

The Mirror Of Unreason

The demonisation of Saddam Hussein tells us something disturbing about ourselves, **Kevin Robins** suggests

It is just two years since Francis Fukuyama announced the triumph of the Western idea. With the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives, he told us, the ascendancy of western modernity and its universal culture was unchallenged and unchallengeable. With the war now raging in the Middle East we might feel tempted to question such certainty. Not Fukuyama.

For him, the Gulf war is no more than the challenge of a criminal to society. 'We inhabitants of the post-historical world', he trumpets, 'will have to keep in mind that the truly fundamental transformations in world politics are not going on in a desolate Middle Eastern desert, but back in *cette vieille Europe* which was the cradle of the idea of human freedom'.

This is more than just crass. Fukuyama's confidence in the superiority, and the supremacy, of western modernity should be seen as dangerously blind and arrogant. Of course, we can see Saddam as a gangster and a bully, the 'violent boy from Al-Ouja'. Popular psychological accounts in the press tell of a child who was beaten by his step-father and who turned into a self-important, paranoid and sadistic adult.

On a more epic scale, we can imagine how this emotionally crippled child mutated into a second Hitler. His evil and bestial nature stands directly opposed to our just and civilised culture. And don't forget his militant religion: Islamic fanaticism and fundamentalism can never be reconciled with

(our) Reason and Truth and Enlightenment.

And so, as so often before, we have the encounter of good and evil. Saddam represents the forces of irrational barbarism that must always be contained and controlled by the forces of reason and sanity. And once again, of course, it is up to *cette vieille Europe* and its civilisational offspring, America, to slay the dragon, to vanquish the alien; these UN crusaders must take on the 'beast of Baghdad' and his 'empire of terror'. Reason, universal reason, must be made to prevail in the new world order - even, or perhaps, especially, in that desolate Middle Eastern desert.

The terror that has ruled in Iraq under Saddam's regime is tragically clear. The atrocities are grimly recorded and documented in reports by Amnesty International and Middle East Watch and in Samir al-Khalil's *Republic Of Fear*. There can be no understatement; we cannot describe these events as other than evil.

But let us not stop here in our excoriations. Remember where many of Saddam's weapons of destruction originated: Britain, the United States, France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy have all played a part in developing his nuclear, chemical and ballistic capabilities. Remember the West's complicity with Iraq when Iran was its Satan. And remember, too, the lessons in scientific death that we in the West have given throughout this bloody century.

It is too easy to project all

the evil outwards into that desert and then to believe that all is well in our own garden. Whatever the substance of the case against him, there still remains something fundamentally obscurantist in the demonisation of Saddam. Accusations against his criminality and bestiality are related to the desire to purify our own culture and civilisation.

To see him as the embodiment of irrationality is to be certain of our own rational cause and motives. Which is to say that defences are being erected to protect the integrity of Western culture, of the Western idea. The symbolic damnation of Saddam-Hitler may then reveal a great deal about the fears and anxieties, and maybe even the guilt, of this post-historical world. It may reflect something disturbing at the heart of western modernity and rationality.

Two distinct, though inter-related, forces have shaped modern Western culture and identity. The first, associated with the European Enlightenment, has been the centrality of reason as the constitutive principle of modernity itself. The Enlightenment was about the dissolution of 'pre-modern' custom and tradition, and its replacement by a more formal and rational management of economic and political life. Above all, instrumental and purposive rationality has been at the heart of the whole project of Western science and technology which has, over the last two centuries, transformed the natural and social orders.



The second force defining the modern West has been the intensive and intense encounter with other cultures brought about by imperialist expansion. Something new was developing in the 19th century, argues the historian Albert Hourani, something 'created by the vast expansion of the European mind and imagination so as to appropriate all existing things.'

In this quest to appropriate the world the West learned to define its own uniqueness against *the other*, against 'non-Europe'. If the political reality has always been one of conflict and disunity, the



Illustration: Alain Pélissier

construction of an imaginary Orient helped to give unity and coherence to the idea of the West. This Orient was, moreover a mirror in which Europe (and subsequently America) could see reflected its own supremacy. In learning to account for its difference from non-Europe, it also had to account for this supremacy, for the unquestionable success it had had in imposing its hegemony on 'inferior' cultures.

Fundamental to both its difference and its inherent superiority, it seemed, was the principle of rationality. It was on this basis of this rationality, embodied in mo-

dern science and technology, that *cette vieille Europe* had triumphed throughout the world, had made itself the universal point of reference. This rationality it came to see as the basis of a universal culture; the justification for its claim to define universal values, to define its values as universal.

Modernity is defined against pre-modernity, reason against irrationality and superstition, and this divide is mapped on to a symbolic geography that counterposes the West and its Orient. *Its* Orient, because if 'the West' did not exist, then the Orient could not exist either. It is 'the West'

that has given both existence and identity to 'the Orient'. And the existence and identity it has bestowed is one of constitutive inferiority and deficit.

Oriental culture is a sub-altern culture, conceived through the very process of its subjugation and subordination to the universal culture. And it is a culture defined by what it lacks (modernity, rationality, universality); its 'otherness' is defined in terms of the backwardness, the irrationality and the particularity of its values.

This confrontation has assumed its most intense and confrontational form in the encounter with Islam. Since the time of the crusades, the relation between Muslims and Christians has been founded on mistrust, misgivings and misunderstandings. In the Middle East, the experience of modernity and modernisation could only be negotiated in the context of a long history of colonial and missionary activities. In this region, it was an involuntary experience, another kind of crusading invasion, and it involved a deep sense of despair and humiliation.

Hourani describes a sense of secondariness in contemporary Arab identity: 'It is no longer to have a standard of values of one's own, not to be able to create but only to imitate; and so not even to imitate correctly, since that also needs a certain originality.' In the face of self-proclaimed Western universalism, Islamic and Arabic culture was shaken to its foundation.

Within the terms of this self-proclaiming universal culture, moreover, there could be no escape from this degradation. Islam was inferior in its very essence. In Western eyes (though contrary to historical evidence), it was constituted as a conservative culture, a culture of dogmatism and fanaticism. History and progress were possible only in the West. Islam, by contrast, was a static culture, an eternally medieval and feudal culture; it was the culture of impossible modernisation. And it

could not be otherwise.

It could not be otherwise because the very difference and supremacy of the West were constructed around this image of Arab and Islamic otherness. 'Our' civilisation was defined against 'their' barbarism; 'our' beauty against 'their' bestiality. If that irrational culture had access to our rationality and science, what would be the implications for the Western sense of difference and uniqueness? If that backward culture could modernise itself, where would we then find the mirror to reflect our superiority.

This unthinkable predicament of modernity in the Orient is what now confronts the West in the Gulf. In this war, Saddam is assaulting the norms that have defined Western uniqueness and superiority; he is violating the boundaries that have differentiated rationality and irrationality, Western modernity and the pre-modern Orient. He has armed himself with the munitions of modernity, not only with 'conventional arms', but also with an arsenal of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons.

But he is by nature - by his Arab and Oriental nature - irrational. When equipped with the scientific instruments of warfare, Saddam's inherent irrationality can only become explosive; with modern technologies he is a monstrous and psychotic force. The armies of Reason, the allies of the post-historical world, must then suppress this crazed Unreason. They must outlaw the 'mad dog'. They must crush what defence secretary Tom King has called Iraq's 'monstrous military machine'. What cannot be tolerated is the monster that pretends to modernity.

We have imagined Saddam in terms which stand diametrically opposed to our civilisation and culture. We have imagined him as absolutely, and monstrously, 'other'. To see him in this way has made it possible - has made it logical and rational - to set fire to the night skies of Iraq. But is that what Saddam is?

Is he the primitive and irrational alien? Might there not be reason in his madness?

Saddam uses our weapons, the weapons that we have sold him, and he uses them, like us, in a rational and calculating way. He is a cunning military strategist: he has a 'game plan' for the war, and, according to General Colin Powell, he is 'resourceful' and 'ingenious' in implementing it. Saddam embodies the aspirations and logic of modernity. He is modernity as it now exists in that part of the world. Saddam is a mirror - a distorting mirror perhaps, but a mirror nonetheless - reflecting an image of us.

The West does not like what it sees in that mirror. But let us be clear about just what it is that it is seeing. It is the monstrous side of its own modernity; it is the irresistible spread of its own project, a project that has been marked by both rationality and violence. Saddam is not an alien monster, a monster against modernity, but rather a monster born of modernity, a monster within modernity. As the Liberal Democrat leader, Paddy Ashdown, unwittingly intimated, 'we are now haunted by a monster which we helped to create'. This is the paradoxical truth that we cannot stomach.

Many commentators have described the creation of a Frankenstein's monster in Iraq. Like Mary Shelley's creature, Saddam is a monster created through the global spread of modernity. In him, too, our fear of modernity's monstrous aspect is projected onto an elemental hatred of the 'other'. Saddam must be a race apart.

If Iraq is in the process of modernisation, then it is an alien kind of modernity that can never be acceptable to the civilised world. Like Frankenstein's monster, Saddam must be banned from civilisation. Only through his exclusion can reason be reclaimed in the name of universal progress and humanity. And so the 'smart' technologies of Western reason are now being mobilised to smash the 'other'.

Saddam is, nonetheless, a part of modernity. Can we ignore the reality that, in this global culture, there is no place that modernity has not reached? How can we continue to de-link the 'other'; from the project of modernity? Saddam's means of war are products of modern science and technology, as are those even more lethal systems being unleashed against him by the Western allies. It is difficult for us to acknowledge that violence and destruction, on both sides, are expressions of 'rational' behaviour; that 'reason' may be at the heart of violence.

If Saddam's third-world modernity is contaminated by a direct and brutal violence, the military exploits of post-historical modernity are, by contrast, clinical, surgical and sanitised. We are fascinated by the way our 'smart weapons' are mobilised to 'knock out' and 'take apart', to 'neutralise' and 'cleanse', enemy targets in what is called the 'theatre' of Iraq and Kuwait. We are seduced by what science can do in the name of freedom and civilisation. What distinguishes us from Saddam is our superior, perhaps supreme, ability to screen out the death and mutilation. It is this that makes us more advanced. We are simply better at being modern.

The allies, George Bush tells us, are 'on the side of God'. 'I have resolved all moral questions in my mind', he says, 'this is black versus white, good versus evil'. With our moral rectitude, our modernity and military science, we look set to prevail against the evil Saddam and his ramshackle modernity. The Western idea will stumble on. Its post-history will be driven by the same fantasies and phobias as its wretched and ravaging history. White versus black. Good versus evil. Us against them. But at what cost?

The Spanish reporter, Alfonso Roja, describes a woman in Baghdad, her eyes smouldering, shouting down at a crowd of Western journalists: 'Is this what you call Western civilisation?'