George Schultz arrives on the island and announces: 'At first sight I realised that this island could be a splendid real estate project.'

1984: US begins arming Contra forces in Nicaragua behind the backs of its own Congress to unleash a civil war and overthrow the democratically elected Sandinista regime. Ronald Reagan quotes St. Luke (14.31) to ask for money to battle the Evil Empire.

1990: The Gulf War: a 'turkey-shoot' to destroy an army in total retreat; destruction of Iraq's social infrastructure; systematic attack on Iraqi people via a criminal UN sanctions regime.

1999: NATO war against Yugoslavia.

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2002: US-Spanish-backed coup attempt against Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Chavez has won seven different elections and referendums, despite the opposition of the private TV networks and a large part of the press. The coup fails because of opposition from soldiers and the poor.

2003: US-British invasion and occupation of Iraq.

What these incomplete charts of post-1944 imperial interventions reveal is the effortless rise of the United States as the leader of the capitalist world and its determination to weaken, destroy and defeat not just the communist opponent, but also those who refused to take sides in the Cold War while maintaining their own independence. This generation of nationalist leaders is epitomised by Nehru, Nasser, Nkrumah, Lumumba, Sukarno, and from a third continent by Peron, Vargas, Goulart, Allende, and, most recently, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela.¹⁰⁵

The last quarter of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century was the period of the empires of Europe and Japan. Dominant among these were the British, followed by the French and Dutch and later by the Japanese and the Germans.¹⁰⁶ It is impossible to understand the

¹⁰⁵ US hostility to nationalist-communists like Ho Chi Minh and Fidel Castro hardly needs to be recalled. In April 1975 the first of these became the only leader whose people defected the United States. The second survived all assassination attempts and direct intervention to overthrow his regime, despite a continuous economic blockade that has lasted for almost half a century.

¹⁰⁶ Germany only came into existence as a state in 1871. The Congress of Vienna in 1815 (the assembly of victors after the defeat of Napoleon) had tucked the German question by accepting only a loosely based German Confederation of thirty-nine states. It was left to Bismarck and Prussia to complete the process of German unification. Bismarck was unmoved by misty references to the Holy Roman Empire and Charlemagne. He defeated his Austrian rival in 1866 and the French in 1870, thus removing two obstacles to Prussian leadership of the state-in-creation. He built a strong, unified, no-nonsense state under Prussian leadership (Eulenstein). The lack of mass republicanism in the German lands made it easier for him to anoint the Prussian king as the Kaiser of the new state, a symbol of its military strength and future glory, resting on the Junkers and what became the most efficient state bureaucracy in

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logic that underlay the First and Second World Wars without a grasp of imperialist history and the inter-imperialist contradictions that marked the period. Despite the rhetoric, neither of these two wars were a defence of 'democracy' against 'tyranny'. It is difficult to even claim that for the first conflict. There was a restricted franchise in most of the countries that were at war and none at all in the Ottoman and tsarist Empires. It was an inter-imperialist war provoked by greed to determine which European great power would dominate the world and be the greatest colonial power. It was generally agreed by all that Europe needed more 'living space'. The only question was who got what and on which continent.

For many decades prior to the war, the 'colonial question' had been hotly debated inside the socialist parties of Europe. The initial position was unambiguous. The 1896 Congress of the Second International had adopted a resolution proposed by George Lansbury from the British Independent Labour Party, which demanded 'the right of all nations to complete sovereignty' and expressed its opposition to colonialism in a language that remains apposite: 'With whatever pretences colonial policies may be justified in the name of religion or civilisation, their sole aim is simply to extend the area of capitalist exploitation in the exclusive interests of the capitalist class.' This was unanimously approved.

the world. Some time after the defeat of 1945, Golo Mann wrote of the two Germans struggling for its soul since its inception. On the one hand the Germany of the Kaiser, of the Admiralty, of the General Staff, of Krupp, of self-righteously nationalist Professors, snarling benighted lieutenants. They were confronted by the Germany of the great Social-Democratic Party of Bebel and his friends, of Einstein and Planck, of Gerhart Hauptmann. For him its ultimate collapse was inherent in its founding structures. Bismarck's compromise between the old order of god and king and junker and liberal bourgeoisie was destined to fail. Might things have been different had it been a republic? The post-Napoleon French imperial example does not inspire much confidence. What is worth noting is the Social Democratic vote prior to the First World War: 27 percent in 1898, 31 percent in 1903, and 35 percent in 1912. But these successes and the much-vaunted trick-and-deceit methods of the German SPD were not sufficient to withstand the tide of German nationalism in 1914. And from this tragedy there flowed its successor.

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Three years later the British Empire declared war on the Boer Republic in South Africa. The prize was the gold mines of the region. In some ways it was a precursor of the First World War. The Boers were Dutch settlers who had the same colonial 'right' to the territories they occupied as any other power. The interests of the native population were disregarded by both sides. British socialists were horrified by the brutalities and reports of British concentration camps in which the imprisoned Boers were being kept. They organised demonstrations and their newspapers denounced the war as plunder. But this view was by no means unanimous. The Fabian Society defended both the war and the annexation of the Boer territories. Its leading spokesman was the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who made rich claims for the war: it was really a war against slavery and possible genocide; it was being waged to protect the natives of the Transvaal; Britain had to be defended because 'a great power, must, consciously or unconsciously govern in the general interests of civilization' and any state 'large or small which hinders the spread of international civilization must disappear'.¹⁰⁷ This Fabian tradition was imported wholesale into the newly created Labour Party, which, whenever it was in office, maintained and preserved the British Empire.

A similar development was taking place in the German Social-Democratic Party. One of its leading intellectuals, Eduard Bernstein, wrote a book in which he criticised the outmoded policy of his party which denounced all acts of imperialism and colonisation as alien to 'the common principles of Social Democracy'.¹⁰⁸ Like the English Fabians, Bernstein argued that, 'Since we enjoy the products of the tropics, why should there be any

¹⁰⁷ George Bernard Shaw, *Fabianism and the Empire*, Fabian Society, London, 1900. It is surely by time for a reprint with a new introduction written by Anthony Giddens and Tony Blair. Shaw's defence of colonial rule created much anger at the time, but he was supported by Sidney and Beatrice Webb and Robert Blatchford, who edited the widely read socialist weekly *Clarion*.
¹⁰⁸ Eduard Bernstein, *Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus*, Berlin, 1899.

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objection to our cultivating the crops ourselves'. And as for the right of savages to the soil they occupy, this is not an 'unconditional right'. Why was this the case? Because, 'in the last resort, the higher culture enjoys the higher right. It is not the conquest, but the cultivation of the land that gives the occupier his historical and legal titles.' This was far from being an isolated view. Bernstein received strong support from Gustav Noske, Max Schippel, Ludwig Quesel, and other German equivalents of the British Fabians. But Karl Kautsky and others demolished these views at the party's Mainz Congress in 1900. The view of the overwhelming majority of delegates was that imperialism resulted from 'the insatiable demands of the bourgeoisie to find newer investment outlets for its continually accumulating capital as well as from the drive for new markets'. The delegates insisted that it was the colonial exploiters who became savages in their greed for more wealth and through their oppression of native peoples.

That same year the Second International meeting in Paris unanimously agreed a resolution proposed by Rosa Luxemburg on behalf of the German SPD. She had argued that militarism and colonialism reflected a new development in world politics and economics, a phenomenon whose 'paroxysms had unleashed four bloody wars during the past six years and which threatens the world with a state of permanent war'. The resolution she proposed insisted on a global alliance of workers and the oppressed against the 'world alliance of bourgeois and governments'. The latter were for 'perpetual war'. The International would unite people for 'perpetual peace'.

These were fine words, but what would the International do in concrete terms to help the colonial peoples? Here there was no agreement. A special commission on the subject failed to decide on anything conclusive. Some felt that 'it is not necessarily bad for a country to be colonised', others suggested that perhaps in pre-capitalist colonies (i.e. all of them) native forms of capitalism should be encouraged, while a few spoke of

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the need to develop a 'socialist colonial policy'. The English delegates presented a resolution to a Congress in Amsterdam, which began with the sentence: 'Congress recognises the right of the inhabitants of civilized countries to settle in lands where the population is at a lower stage of development. However it condemns most strongly ...', etc.

Nonetheless they all agreed that within colonial rule there should be some degree of self-government, and the entire Congress rose to its feet to applaud the presence of eighty-year-old Dadabhai Naoroji, the President of the recently formed Indian National Congress.

If this was the level of consciousness of its leaders, what could be expected from the rank-and-file of the European labour movement? Racism, a necessary corollary of Empire, had penetrated deep in the imperialist countries, as the civilisational references in the resolutions presented or discussed at conferences of the Second International reveal. The basis of this racism lay in conquest. We won not because we had the Gatling gun and they did not, but because we were/are a superior race. The colonial moment obscured all other histories. The forward march of competing empires became the dominant narrative. Chinese, Indian, and Islamic civilisations that had governed much of the known world prior to the birth of capitalism in Europe, were forgotten in the Gadarene rush to plant the flag on foreign soil. How could these imperial triumphs in which many workers and peasants had participated directly as soldiers not infect the whole society?

An early demonstration of this came in the 'Hottentot election' in Germany in 1907. The socialists in the Reichstag had voted against war credits to fund a colonial war in South-West Africa, where General von Troscha was busy crushing a rebellion by the native Hereros with the utmost brutality.¹⁰⁹ The Kaiser's parties unleashed a barrage of national-chauvinism

¹⁰⁹ The battle orders read: 'Within the German borders every Herero, with or without a rifle, with or without cattle, is to be shot. I shall not receive any more women or children.'

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against the SPD, and in the elections the latter lost half their seats (their number dropping from 81 to 38) and, despite a rise in the number of votes cast, the SPD percentage was down by three points. Bernstein, Noske, and friends attributed this, correctly, to the position taken on Africa. They denounced the 'negative colonial policy' and demanded a more 'realistic and positive' approach. It was this approach that won and led inexorably to the decision that favoured voting in support of war credits in August 1914.

Defeat in war lost Germany its African colonies: Tanganyika was 'mandated' to Britain and South-West Africa to the Union of South Africa. The British Empire, thanks to US intervention in the war, had emerged triumphant. The consequences of this in the Arab east have been discussed in previous chapters.

The Second World War represented both continuity and breach with its predecessor. The continuity was self-evident. Hitler spoke of needing more living space (*Lebensraum*) and ranted endlessly against the British Empire. It is worth reminding ourselves that the war was not fought to 'liberate' the Jews. If that had been the case one would have to acknowledge that it was lost not won. The German fascists, who were handed the German state by a supine bourgeoisie and a decaying aristocracy fearful of Bolshevism, demanded the recognition of Germany as a Great Power. Hitler denounced the British and the French who 'acquired a world by force and robbery' for denying the same rights to the Third Reich:

It cannot be tolerated any longer that the British nation of 44,000,000 souls should remain in possession of fifteen and a half million square miles of the

they must be driven back to their people or shot. This is my message to the Heroes - signed Von Trotha, Great General of the Mighty Emperor.' Out of a total population of 80,000, the Great General exterminated 60,000. Such is the power of superior civilisations.

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*world's surface. They pretend to have obtained it from God and are not prepared to give it away. Likewise the French nation of 37,000,000 souls owns more than three and a half million square miles, while the German nation with 80,000,000 souls only possesses about 230,000 square miles [emphasis in original].*¹¹⁰

Thus, inter-imperialist contradictions were not absent from the causes of the Second World War. Hitler's insistence on receiving the surrender of France in the same rail carriage where the German High Command had been humiliated in 1918 was a symbolic revenge, but one nonetheless designed also to cement the ties between the traditional wing of the army and the Nazi regime.

This second confrontation between the major imperialist powers opened the doors of revolt in the entire colonial world.

The colonial epoch came to end for a variety of reasons. The first of these was the growth of resistance throughout the colonies. This resistance took various forms: armed struggles, non-violent civil disobedience, a combination of the two, the emergence of nationalist political parties, etc. What made this resistance more potent was a wave of social revolutions starting in Russia in 1917 and spreading to China, Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba in the decades that followed. The emergence of this new bloc of anti-capitalist states created a space in which it became less easy to crush the national movements fighting against imperial rule. The nationalist leaders with few exceptions belonged to the educated layers of colonial society. Some had been educated abroad in Britain, France, Portugal, or the Netherlands. They returned home with liberal and radical philosophies and the colonisers realised that if they did not agree to a compromise solution

¹¹⁰ *New Order* by Adolf Hitler, cited in Norman Finkelstein, *Lugger and Reilly of the Israel-Palestine Conflict*, new edition, London and New York, 2003, p. 234, footnote 16.

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Photograph by REUTERS/Larry Downing

June 2003: the famous golf-cart summit in Egypt after the occupation of Iraq. The Egyptian caddy Hosni Mubarak sits in front while his Saudi counterpart Crown Prince Abdullah sits behind him. The over-excited unidentified man on the right is trying desperately to stop himself from rising to the occasion.

with the less radical nationalists, the communists would be the only beneficiaries. When forced to choose between a Gandhi or a Ho Chi Minh, the British chose the former. The French decided to struggle till the bitter end. The defeats they suffered in Indo-China and, later, Algeria scared French society. The Dutch, too, were reluctant to abandon the Indonesian archipelago. The Japanese advance westwards during the Second World War pushed the Dutch and the French out of South-East Asia and strengthened nationalist resistance. After the war both powers, helped by Britain, returned to their colonies, but it was too late. The world

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had moved on. It was this combination of events that ended the colonial order in the 1960s. As the leader of the capitalist world, the United States now stepped in and attempted to prevent a total collapse. They did so by establishing a chain of military dictatorships in Latin America, Asia, and Africa with two NATO bulwarks (Greece and Turkey) also secured via military regimes. The most bloody representatives of these regimes were Pinochet, Videla, Suharto, and Mobutu, though this short list is not intended as an insult to any of the others, who did their best to maintain the peace. Local resistance was often killed or tortured out of existence.

Readers will, I hope, forgive this long detour. Its purpose is straightforward. The occupation of Iraq is something new for the younger generations, as most of them are unused to living in countries which dominate others by force, but it is part of a long historical process that was disrupted by the twentieth century and is now back on course. Bush wants Syria and Iran, while his deputy-sheriff in London wants to take over Zimbabwe and Burma (two former British colonies). There is also the question of how Iraq will be ruled in the coming years. The methods of imperial domination are necessarily limited, circumscribed by the existence of a local people with a long history. In the case of Iraq this stretches back three thousand years. Genocide – as applied in the Americas¹¹ and Australia – is no longer feasible, despite the existence of media barons who would not find it a problem to provide a justification for it.

11 The scale of the massacres in South America surprised Charles Darwin. Though he was used to the elimination of animals and plants by stronger species, his conversation with a Spanish commander, General Rosas, in 1832 alerted him to the fact that human beings were being exterminated in a similar fashion. The Spanish in Argentina had decided to clear the pampas: 'The Indians are now so terrified that they offer no resistance in a body, but each flies, neglecting even his wife and children; but when overtaken, like wild animals they fight, against any number to the last moment. ... This is a dark picture, but how much more shocking is the undeniable fact that all the women who appear above twenty years old are massacred in cold blood! When I exclaimed that this appeared rather inhuman, he answered "Why, what can be done? They breed so!" Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Chapter 5.