

The Gulf Peace

The War The Left Lost

The Left was thoroughly divided over its response to the Gulf war.

Fred Halliday takes issue with the anti-war position and **Michael Gilsonan's** powerful polemic in our last issue

The March 1991 issue of *Marxism Today*, devoted to the Gulf war, presents a refreshingly wide range of views on what is one of the major crises of the post-war epoch: it contains by far the best range of socialist views and analysis of the question yet published. Maxime Rodinson, the most experienced and judicious of all left-wing writers on the Arab world, concentrates his fire on Saddam and the false liberation he offers to the peoples of the Middle East; Eric Hobsbawm makes many a sane remark about the war, and seems to be on the verge of saying not only that the war was inevitable, but that it was legitimate in principle, if not in the way it was actually launched and fought. Or do I traduce him? The cover has what is a rather anodyne if safe message: 'A peace the West can't win': but *Marxism Today* is too savvy to suggest who might win, if the West is not going to - the Iraqis? the Iranians? the Israelis? By implication at least, the crisis is good for *Marxism Today's* side, albeit there is little in the issue itself to elucidate this. Michael Gilsonan, author of one of the great books on the subject, *Recognising Islam*, which is all the finer because it looks at what Muslims do and say and never once quotes the Koran, criticises myself and Hans Magnus Enzensberger for our view that military action against Saddam was necessary.

Gilsonan is kind in tone, concerned but muddled in a postmodernist vein. He argues that there was an alternative to war, namely sanctions, and invokes the authority of Heath and Healey. He fails to note that both these figures took the position that after the war started, it had to be prosecuted successfully - Healey in the very same issue of *Marxism Today*, Heath in interviews. Of course a peaceful outcome would have been preferable. But benign invocation

of sanctions is not enough to clinch the argument, since they could only have worked under two conditions: either that Saddam would, in the face of the suffering of his people, have called off the occupation of Kuwait, or that, under pressure from outside, there would have been such discontent in Iraq that the Ba'athist regime could have been overthrown, as were the Popular Unity government in Chile in 1973 or the Mosadeq regime in Iran in 1953. Yet it is absolutely clear now, after the war, if it was not before, that Saddam was prepared to put his people through any hell rather than withdraw - he only did so when the power base of his regime, the elite military units, were about to be destroyed; his regime was not a democratic one, as were those of Mosadeq and Allende, and was not, therefore, vulnerable in the way that theirs were. The reality that Gilsonan and those who argue like him wish to avoid is a harsh one: it is that if Saddam had not been attacked, he would have stayed in Kuwait. There is an argument for saying that would have been the lesser of two evils, but that is the choice that was faced.

Michael Gilsonan argues against the war on proportional grounds - that it was not worth it. He makes much of the consequences of the war, within Iraq and Kuwait, and more broadly. He does not confront, any more than most peace movement critics of the war, either the issue just raised, that the peaceful route would have left Saddam armed and in Kuwait, or the question of what people in countries most affected thought: in Kuwait itself, in Saudi Arabia and Israel, yes, Israel, where the Scuds fell, and in Iran which had just been through eight years of war following the Iraqi aggression of 1980, and where even more Scuds had fallen. We know what the populations of these countries

thought: they backed, in the main, war against Saddam and wanted his regime overthrown. So, on the evidence, did many people in Iraq itself, as was shown in the mass uprisings that took place immediately after the ceasefire. In the days after the ceasefire we saw a revealing situation: in the West, the Left and peace movements were denouncing the war, while the popular insurrectionaries in Iraq and the coalition of exiled politicians, including the Communist Party, were calling on the West to go further, to provide material assistance to them in their attempt to oust Saddam. My own view is that the 'coalition' should have responded to that appeal with assistance.

Gilsonan asks whether the costs of war are proportional to the gains, and lists what the 'losses and benefits to the Arabs' are: but what he then itemises - the hammering of Kuwaitis and Palestinians, the expulsion of Yemenis, the shattering of Jordan, etc, - were consequences not of the war starting on January 17, but of the original Iraqi invasion of August 2. He calls for historical awareness, but what he gives is jumbled. Nowhere is this confusion, one he shares with many left attempts to analyse the crisis, more clear than his discussion of American motivation and strategy.

Like many on the Left, he seems to imagine that in order to analyse the strategy of the USA, it is sufficient to come up with a few generally critical notions - oil, imperialism, hegemony, world order - and toss them into a strategic soup. Typical of this kind of argument is the claim that the campaign against Iraq was a product of an underlying capitalist search for an enemy - after the cold war, it needed a foe in the south or in 'Islam'.

Of course the US hoped to use this war to strengthen its position in the world: but this does not go anywhere near proving that the war was an attempt (motivated by the need?) to strengthen the US position vis-a-vis its other capitalist partners. What Gilsonan and others fail to see is that, prior to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the West in general, and US hegemony in particular, were doing very well anyway. They had just seen off the Bolshevik challenge, after 70 years: they hardly needed a war in Arabia. Of course, there are sectoral benefits, but the political rout of the Left which the war has occasioned would have been substantially less if the peace and left movements had put themselves at the head of the movement to defend Kuwait, inhibit the alienation of Israelis and Palestinians, and support the anti-dictatorial struggle of the Iraqi people. Instead the Left in Europe and the US meandered off, with misplaced trust and unthought-through reactions, and so conceded the defence of peace and democracy to the Right.

The most puzzling part of Gilsonan's

essay concerns what he says about Enzensberger. There were points in Enzensberger's essay that I disagreed with - I did not think when I read it in mid-January, and subsequent events have born this out, that Saddam was prepared to destroy his whole people and regime in the way Hitler did. But there are many valid comparisons between Saddam and Hitler, not least in the rhetoric of blood, leader-cult and war. Moreover, Gilsenan seems to miss the whole point of Enzensberger's article, which was not to add further castigation to Saddam by comparing him with Hitler, but to criticise the complacency of his fellow Germans and show how many of the things they abhorred in the Iraqi leader and regime had not so long ago been present in their own society. Far from it being a miscomprehension of the Arabs, as Gilsenan supposes, it was a powerful piece of national self-criticism.

Cilsenan rightly makes the point that much of the conflict between the Arab world and the West is not about cultural stereotypes or ethnocentrism at all, and is comprehensible in terms of general political categories. But in the special position of scholar and *engage* that he occupies, he would make a special contribution by taking the argument a bit further and speaking what is, in most circles, unspeakable: this is what Maxime Rodinson, with greater authority than any of us, does say, namely that the myths and ideology of the Western world are at least equally matched by the delusions, half-truths, conspiracy theories and demagoguery of the Arab and Islamic worlds. Nobody following the antics of the Iraqi leadership over recent months, **and** the widespread popular identification with them, can fail to be struck by the dreadful tendency towards self-deception and the cult of violence found in the political culture of the region. Nor can one ignore the deep-rooted chauvinism and racism displayed by almost all the peoples of the region, not just by Israelis towards Palestinians, but by Arabs towards Persians and Jews. Whatever else, these phenomena are not just the creations of imperialism, past or present.

The tragedy which Saddam Hussein has brought on his people and on **his** region is to a considerable part a product of this indigenous, anti-democratic, militaristic and racist political culture. It is no service to the peoples of the Middle East, including those of Iraq, if we forever misrepresent by simplification the character and motives of Western policy and ignore the ways in which, imperialism or no imperialism, the leaderships of the region must bear a considerable responsibility for the actions they have taken. The Left now has to come up with a post-war agenda: it cannot do so if it remains a prisoner of the half-truths of the past.

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