In the aftermath of the Cold War the shape of world politics is in a state of flux. How should we interpret the new face of the post-communist epoch? Stan Correy spoke to Fred Halliday about his views on the Gulf War in retrospect, the 'end of history', and the precarious state of democracy in the fin de siecle world.

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You surprised a lot of your left-wing colleagues by supporting the UN intervention in the 1991 Gulf War. What was the background to your position on the war?

The war started because Iraq was in trouble. They’d fought Iran for eight years, ending in 1988, and had very little to show for it. They’d lost a large number of men, and most Iraqis knew that Saddam had started the war. In addition, Iraq faced very serious economic problems. These were in part caused by the fact that Kuwait and Abu Dhabi were producing more oil than their OPEC quotas allowed. This was pushing down the price of oil, and as a result was depriving Iraq of the oil revenue it needed to rebuild. In that situation Saddam said: ‘we’re going to teach these parasites a lesson’. I think he had considerable support in Iraq and elsewhere in the Arab world for teaching the oil-rich states a lesson. And he believed the Arab world would accept the fait accompli.

So, in one sentence, Saddam thought he could solve the problems of Iraq by basically robbing his neighbour—and by posing as the champion of the Arab world in the process. He didn’t succeed and he was stopped. Now, many people said there could have been an alternative solution. Saddam could have been gotten out of Kuwait by Arab diplomacy. I don’t believe there ever was such a possibility. An Arab solution was no solution. They also said sanctions could have worked. Sanctions certainly were not given time, but I don’t believe they could have worked, for two reasons. First, the Middle East is very porous: Iraq has open borders with Turkey and Syria. They could have imported necessary goods for a long time to maintain their infrastructure and to meet some important technological needs of the regime. Second, they wouldn’t have worked because sanctions only work against nice
people. They work against governments which are not willing to inflict great suffering on their own people—like Salvador Allende in Chile. The Iraqi regime has no such compunction about its own people, as it showed after the war. They would have let the population starve and blamed it on the West, as they blamed subsequent problems on the West.

So the real choice in the Gulf was this. Do you let Saddam stay in Kuwait, or do you evict him by force? In those circumstances I favoured evicting him by force. I think there is a good argument against the Gulf War. But that argument involves saying that Saddam should have stayed in Kuwait: that the price of getting him out was too high—too high in terms of human life, too high in terms of American domination, too high in terms of Western intervention in the Third World. Therefore, he should have been allowed to stay. But to say that peace wasn’t given a chance, or that there was another solution, is self-deception. There was no other solution to get him out of Kuwait.

Saddam thought people didn’t like the rulers of Saudi Arabia or Kuwait, who were seen as greedy sheikhs. But a lot of people in the West also thought: why bother about them, what have they done for us?

The ruling family in Kuwait, the Al Sabah family, is a tribal oligarchy. They rule with some concessions to the population, but basically they keep power and they keep the money for themselves. But having said that, it’s preferable—as most people in Kuwait thought—to be ruled by them than to be ruled by Saddam Hussein’s government, which also took the money for itself, and was far more repressive than anything in Kuwait. Second, if there was going to be a change in Kuwait, it should have come about through the actions of the Kuwaiti people themselves. For me the clinching argument in the whole affair was that the Kuwaiti opposition itself opposed the Iraqi intervention. They favoured military action, not in order to restore the royal family, but to restore the sovereignty of Kuwait, so that they could get on with the job of trying to change the country—something they’re busy now doing in the elections.

There’s a lot of nonsense talked by people who say that because the royal family were undemocratic rulers, Kuwait should not have existed as a state. There are plenty of countries with dictatorial regimes, but it doesn’t mean that people don’t have the right to their own country. Moreover, many of the people who suffered most during the war were people who suffered at Saddam’s hands. Hundreds of thousands of people were expelled from Kuwait in appalling circumstances by Saddam after 2 August, 1991, and distributed all over the Middle East. Particularly badly treated were the non-Arabs—people from Sri Lanka, from the Philippines, from the Tamil areas of India—who were thrown out by Saddam in a completely merciless way, on the grounds that they weren’t Arabs. I think we tend to forget what that occupation meant. So faced with the dictatorship of the Al Sabah oligarchs or Saddam’s military intervention, I still think that on humanitarian grounds the Al Sabah were preferable. And so does virtually all the population of Kuwait.

Critics of the war, like Noam Chomsky for example, argue that the Gulf War was basically a classic example of US imperialism. Wasn’t it simply a case of America throwing its weight around simply to protect its dearly beloved oil?

I would concede that in some respects America was throwing its weight around—not just against the Arab world, as George Bush saw it, but also against its major rivals in Europe and Japan. But the fact is that it didn’t succeed. I challenge anybody to show me how America’s bargaining position vis-a-vis the Common Market or Japan in trade negotiations, or in GATT, has been altered one per cent by what it did in the war.

Chomsky and the critics of American foreign policy are basically concerned with criticising the lies and hypocries in America’s moral position. I would agree with them on this. But that does not mean that everything America does should be opposed. And I would add to this a second consideration, which I don’t think Chomsky comprehends. Throughout the Third World many people fighting for various forms of democratisation and liberalisation look to the better side of America to do something for them—even if for the wrong reasons.

The PLO, for instance, are not saying that everything America does is dreadful. Rather, they’re saying live up to your rhetoric, get on and support national self-determination, do in the Arab-Israeli context what you did in the Kuwait context. And, to Baker and Bush’s credit, they’ve got on and tried to do it. Likewise, when Nelson Mandela went to the US Congress he said: Thank you for the sanctions you imposed on South Africa in 1986 which helped to change de Klerk’s mind; now do more to encourage the peace process in South Africa. So the question is not whether everything America does is for pure motives, or whether everything America does is right. Under some circumstances it can assist the process of national self-determination. I think the critics are misreading the objective consequences, if not the subjective motives of American action by this, as it were, off-the-shelf critique.

You argue that not only critics of the war, but even George Bush, misread its significance.

They certainly saw it as more important than it was. First of all, there’s no such thing as a New World Order; it’s an ad-man’s phrase. Bush himself doesn’t use the phrase any more. So far as it meant anything, it meant that the Soviet Union and the United States would work together to
resolve some Third World problems: Namibia, El Salvador, and at least the beginnings of a Cambodian solution. Of course in other places, such as Afghanistan, they made a complete mess of it.

Chomsky says the New World Order means America trampling all over the world, dominating the world and playing the world policeman. The fact is, it hasn’t played the world policeman. The Europeans and the Japanese are not being pushed around by the Americans. The American public itself has shown much greater pacific—not pacifist—in instincts than most critics of American foreign policy gave it credit for. And the United States is now extremely reluctant to intervene anywhere—though I have my doubts whether they wouldn’t intervene in Cuba if there’s a crisis there.

In short, the Gulf War has not led to a new period of imperialism. It was not exactly a sideshow, but it was a secondary side-road on the evolution of the international system since the end of the Cold War. It hasn’t set precedents—except for the precedent, which I happen to endorse, that bigger states should not gobble up little states.

Yet the term New World Order, ad-man’s phrase though it may be, is still used quite a lot in trying to come to terms with how American foreign policy is being carried out throughout the world.

I’m not sure that the term New World Order is still being used by anyone except the critics of American foreign policy; in other words those who wish to impose on it a consistency and a coherence which I don’t think it has. Having said that, we are in a new international situation—one which concerns, among other things, America’s power and what it does with it. That does raise a number of important questions, but they’re not ones encapsulated by a ‘new world order’—not least because we don’t have a new international order, we have a new international disorder. And that’s something which the Americans on their own certainly aren’t going to solve, even if they were able to.

Before the Gulf crisis it was the Palestinian issue which had dominated Middle East politics for so long. Has the coming together of the Arabs and Israelis to talk about peace been a direct result of the war?

The decision by the Americans to put so much effort into getting talks going, and the willingness of the Israelis and Palestinians to talk, was in part a result of the Gulf War. It underlined the extent to which the Middle East is dominated by the Palestinian question; not because it’s the only question, but it is a central part of the problem, and things will not be solved elsewhere if there is no solution to that problem.

Other factors contributed to it. I think the Israelis feel, as indeed a number of other countries throughout the world feel, that the end of the Cold War has removed a protector from them. And certainly the strategic ground has moved under Israel’s feet. The factor which has most affected the Americans, however, is that the Gulf War underlined the extent to which the developed world depends on Gulf oil for its economic lifeblood. As long as people drive motor cars they’re going to need oil. And while there is some other oil around in the world, most of it in the future is going to be obtained from the Middle East. And in that sense, they intervened militarily to secure access to it: not to own it, to secure access to it. And they have moved on the Arab-Israeli question precisely to try to increase the probability of stability in the region. I don’t think they’ve achieved it, and I think that’s in part because the lessons of the Gulf War have not been learned.

Lesson number one is that if you play politics with the price of oil, you play politics with the stability of the region. The price of oil is too low at the moment and may lead to friction between oil-rich and less oil-rich states. The lesson that should have been learned is that a stable, but somewhat higher price of oil is a guarantor of long-term stability in the region.

Second, the security of the Gulf rests not just on a coalition of some Arab states, but on a coalition of the Arab states and Iran. Yet the Americans have excluded the Iranians, who are getting more and more confident, and at the same time more and more angry. If the Iranians start an arms race, then the Arabs are going to start an arms race, and the result is going to be greater instability.

But the most important lesson they didn’t learn concerns democracy. The issue of democracy lay at the heart of the Iraq-Kuwait dispute. Why? Because on the Iraqi side you have a dictatorial regime which rests upon theatrical and dangerous foreign gestures to keep up its momentum and legitimacy. On the Kuwaiti side—and this is a point often overlooked—the Kuwaiti government was resisting pressure for democratisation. They thought they could play a game of hard-line poker with Iraq as a means of maintaining a foreign threat to silence their domestic critics and to enable them to delegitimise them by calling them Iraqi agents. That’s why the Kuwaiti government miscalculated so much in dealing with Iraq.

I don’t believe Saddam was planning to invade Kuwait for six months beforehand. In the end he said: “I’ve had enough of negotiating with these people, I’m going to teach them a lesson, and I’ll get away with it.” Well, he did teach them a lesson, but it’s not a lesson they seem to have learned for long. The lesson is that lack of democracy in the Gulf states is a contribution to instability.

The people who have learned the democratic lesson least are the Saudi Arabians, who are playing around with non-
sense like ‘special kinds of Islamic consultation’ and so-called consensus in Islam. Frankly, these are just apologetic terms, like people who use terms like ‘the different nature of Asian politics’ to justify their own dictatorships. This is garbage. There are certain general, universal criteria for democracy. There are cultural variations—the British have their Queen, America everyone owns a handgun, and so on—but basically the criteria for democracy are the same. They’re not being met in the Gulf, and this is another cause of instability, because the rulers are going to remain frightened of the ruled.

What about the Kurdish revolt after the Gulf War. What was the significance of that, the way it came about and the way it is resolving itself?

The great difference between Iraq’s war with Iran and its war with America was that in the first war they were able to mobilise patriotic sentiment inside Iraq against the enemy. In the second war, much to the surprise of everyone outside, they were not able to mobilise great patriotic support against the Americans or against the Kuwaitis—even though initially people were glad that these rich, corrupt Kuwaitis had been taught a lesson. The result of that was that with the defeat in Kuwait, there was an insurrection inside the country.

But because of the limited nature of the Americans’ destruction of Iraq’s military potential, the Iraqi regime had the potential to put down this uprising, and the outside world did nothing. I have to say that they should have done something. Not so much because they gave false expectations to the Kurds that they would come in—they didn’t. Rather they should have done something because this was a chance to get rid of Saddam, and a chance that was in keeping with the evident aspirations of the majority of the Iraqi people.

They didn’t do so for reasons that are not entirely pernicious. In part, they didn’t want to get into a situation of manufacturing a new political regime in Iraq. In part, they weren’t sure whether some of the elements in revolt among the Shiites were preferable to Saddam—and given what such people have done in Iran, that’s again an open question. In part they didn’t do so because they wanted to stick within the UN resolutions, which did not encompass, even at the most stretched interpretation, going into Iraq and getting rid of Saddam. But having said that, I think they should have done it. The uprising happened and Saddam defeated it, very bloodily. Many more people were killed in that uprising and its suppression than were killed in the war itself, certainly many more civilians. And it has certainly meant that any of the other people planning an insurrection will think twice before doing so. So an opportunity was missed, and it was missed through a combination of timidity and legitimate scruple.

You’ve commented that it was “the T-shirt and not the gunboat” that destroyed the old Soviet Empire and broke down the resistance to global capitalism. Ronald Reagan would probably disagree with you; he would see America’s tremendous arms build-up as having been the decisive factor. What did you mean by that?

I don’t have much time for Ronald Reagan as a commentator on international affairs. The simple explanation as to why the Soviet Union collapsed—one which is espoused both in the United States and in the former Soviet Union—is the arms race. The West, we are told, outspent them. I don’t think that explains what happened, for a number of reasons. First of all, even if the Soviet Union spent 20% or 25% of its GNP on military production, that doesn’t explain the inefficiency of the rest of the economy. It doesn’t explain why they couldn’t harvest more than two-thirds of their crops, or the levels of inefficiency in the provision of consumer goods. Moreover, it doesn’t explain the lack of spin-off between the military and civilian sectors, which you’ve got in the West. So the failure of the Soviet Union was not to do with the amount of money spent on military production, but with the very structure of the economy, which was increasingly unable to grow, and increasingly unable to incorporate new forms of technology.

Where I think the arms race did have an effect was in the realisation by the Soviet military leadership—who after all were the core of the whole story—that not only could they not keep up with the West, but that they could never imitate the West. Once you’re talking about precision-guided rockets and bombs, once you’re talking about precision engineering to a thousandth of a millimetre; they were into a league they could never compete in as they’d competed before. And that not only had military and security implications, it had ideological implications. It meant that the West was moving further and further away from them, and that they were never going to be able to overtake them. That demoralised them.

But beyond that, what demoralised them, and led people to abandon hope in communism, was the rise in consumer standards in the West, the growth of youth culture, all these things which affected the elite, their families, and the larger class of educated people who were created by the very successes of the Brezhnev period.

Added to which is one other fact: there was no halfway house, no third way. Dubcekism, ‘socialism with a human face’, was simply not a viable option for them in the 1980s, if it ever was. Gorbachev tried to find a middle way; it didn’t work. The real pressure came not from Western military spending, but from the success of Western consumer society. And in that sense, the Common Market did as much to demoralise them as anything else.

Fukuyama’s term ‘the end of history’ has been criticised by both Left and Right as an oversimplification. What do you believe the term means?

I have annoyed a lot of people by saying that to a considerable extent I agree with Fukuyama. I agree with him to the extent that there has been a period of history—the 200 years since the French Revolution—in which the western capitalist model of economy and politics has been challenged by an alternative, whether out of power or in power: an alternative in which people believed. Even strategies for radical Third World development which weren’t explicitly communist—like Nasser’s Egypt, Sukarno’s Indonesia, or
for that matter Khomeini’s Iran—were parasitic on the communist belief that there was an alternative.

Fukuyama is saying there is no longer a global competitor. He is not saying that there aren’t going to be wars, he’s not saying that this is a perfect society—in fact he has some very interesting arguments as to why it’s an imperfect and unstable society. But he is saying that there’s no global alternative, and I agree with him. Communism after seventy years hasn’t worked; it’s discredited. It so happens that 1.4 billion people in China and elsewhere are still ruled by Communism, but it looks like it’s on the way out. And I don’t think that the Islamic movement in its political form is a challenge—not least because economically these societies are a disaster, and also because they greatly overestimate their ability to challenge the West. The Islamic movements haven’t been a challenge to the West since the battle of Lepanto in the early 16th century.

I also agree with Fukuyama when he says that we can make judgements about the progress of history. In other words, we don’t have to simply say we don’t know. We’re surrounded these days by what is loosely termed postmodernism, which in my view is a kind of liberal feeble-mindedness. People say: We don’t really know if we believe in this value or that value. There are no grand narratives in history. I think this leads to all sorts of pernicious consequences. And Fukuyama’s saying: No. There are certain criteria by which we evaluate human progress. These are they. He’s also right in saying something that liberals have a lot of problems in saying, particularly in the States—that the United States won the Cold War. Many Americans don’t like to hear this; they say “Look at our schools and our roads. Look at crime; look at southern Los Angeles”, and so on. First of all nobody ever won a war without costs. The Americans have won a war; of course they’ve paid a price for it. Second, to say that the US is in the same kind of trouble as the Soviet Union is plain silly. It’s a solipsism. It’s thought polite to say it, but it’s simply not true.

However, I do think Fukuyama is wrong in several respects. First of all, what he doesn’t acknowledge sufficiently is that the idea of an end of history itself has a history. And of course it isn’t just Hegel or Marx; all the great religions have a belief in the end of history, in the coming of a Messiah or some kind of grand resolution. So it’s part of an aspiration for something. And behind every idea of the end of history lies an idea of historical agency. In other words, who’s bringing it about? It could be the Messiah, it could be the market, it could be the working class, it could be Reason, as Hegel believed. But Fukuyama won’t acknowledge what his theory of agency is. And of course in his case it is ideas. He seems to think ideas solve history.

Yes, but many people on the Left, as well as a lot of liberals, worry that if you adopt Fukuyama’s conviction that liberal capitalism has won, that means there’s no other alternative. You’ve studied revolutionary movements around the world for many years. Does this mean that you’re saying there’s no form of radical economic or social action possible any more, because capitalism’s won, the market’s won?

First of all, I don’t think capitalism and the market are the same thing. I think that’s a particular interpretation which Thatcher and Reagan put on events. But the success of capitalism in East Asia, like the success of British and German capitalism in the 19th century, didn’t rely primarily on the market at all. It relied on state intervention, often of a quite coercive kind, to mobilise resources, channel education, and so forth. I’ve just been in Singapore, where the success of capitalism certainly doesn’t rely on the market. The two main agencies in Singapore are Singapore Airlines and the Port Authority—both of which are run by the state. So this equation of capitalism with the market is not something which equates with much of the history of capitalism.

Second, to say that liberal capitalism has won is not to say that that particular current definition of it is the only one. There is already a wide range of interpretations between, say, Sweden on the one hand and the United States on the other. There’s an immense amount of variation there.

Third, there are new potentialities, both for the worse and for the better. There are trends in the international system which negatively affect the ability of democratic societies to survive even as they now do. I would include in that the lack of control over economic processes by governments, something you certainly see here in Australia, but also in Britain; increasing abilities for surveillance and monitoring offered by new technologies; and the new rise in chauvinism associated with the rise in migration. On the other hand, there are a whole range of areas where democracy can be enhanced. What I’m saying is that they can’t be enhanced by Bolshevik-style revolution or Islamic revolution—by throwing everything out the window.

What I would stress is that there is no reason to think that this model is going to prevail, and here is my greatest difference with Fukuyama. First of all, we should remember that if one-person, one-vote is the criterion, then democracy didn’t come to Britain or the United States until the late 1960s. Prior to that, in Northern Ireland and in the southern United States, there were quite a lot of disfranchised people. Democracy is in fact a very recent development. It’s precarious, even in the most developed countries. And you can only be reasonably confident that it operates once it’s been up and running for at least a generation. The Weimar republic had democracy, Liberia, Lebanon and Sri Lanka have all had democracy—but it was taken away again. We’re talking about at most a couple of dozen countries out of the 180 in the world who’d have secure democracies.

Given that fact, and given its precariousness, the greatest mistake is to be complacent about liberal democracy and to say that it has solved all human problems. It has not. You don’t have to live in southern Los Angeles to see just how imperfect the system is. So, yes, radical, revolutionary alternatives to it have failed, while it itself is both precarious and capable of both positive and negative development.

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