

All Quiet on the Eastern Front



"Supposing we win in Iraq. . . ."

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SUPPOSING IT ALL GOES PERFECTLY—the sanctions eventually bite, the admonitory air strikes take out, say, ten percent of their intended targets, and there turns out to be no secret weapon, or none the Iraqi field commanders agree to use. Supposing the ramshackle alliance holds together over the winter—Jordan huffs and puffs but is ultimately, as usual, a good American dog, the Iranian factions can't decide on a policy, the Congressional factions even less so, and Saddam plays the Israeli card so ineptly—in such obvious fear of the gambit being taken seriously—that no other Arab state breaks ranks. . . . Supposing in February or March we install exactly the "democratic" general in Baghdad that the CIA/KGB has been paying for the past ten years with just such an eventuality in mind—our Noriega, our Pinochet, our King Hussein. . . .

There will be the usual moment of foul-mouthed togetherness. The polls will shriek unanimity, the General's impeccable English will be widely admired, the Liberals will tell us how good it feels to see America again "on the right side." And then what, precisely?

What do we think will have been achieved? How long, for a start, do we estimate our general will last? How is he going to fare against the fundamentalists, who for sure will be the main beneficiaries of Saddam Hussein's fall—why else did we prop up his secular "Socialism" for so long? As the democratic general's state begins to come apart in his hands, splitting up into its Kurdish, Sunni, and Shiite components, what other card will he have to play except his willingness in turn to bite the hand that fed him and borrow the clothes of Habash and Khomeini? Is our man going to slow down Iraq's nuclear program? (Do even his CIA/KGB managers think he could afford to do that and still hold on to his military constituency?) What's likely to be his line on Israel—his line in February, his line the following November? Which chemicals will he use against the Kurds?

Nothing had happened because nothing had changed. / Yet the General was rubbish in the end.



No doubt behind closed doors the policymakers are even more pessimistic about their new world order than we are. They know much more about the murderers and hypocrites whose "regimes" they prop up from Ankarah to Riyadh. They have the intelligence on popular unrest in the region, on the latest inroads made by the fundamentalists, on the comic-opera corruption at the top and the answering vengefulness below. To be sure, the

CIA/KGB underestimates all of the above when it phones its copy in to its masters, but any accounting of them will make the Middle East seem more of a Hell than an outsider can possibly imagine. It is a Hell of our making.

The Middle East is the Europe of the late twentieth century: an uncontrollable system of warring nation-states, driven mad by the same cancerous ideologies: nationalisms, blueprints for theocracy (the blue already drenched in blood), anti-Semitism, dreams of the corporate state. The backers and paymasters lean over the squalid cockpit and can think of nothing to do but pump in more weapons. This Europe has already had its 1914–1918 war along the Tigris and Euphrates, complete with trenches and mustard gas; now it gets ready for 1939. Only this time one of the players already has the bomb, and no one quite knows how long it will take Baghdad's Manhattan Project to cobble together its own dirty, primitive parcel of uranium.



So here it is, come soon upon us: the first crisis after the Cold War. At one level it all has a deadly familiarity to it, and yet of course there are some comforting landmarks that seem to have been overtaken by the sand—Gorbys is not even pretending to resist any longer, the U.N. sheds its cutaneous rhetoric about Imperialism and rallies overnight to the new (read: old) world order, Deng is forgiven, and of course we understand about those “advisors” in Baghdad. (Contracts are contracts. And who else but the “advisors” are going to tell us where Saddam's mistress lives?) Even the Cuban delegate stumbles over his script.

Luckily for Bush, there is one ideological landmark that stays constant in the suspect terrain: those goddamn Arabs, those oil-smooth sheiks and unshaved terrorists, that bristling, degenerate, hate-filled Other to civilization as we know it. No doubt it is on the bedrock of this bar-stool Orientalism that the polls' support for U.S. policy is founded—for a while, until the going gets tough. Ignorant demonizing of the East will not, we suspect, prove a sufficient basis for policy once its costs become clear—as they did in Beirut and Teheran. One minute it will be: “Let's pay those bastards back, finally, for all the humiliations they've inflicted on us through the years. Now's our chance. Let's take out the Dome of the Rock” (the Dugan scenario). And the next it will be: “Let the bastards fight it out among themselves, that's all they're fit for. Let 'em go down to darkness together.”

It has a good, specious ring to it: "the first crisis after the Cold War." Of course it was predictable that such a state of affairs has put the intellectual Right at sixes and sevens, and had them immediately descend to name-calling. They've found their level. It worries us more that so much of the Left seems almost as bewildered, as if it did not want to believe that its East-West dramaturgy had turned out to be a mirage all along; and as if the tone that had gone with that dramaturgy—the sneering, carping, eternally aggrieved monotone, the fretting and frothing at U.S. "hypocrisy" (as if anyone believed the elderly rubbish was for real in the first place), the doomsday muckraking and the Now-it-can-be-revealed—as if all this were still somehow indispensable to Left politics. As if there were no other tone on offer. (Not that we think the question of tone is immediately soluble in the present desperate circumstances, or fool ourselves that we have solved it. The sneering and carping are there in our text too, we recognize; and they have to be. Any text that fails at least to try to approximate the guffaw that issues these days from the coffeehouses of Cairo—even if it knows full well that the guffaw cannot be ventriloquized from where we stand, safe inside the capitalist heartland—has not begun to face up to the real horror of the times.)

For us, this moment is a (dismal) opportunity. What the first crisis after the Cold War makes clear is surely this: the ideological contest of the superpowers, lasting apparently for the past forty years, was never the shaping structure of world events, still less of those events called "crises." The essential dynamic was always, and still is, that of a world capitalism in search of *lebensraum*—the room it needed, that is to say, to keep the center from slowing down and seizing up. This was the force that made the late-twentieth-century world, and goes on making it in the Middle East. The image that stays in our minds from the usual aimless, numbing media blitz is that of the Bangladeshi workers sitting inside the shell of some transport plane in the desert, eyeing the camera for a moment before the hatches slam shut and they are flown back to the chaos from whence they came. We were supposed to be chastened by the bareness of the airframe's gaping interior. It was the plushiest ride these men had ever had. We were supposed to be sorry for the wreckage of their hopes. What hopes? What were they doing in Kuwait in the first place? How many months would it have been before some other, maybe "milder" crisis of capitalism—a downturn in oil prices, a change of regime, a surge in xenophobia—had sent them on their way, this time without even a free ride in a C-5? The image was only misleading in the *glamor* of its desolation: have these people's uprootedness and fear be a bit more ordinary, a bit less noticeable, happening some-

where that cameras don't go, and you'll have an approximation of capitalism at work.

We have to say something, then, about what we think it is in capitalism that goes to make the Middle East crisis, and many more like it to come. Our language will be general, but it seems to us a level of abstraction that the present moment makes necessary: nothing will be possible on the Left if we do not take the opportunity, after the Cold War, to stand back from the pile of bodies and look again at what produces them; that is, at the peculiar form of capitalism's building and organizing of its world economy.

The form is this:

On the one hand, no one is in any doubt that capitalism ever since its inception could not have sustained itself for a moment if it had not gone on constantly extending and intensifying its hold on the world—its hold on resources, on markets, on cheap and disorganized labor, on terms of trade, on new sources of investment. Capitalism as a system is coincident—maybe synonymous—with the urge to world economy, and the urge has been by and large irresistible. More and more of the world has been drawn into capitalism's orbit; by which we mean not just a matter of geographical access or occupation, but a wholesale irruption of capitalism into the texture of everyday life—the pattern of buying and selling, the organization of production, the shape of the labor force. If this forced entry had not happened, *and if it did not go on happening at an accelerating rate*, the capitalist heartlands would grind to a halt in a matter of years.

The political and economic forms this process has taken hardly need cataloguing, they are laid out before us in the Gulf with such clarity: client states, more or less grisly, wholesale export of high tech, wholesale war against the least sign of a popular politics in the making; the production of instant consumer culture in places where, by and large, the images of consumption are all most people can afford to consume; ecological nightmare, corruption, bureaucracy, "aid," debt, the rhetoric of free enterprise. This last in particular takes on more and more of mystical sanctimoniousness the further it gets from capitalism's evident truth: the truth, that is, of bail-out and subsidy, of price fixing and "market management," of the whole hopeless entanglement of the State with those whose "freedoms" it means to serve. Not that the system, sclerotic as it is, is lacking in brute *effectiveness*. It does better than any other system on offer; most everyone wants to join. But it is a system of control which by its very nature—its very mechanics—is erratic and conflict-ridden: not merely ramshackle and indirect in its hold on its empire, but producing as part of itself the "factors of instability" that have the policymakers wringing their hands.

In the Middle East, again, these factors could hardly be more on the surface. It does not take enormous powers of political analysis to see that the Saddams, the Mubaraks, the Khadaffis, and the Saudis are a necessary result of capitalism's determination to crush even the most rudimentary forms of political modernization in the area. Dictatorships are a *necessity* of the system, above all in a part of the world where popular government, however makeshift and backward-looking, might for once not be rooted in economic debility—where democracy might be able to make capitalism pay up. No doubt the dictatorships will want to gobble bits and pieces of each other's territory. No doubt their version of Westernization is so transparently vile that it plays into the hands of the most desperate and atavistic forms of popular resistance. No doubt the mad saturation of the place with high technology, military and corporate, is what has the experts guessing which bunch of hoodlums will be next to go nuclear (and what the chances are of them not using their bomb in the next crisis). But this is the system that serves our interests, as at present defined.



This is, as we say, a generalizing sketchmap of a system that is—that's the *point*—barely organized chaos. It is not meant as a substitute for particular histories, some comic, some tragic, most a mixture of both. We are not such fools as to make believe, for example, that the Cold War simply never happened or did not have specific effects—mostly beneficial from capitalism's point of view. Least of all do we mean to pass judgment on the USSR's rapaciousness and duplicity in the period in question; what concerns us is its *power*—its power to generate empire—in comparison to that of the West. That power was always nugatory, and known to be. (Nor do we even mean to deny that "Marxism" was somehow or other a player, or a counter, in the weird global game of ideological checkers; but only insofar as it had become, in the wake of Bolshevism, the *ideology* of "development" for those national bourgeoisies who dreamt of an end run round capitalism—to a miraculously "stabilized" commodity economy. The versions of Marxism those dreams gave rise to were, putting it mildly, a bit exotic. There may be differences of opinion among us as to whether, in the light of this history, the old dog of Marxism has any life left in it. How could there not be, after half a century of hearing Marxism out of Ulbricht's mouth, or Kadar's, or Mugabe's? But one thing we agree upon: if Marxism is to be retrieved at all as a critical force against capitalism, it has everything to gain from being thus "discredited"—that is, with most of the peo-

ple who previously gave it credit. It may still prove to be an idiom of use to those for whom it was first meant. It's not as if such people have gone away.)

Our map is intended to pick out certain structural features of capitalism and point to them at work in the Middle East. It has a good old-fashioned look to it, for which we do not apologize. What could be more old-fashioned than the present jargon of build-up, blockade, stalemate, preemptive strike? What faces could look at us from deeper in the past than those of the Bangladeshis on the airplane? This past is capitalism's present; the past it needs to keep its miserable "postmodernity" alive. Is the Left supposed to abandon the explanatory term "capitalism" because capitalism has won: is that the line of reasoning? Sure, capitalism has won: the present crisis is a picture of its victory. It is a crisis of capitalism's strength; which is to say, the worst kind.



None of this, need we say it, provides a picture of how opposition to capitalism in the U.S. could be given effective political form—in this crisis or the crises to come. We haven't been talking tactically. *It will be opposition to capitalism as a world system or it will be nothing*: that is what we think needs saying, "after the Cold War." Putting our faith in the good works of the Security Council seems to us like running around with buckets of water trying to start a fire. And dreams of a scaled-down, fuel-efficient, self-sustaining, home-boy capitalism are based, in our view, on a deep misreading of what capitalism is, and what it needs to keep going. There is a "crisis of resources," yes, and the events in the Middle East can be understood to be part of it, but only if we take the word "resources" to mean something else than faraway fuel and raw materials; what is at stake in the Gulf, as always, is a struggle for *control*—over markets and labor power and terms of trade as much as oil per se. *Capitalism cannot do without these resources; it cannot even learn to scale down its appetite for them; and its appetite leads always to war.*

And do not let our occasional, somewhat lofty references to "future crises" make it be thought that we don't see war as imminent, maybe weeks or months away, and liable to spin out of anyone's control. Nobody really knows (or is saying) what Saddam has in his arsenal and what it will take for him to use it. Shamir's bomb is ready for launching. We have had a glimpse of General Dugan (ret.)'s vision of the future. Which of the several available eco-genocides is it going to be—chemical, biological, nucle-

ar, you name 'em, all totally unpredictable in their wider, long-term effects? We believe that mounting a real resistance to these possible futures involves a recasting of the language in which crises are described. We haven't talked tactics; but we know it is a race against time.

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Iain A. Boal, James Brook, Jeffrey J. Carter, T. J. Clark, Gloria Frym, Eduardo Gutentag, R. Dennis Hayes, Anne M. Wagner, Linda J. Wiens

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P.O. Box 9699
Berkeley, CA 94709
USA



