

Iraq: a moral for the world's future

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It is said that when the First World War broke out, the European liberal intelligentsia was shocked as much as it was saddened. It was somehow thought in enlightened European circles at the beginning of the twentieth century that the Franco-Prussian war was the last war of their history, and that European history, at any rate, had outgrown the juvenility of wars. The First World War was a shocking message that this opinion was an illusion as juvenile as any.

The adventures of Bush Jr (and his friend, the one and only Blair) in Iraq – preceded by Afghanistan – must have sent a similar shock to the many who must have believed that humanity in the twenty first century has put behind it the more crude forms of belligerence, at any rate in the more ‘advanced’ parts of the world, advanced not only in the language of human rights and values in common use, but also in the degree to which civil rights are protected and respected within those countries.

If I say that this too was an illusion, and that it was bound to be shattered one day or another, I am not being cynical about the extent to which civil and political rights of citizens are in fact protected in the countries of Bush & Blair (hereinafter, B & B). No, it would be not only uncharitable but also unreal to dismiss the civil rights regimes of the lands of B & B as fake. I am aware that Noam Chomsky has said some very uncharitable things about US democracy. But he was referring to the extent to which US citizens in fact shape their own future – the ultimate test of political democracy. That may well be slight, and Chomsky may well be right in his criticism, and yet the individual freedoms and civil rights of citizens may well be respected to a considerable degree. I think that, inspite of the numerous and well documented instances of violation of the rights of citizens in those countries, especially those of ethnic minorities, there is little doubt but that the citizens of the countries ruled by B & B do enjoy well protected personal and civic freedoms. The illusion lies in believing – as many otherwise intelligent people seem to, or at least seemed to until Iraq happened – that a State that respects its own citizens’ rights must necessarily, in some essential sense, respect the civil and political rights of other people as well, and if that does not happen, then there is some thing unnatural about it.

In fact, the saga of the imperial adventures of the European States and the US must have shattered this illusion long ago. The US, in particular, has made it clear ever since its war against Mexico in the year 1846 that it cares just about nothing for the rights of foreigners who stand in its way. It has, for the last one hundred and fifty years, declared this fact again and again through its actions: in Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Chile, Palestine, Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, Iran, the Balkans, the Arab countries in general, Afghanistan, and Iraq over the last decade (the more knowledgeable reader will forgive any inadvertent omissions). And the

Europeans are not far behind, though being (as they themselves will proudly say) less crude than their transatlantic cousins they have invented less transparent fig leaves. And all of them have done so even as they went on improving the content of the civil right regimes of their own countries.

I do not agree with the kind of radicals who would argue that these States could improve the civil rights content of their internal regimes only because they trampled upon every body else's civil rights. In fact this belief is of a piece with its opposite: that a regime that respects civil and political rights within its boundaries will necessarily be more democratic towards other nations and societies. This liberal illusion and its radical alternative owe equally to a belief that is quintessentially that of the European enlightenment, and would not seem so obvious or natural to other traditions of thought. I am referring to the belief in the essential unity or one-ness of Good, that if some thing is really good in one aspect it must necessarily be good in other aspects too (and its corollary: that if it is known to be bad in one aspect, its seeming goodness in another aspect must be illusory). This belief that is deeply ingrained in the point of view of the European enlightenment is a characteristic of what we know as modern thought, in its liberal as well as Marxist variants.

Once we give up this illusion, and accept what we all know to be true, namely that the Good is as fractured as the Bad, we will cease to be surprised that the Americans and the English can criticise harshly and even lampoon their war-mongering leaders at will, even as B & B plumb the depths of imperial savagery, and the two can go on parallelly. We will then realise that even a world full of countries with impeccable democratic credentials internally will not necessarily be a just world in international relations. The effort for a democratic community of nations will have to be structured minus any such *a priori* beliefs. Such a structure will be informed by the experience of the last half a century of the United Nations – presently the favourite foot ball of the Americans – and will not trust the sense of justice of any member State: whether on the ground that it is a working democracy, or that it is a working socialist State, or that its citizenry's mean skin colour is fair enough to inspire faith in its wisdom (a belief that seems to be becoming more and more unabashedly popular with official ideologues in the West).

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