

CAUSE *without* EFFECT

The loudest Left response to the Gulf crisis has been a non-political 'no' to war in general. Yet the Left also commonly endorses violence in world affairs. For Colin Mercer, this is a watershed in Left belief. The death of communism has left the politics of critique rudderless, and ushered in a new politics of policy.

The war in the Middle East will probably, sometime, be seen as a threshold in the development of Left political culture in Australia and, for that matter, many other countries. The war has an exceptional status, not just because of the features which are unique to it—the role of the United Nations especially—but also because it occurs in the context of a massive reorganisation of international relations of power and the effective geo-political disappearance of communism as both a government and oppositional force.

This is a threshold between one political logic and another: between, roughly speaking, a politics informed and dominated by the idea of critique and a politics informed by the ethos of policy. A politics informed by the idea of critique can operate comfortably on the basis of big 'causes' (in both senses). According to one component of this logic the current Gulf War can be seen as the pernicious effect of a history of imperialism and the exploitation of the people and resources of the Middle East: blood for oil, as the slogan insists.

Well, yes, if you were writing a long-term history of relations between the Western powers and the Middle East, this is certainly a pattern which would plausibly emerge as a general explanation. This is a compelling and effective account: the West has little to be proud of in its historical and contemporary policies, attitudes and relations towards the Near, Middle or Far East.

It is an account, however, which, no matter how plausible it might be in the grander sweep of 'historical time', and no matter how useful it might be in informing decisions on the shape and nature of a post-war settlement, does not necessarily help a great deal in the much shorter span and messier context of 'political time'. There are different mechanisms and quite specific logics which apply to long-term historical and political analysis on the one hand and shorter-term political decision-making on the other. Grand histories of class, of social structure and, in general, of those patterns of dominance on which much political analysis rests, pose the same sorts of problems.

As a response to this there is no need, according to some prevailing political and moral precepts, to concede priority to pragmatism over principle (the opposition is frequently a false one anyway). Rather, it is to recognise that there is a real and effective difference between the sort of analysis



which gets applied to the longer historical span and the decision-making procedures which determine policy in and for the present. Sometimes these orders overlap. More frequently they don't. The point is that they don't have to and it's a peculiarly pure mode of political analysis which can align its policies and decisions at every stage with the general precepts of its guiding doctrines.

The waters of political time are muddied in the case of the current conflict in the Middle East by, among other things, United Nations agreements and treaties on political sovereignty and the implications of invasion, by the fact of a 28 nation agreement on the United Nations resolution on Kuwait, by domestic and international law and obligations, by the presence of chemical and biological warfare capacities beyond all treaty parameters, by the fact that Saddam has used these capacities on Kurdish and Iranian populations and has said that he will also do so on a nation which is 'technically' non-combatant in this conflict—Israel—and, finally, by differing levels of public support for various forms of involvement. These are difficult and complicated, 'present-tense' policy matters which are not well-addressed by the certainties of some forms of historical explanation currently being used as argument for non-involvement.

So, this is not an argument about expediency but, rather, about recognising that there are real differences between the types of analysis and explanation that are relevant at the 'grand' level of historical, social and geo-political development and those that are pertinent in the domain of everyday policy considerations. The non-Labor Left has been good at the former but has had some problems with the latter, notwithstanding the advice to think globally and act locally. This has to do with political and intellectual affiliations with various forms of grand social theory, particularly, though not exclusively, with marxism both as a theory and as a credo of government. Grand social theory, whether in the form of marxism, the variants of sociology often adopted by political radicals in arguments about class, some theories of patriarchy or the environmentalist use of the idea of the 'planet' as a prime mover, tends to be accompanied by grand explanatory principles or causes from which effects can easily be read off. In this sense they are, more or less, 'total theories' in so far as they attempt to explain how things hang together, how they interact and how certain outcomes are pretty much inevitable.

At the political level, grand theories can operate quite comfortably in an 'I told you so' attitude. Readings of the Gulf War which view it only as an outcome, through a

grand theory of imperialism, of an historic pattern of exploitation, or as the effect of masculine forms of aggressive behaviour, or as the predictable outcome of human exploitation of natural resources fall into this category. These explanations may be comforting retrospectively and they may also, at this level of explanation, be true, but they do not provide many of the necessary tools of engagement in policy in the here and now. From the side of resources, is it possible for governments to ignore the effects of the invasion on the supply of oil by consent and trade to those economies which need it to survive? From the side of human rights and international law is it possible to ignore an invasion of a sovereign territory? If we are willing to cite the cases of East Timor, Grenada and Panama as examples of when this policy has been shamefully ignored then surely the argument is that they should not have been ignored and something should have been done about it. What should have been done? Might it not have involved the United Nations, sanctions and some form of intervention by a UN approved force?

There is a question, then, of how content we can be with the general slogans of 'Peace' or 'Anti-War' as political principles. While they can have definite and measurable effects as slogans in specific campaigns—Vietnam, nuclear disarmament, etc—they cannot work as policy frameworks, and nor should they be intended to. To say that you are for peace and against war is not a political position but an ethical stance to which pacifists and others are entitled but which is destined not to have much political clout in a country which has a non-conscripted defence force, is a member of the United Nations and party to other treaty arrangements. What would you do in these circumstances? In your day-to-day practice you would need to be asking little questions rather than big ones. Peace in what and on whose terms? Which war? Vietnam? Cambodia? Nicaragua? El Salvador? Romania? To be pacifist in relation to these conflicts is surely meaningless in political terms. It is not possible for the Left to 'heroise' some conflicts and denigrate others simply because of the nature of the key antagonists.

These are constrained policy questions which trouble the general critical and ethical position—the critique position—of 'anti-war' and they have been posed in this journal and elsewhere recently. In the November issue of *ALR*, Fred Halliday, well known for his associations with the intellectual far Left in the 60s and 70s, a respected analyst and writer on the Middle East and now Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics, argued broadly in favour of 'the West doing something about it'. In Australia, Albert Langer, doyen of the far Left in the Vietnam Moratorium period, put it this way (in *The Australian*): "I cannot follow the US example of selective indignation. I cannot support armed struggle against US aggression in Vietnam and armed resistance to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and fail to support armed opposition to the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait". Bernie Taft has also argued, in *The Age*, that "...we have a moral obligation for a limited participation, in order to make this military action, as much as we can, a United Nations and not simply a United States affair." This requirement—along with appropriate monitoring of Australian involve-

ment, pressures to strictly observe the UN mandate, and to avoid the bombing of civilian populations and infrastructure, to move at every stage and wherever possible towards ceasefire arrangements, to make sure that the pieces and players are in place for a long-term settlement and to ensure adequate media reportage—represents a plausible and achievable response to the crisis.

The slogan 'No blood for oil' is an exemplary form of critique politics but is not much help in these circumstances. Dirty, smelly and environmentally unfriendly as this fossil fuel may be when extracted and burnt, it is nonetheless still a vital resource in running households, industries and economies in First, Second and Third World countries—more dramatically so in the latter than in the former. These are the 'little' but vitally important issues which get in the way of big stances and complicate the drawing up of a big picture in which we can all witness the truth. Access to vital resources is something that people usually fight for and go to war over. The Left has usually supported these fights. The ANC fights for such resources in South Africa. The Sandinistas fought for commodities such as coffee, bananas, cotton and fish in Nicaragua. Human rights are rights of access to basic physical resources as well as to principles of political liberty and democracy. These are wars too, and to be anti-war in these circumstances is politically vacuous.

The slogan 'No blood for oil' wouldn't mean much to the poverty-stricken urban populations of the Philippines or India who are increasingly and dramatically feeling the effects, in terms of consumption and family income, of the rising prices and scarcity of oil produced by Iraq's military occupation of Kuwait and the subsequent conflict. To make oil sound like a superficial substance compared with the emotive qualities of blood is about as meaningful as suggesting to remote Aboriginal communities that blood is more important than water. Zappy little phrases which trip easily off the tongue on street marches don't always translate into politically achievable objectives. In other words, great causes but few effects. Dirty little difficulties and policy conundrums get in the way of totalising theories and smart slogans. Nothing against slogans here: they are intended to be economic and emotive in their effects, but let's recognise that they are a quite distinct theoretical use of language, addressed to particular audiences in specific circumstances and not an embodiment of a general truth.

Totalising theories and smart slogans are the province of minoritarian movements who are content to remain minoritarian. This is a key problem both in relation to the present Gulf War and to longer term problems of Left and democratic politics: who is being addressed? The 70-80% of the populations of Australia, the US, the UK or France who are 'in favour of' but do not necessarily support (this is an important distinction from the point of view of policy) the actions of the coalition countries? Does the politics of critique have a language which can address these majorities or is it happier to speak only to its own constituents? There are few signs, in some of the present stances on the war from the non-Labor Left, of the emergence of the sort of language and political stance which can effectively address the real problems of oil shortages, the

new role which the United Nations is assuming, the issues which follow from the new relations between the USA and the USSR, or Australia's defence policy and commitments. The history which led to the conflict is clearly visible and many have a clearer idea or set of hopes about the nature of the settlement after the conflict including a significant presence for the Palestinians but, between this looking backwards and looking forward there is a blank spot at the site of the politics of the present. This is a problem.

This is not, however, an article about the Gulf War. It is, rather, about a 'lag' in political culture between the generalities and certainties of critique, a legacy of an older order in politics, intellectual practice and, indeed, the world, which the Gulf War increasingly serves to highlight. It is about the need for democratic Left political culture to complete—or effect—a transition from the domain of critique to the field of policy: from the purely oppositional to the plausibly governmental.

We can be assisted in this if we will recognise what's going on at the level of training in political and other competences, both formally in the education system and informally in bureaucracies, workplaces and communities. A few months back I got a phone call from a reporter at the *Sunday Age* in Melbourne which reminded me of the large gap between the two types of political behaviour at issue here. He asked me, as a "social theorist" (I became instantly suspicious) whether I regretted the demise of the "maverick radicalism" so prominent in the 1960s and early 1970s. I wasn't in Australia in the 1960s and 70s and all I could think of were Tariq Ali and Robin Blackburn. This didn't help. The gist of my answer, in any case, was: no, I didn't. I suggested, politely, that many of those people who might have fallen under the unfortunate heading of maverick radicalism were now gainfully employed in various agencies, both public and private, of social, economic and cultural policy and that this should not be held against them. They were probably, I suggested, achieving more now than they ever did in the media-visible domain of public protest.

This is the same sort of question as 'why aren't students radical any more?' which we are always being asked—mostly by ex-students from the 60s and 70s now working for newspapers and doing pop socio-psychologies of lost tribes. As a generality, students aren't any more or less radical now than they were 20 years ago. They are just doing different things which happen not to take place in the streets, and are therefore not public or, at least representable, critique. A policy adviser or a bureaucrat at the Trade Development Commission, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, the Affirmative Action Agency or the National Board for Employment, Education and Training is not, after all, good copy. These people are responding, in their chosen career paths, to both a reality and to changed circumstances which some of their teachers from another age may have failed to recognise: that government—or 'governmentality' as some have called it—is not confined to the legislature or to the central apparatuses of the State. One key lesson that was learnt from the 1960s and 70s from feminists, from the work of writers such as Gramsci and Foucault and many others, is that

government happens in lots of places and that it is not necessarily experienced as forms of oppression or intrusion. It has its positive and productive dimensions too and this is one of the reasons for a change in political culture among a whole generation of people initially trained in the orders of critique but now operationalising those capacities effectively in the machinery of government and quasi-governmental organisations.

This has little to do, then, with some universal principle of pragmatism in hard economic times which makes people turn their eyes from the light on the hill to the economic realities on the doorstep: it is the implementation of the capacities in which they have been trained. Many of those students trained in the critical analysis of the dominant culture, in the critique of political economy, in the critical analysis of the social structure are now making their skills operational in advertising agencies and journalism, in the treasury, taxation offices or other economic instrumentalities, in social policy and welfare agencies and so on. This is not a problem. It is why they were trained in those skills in the first place: to get a job, not a priestly calling. It is surely profoundly elitist to complain retrospectively—or to put up the idea in order to sell copy—that there has been a 'sell-out' or a conservative turn in the culture of student expectations and career paths. This is a nonsense which thrives on the idea that there was a moment, a Golden Age, of radicalism in which the universities were the prime movers and the students the exemplary cadres.

Universities occupy an important but profoundly ambiguous position in the culture of protest and opposition, providing, as they do, both the key cadres for the actual implementation of government policy and the symbolic opposition. This is one of the reasons why we keep getting asked why students aren't radical any more. The reason for going to university, after all, is to get trained professionally in various skills. It is not intended as a novitiate in preparation for the orders of pure critique. Those endowed with the capabilities to occupy this position through historical, philosophical, literary or economic training, and to be named and published as such, are perhaps one in several thousand. The skills that are taught may also be critical ones of analysis, argumentation, the presentation of a critical position and so on, but, whether in the humanities or law, the social, pure or applied sciences, these are only components of a more general program of training and not its ultimate object. Dawkins-esque as this may sound and horrible to behold as it may be for a whole generation of radical intellectuals, it is nonetheless the case that universities have no special privileges in the domain of what Marx once called, disparagingly, "critical criticism". As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out in relation to the particularly hierarchically-structured French tertiary education system, there is absolutely no reason why we should expect universities to be the natural repositories of critique. Political intellectuals are, in fact, much more likely to emerge now, and especially in Australia, from trade unions, community and welfare organisations and the legal system than they are from the assumed critical ether of the universities. It's as well to put this icon of protest and opposition in its proper place.

In addition to laying the ghost of critical icons, there are—forgive the phrase—'world-historical' reasons for both the reality and desirability of a shift from critique to policy. Marxism in government—the historical reminder to both the left and the rest of the world that however new, struggling and downright grubby, a systemic alternative was possible—has been seen to be an almost entire failure, as a form of government, in any of its evident forms. This is not to say that in a whole range of fields, from foreign policy to agrarian reform, literacy, equal employment opportunity and the treatment of ethnic minorities, there is nothing to be learnt from this history: simply that, domestically and internationally, as a plausible form of government, it did not work. After scanning the world for acceptable communist models—China, Cuba, etc—and finally ending up with the formula of 'actually existing socialism' it is clear that there is nowhere else to look. To hiss 'social democrat' no longer counts as an insult except at a few academic conferences and, presumably, at meetings of the few ultra-leftist rumps that still exist. It is clear, I think, that the integrity—meaning 'wholeness', not 'honesty'—of socialism as such, including the actions, theories and cultures of the communist and mainstream social-democratic traditions, is no longer very clear to any but the most resolute optimist and clarity will only be achieved in these circumstances by developing a 'politics of the present' fairly quickly.

In Australia, a Labor ascendancy since the early 1980s, the emergence of the various social justice bureaucracies in multiculturalism, human rights, EEO and Affirmative Action have provided fertile ground for cautious but often career-based alliances with the machinery of the State and the various formal and informal, public and private institutions of government from schools to trade unions and community organisations.

But does this mean that when Labor gets thrown out of office we will see again the emergence of the maverick radical? I don't think so: the return of the repressed is not on the agenda and, in any case, there is no space for such a figure to operate any more. Not even the environmental movement—which is where most mavericks and radicals are likely to emerge these days—is likely to mortgage its hard-won presence within the field of public policy to the image of Joshua at Jericho. The walls are still standing after all: it's the battlelines which have changed in a thorough transition from, as Gramsci put it, a war of movement (which never actually moved anywhere) to a war of position. The metaphorical language of war, battles and, most of all, struggles, is something of a legacy of the earlier moment. We are now more in the era of tactical engagements, strategic development, flexible specialisation and conflict resolution procedures.

Should we be worried about this? Not too much. There has been a steady process of settling of accounts and of erstwhile philosophical consciences accelerated in Australia by that older tradition of 'fabianism' in critical intellectual thought. Australians have more readily and rapidly assumed a little portion of 'the mentality of government' than their Anglo-saxon counterparts else-

where in the world. There is an increasing osmosis between those agencies responsible for the production of intellectuals, broadly defined, whether in the trade unions, community organisations, political parties or universities, and the general domain of government.

In this context, the shift from Critique with a big 'C' to Policy with a big 'P' which has been going on in political and academic culture over recent years cannot be represented as just growing up and out of a Young Turk period. This is a newsy way of representing the situation but also quite wrong. Political, intellectual and governmental culture have changed drastically over the past 20 years. Grand theories have nose-dived and along with them have gone many of the certainties about the nature of society and social structure, of social power and, above all, the ability to identify effective single causes of the effects that we see around us. The cult of the postmodern as an era of fragmentation, of dispersal of the firm foundations of knowledge and experience is simply an effervescence in the academies, publishing houses and advertising agencies but the bubbles do, in fact, suggest more profound movements in the substrata of political culture.

These movements are caused precisely by the levels of 'political professionalisation' of those cadres who might hitherto have been happy in the era of critique. With this political professionalisation goes a level of specialisation, a narrowing down of concerns and a more precise targeting of political and policy objectives. Not war as such but the conduct of this war. Not racism or sexism as such but this instance of malpractice or discrimination. As important is to teach and disseminate information about the general problems of war, racism and sexism, it is equally important to teach the 'tactical' ways of handling these problems in everyday life by constantly posing the question, "What do you do now?" The politics of critique only completes the first stage of this process. It is more difficult, but absolutely necessary, to move to the stage of positive but complex elaboration.

With this professionalisation and specialisation goes a necessary recognition of the sheer complex pluralism, density and complexity of social relations: the recognition that what we call society is not a transparent social structure where things and people can be ordered and harmonised according to the principles of far-sighted doctrines or historical lesson-teaching. People working in the areas of law, social and economic policy know this well.

If we remain committed to social change, social theory and social analysis, then it seems important to begin to move in a little closer and to turn our attention more systematically to that present complexity and to the politics of the present. This also means policies for the present. Otherwise it is likely that, despite the best intentions, as somebody once said, we will be confined only to interpreting the world while others, perhaps less sympathetic, will go about changing it.

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