'New world order': the Left's three favourite hate words of the year. But Diarmuid Maguire suggests righteous indignation isn't enough. A sober look at the new global realities is in order.

The New World Order' threatens to become as pervasive a slogan as "Drink Coca Cola". It has entered our homes through the electronic media; it turns up in our daily newspapers; and entire conferences are organised around the meaning of the concept. Indeed, one wouldn’t be surprised to come across it on a trip to a remote village somewhere. Whenever I hear or read the phrase I imagine that a Saddam-like portrait of George Bush has been erected in my living room or on a billboard on my way to work. And my immediate urge is to pencil in a funny moustache and a pair of round glasses.

It is clear that I am not alone. There are a host of subversive scribblers who insert in their articles a "dis" before the "order" or substitute "American" for "world". "Fight the New World Order!" screams a poster near my local railway station. This shows that some are prepared to challenge the concept head on. But the contested slogan survives even here. One wonders if such a campaign - like "Don’t Drink Coca Cola!" - can ultimately be successful.

I must admit that there is a dark part of me that cheers every time there is some terrible international news. I know that this news chips away at the New American Order and illustrates the true character of our New World Disorder. In this regard - to paraphrase John Lennon - I know I’m not the only one. But again, like Lennon, I would...
much prefer to imagine a world that was better and explore positive ways to help build it.

So what is ‘The New World Order’ exactly, and what are we supposed to do with it? For it isn’t good enough to draw funny moustaches or issue open challenges without knowing what one wants to subvert, fight or replace. It seems that at least three meanings have been attached to the slogan and it is useful to examine each in turn.

New World Order One characterises an international system that has supposedly become more stable and secure because of the end of the Cold War. From this viewpoint, the evaporation of the East-West equation and greater US-Soviet cooperation will reduce the nuclear threat and lead to the resolution of regional conflicts. Although this version of the New World Order received a body blow with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, it was quickly reconstituted in the wake of the US victory over Iraq.

New World Order Two stems from the notion that the collapse of Soviet power represents the ultimate and global triumph of capitalist democracy. This thesis has been argued forcefully by Francis Fukuyama in his ‘End of History’ articles. It is an argument that has been criticised by those who see History’s virulent return with the resurrection of ancient quarrels in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Regardless, it is clear that the marxist-leninist model of economic and political development has collapsed and that the alternative of capitalist democracy has been used to fill the vacuum. In this manifestation of world politics in transition, peace and cooperation will be established among states that need trade and investment and whose militaries will be subject to ‘the democratic veto’.

Finally, New World Order Three condenses the previous two, but expresses them in concrete politico-strategic terms. That is, the US won the Cold War and it is the US that will shape the post-Cold War world. In this version, America will be the cautious leader of a unipolar world in which it shares not only power, but also the economic burden of hegemony. In return, it will help guarantee the survival of capitalism and democracy and will provide a modicum of international stability.

All three world orders represent an attempt to envisage a replacement for an old international system that no longer exists. The Cold War Order has gone and it has left a vacuum in international politics. Old power structures and ideologies are being sloughed off painfully and slowly. Leaders are searching for principles and institutions around which to organise a new system. The post-Cold War era is still pre-Something Else, and slogans like ‘The New World Order’ hide the fact that nobody knows what that ‘Something’ will be. Will international politics in fu-
ture be shaped by cooperative security alliances, the 'natural' harmony of capitalist democracy, or the continuing dominance of the United States?

New World Order One: Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990 not only challenged New World Order One, but also illustrated what superpower clients might do if freed from Cold War constraints. The degeneration of the international system into a Hobbesian 'war of all against all' was something that the US and the Soviets were determined to prevent. Bush's repeated references to the collapse of global order in the 1920s and 1930s, and his comparison of Saddam with Hitler, revealed this deep-seated fear. The US administration also sought to use the Gulf War as a means of forging new security arrangements through coalition building and burden sharing among capitalist democracies — old, new and potential.

In the short-term, the coalition was a success. In the long-term, however, no structures have been established to fight, let alone prevent such wars in future. The United Nations merely sanctioned the use of force by the US-led alliance and thus was not strengthened as an international security organisation. NATO was not involved and still resists the idea of military engagement outside Europe. The organisation that was established, in the words of one of its architects to "keep the Soviets out, the Americans in and the Germans down", no longer has a rationale for existing. The European Community lacks the military apparatus to guarantee 'order' internally or externally. This can be seen by the failure of its monitors in attempting to impose a ceasefire in Yugoslavia by carrying little more than EC flags.

All the Gulf War demonstrated was that an international coalition can be established if conflict breaks out in a vital strategic and economic region. But the tremendous effort that went into defeating such a small nation cannot be exerted repeatedly. Thus the Kurds and the Shi'ites have been subjected to renewed Iraqi attacks and receive little more than rhetorical support. Yugoslavia is left to pursue its own civil war which has already claimed more casualties than those borne by the allies in the Gulf.

The greatest challenge to New World Order One comes from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. There, old elites in new guises struggle to preserve their power and some are willing to shed blood in order to do so. Conflicts are becoming more fierce in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine and the central Asian republics. But there are no international frameworks for resolving them, or even dampening their effects.

It is unclear how the New World Order can maintain international security when these conflicts spill across national boundaries and challenge their very existence. Under these circumstances, the Bush administration is forced to sit back and observe these events like the rest of us. This explains its caution in recognising various independence movements. If a large and important part of the world is deprived of legitimate national boundaries, there can be no international stability and order for the foreseeable future.

New World Order Two: Perhaps these problems might be resolved as the free market and representative democracy slowly encourage individuals to pursue more material gains and to settle their differences peacefully. This is the solution advanced by the advocates of New World Order Two. They argue that the end of the Cold War shows that capitalist democracy is the only viable way to manage a political and economic system. Thus the problems of post-communist regimes can be solved by their societies absorbing the short-term pain of market transition and fully accepting representative democracy. It has been claimed that countries like Poland have already moved well along this path.

Yet this analysis of the post-communist world fails to recognise how old elites there are engaged in a struggle to effect control of the means of production and existing state structures. Democratic centralisers want to maintain the nation-state but transform its institutions. Authoritarian centralisers work to keep the nation-state and existing institutions intact. And regional ethnicocracies — whether authoritarian or democratic — are prepared to encourage ethnic conflict in order to challenge present boundaries. But all are capable of accepting the market and the trappings of democracy if it helps them realise their goals. In this way, after the transition to capitalist democracy, the same people remain in charge but, as the Poles say, they now wear different hats. Often their power is legitimated by free elections. To paraphrase de Tocqueville, elections allow the ruled in Eastern Europe to hear their new chains rattle.

The post-Cold War era is still pre-Something Else

Like most of Latin America, much of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is now formally democratic. But also like Latin America, this democracy is a thin electoral cover that covers highly elitist power structures. The pre-coup Soviet Union was managed by an unelected Soviet President who ruled by decree. The post-coup Soviet Union is run by Russia's first elected president, who nonetheless prefers the same method of control.

The argument that the marriage of capitalism and democracy will produce 'order' in the East also ignores important lessons from history. It is no easy task to absorb the social costs of the market and maintain political democracy simultaneously. Italy, Germany and Spain discovered this in the interwar years. The birth of new capitalist democracies in the international system is no guarantee of future stability and order.
New World Order Three: Given the limitations of the first two alternatives, is the United States the only power capable of promoting international stability? The US is a representative democracy and it has the world’s largest capitalist economy and military machine. It has no real challengers in the international system, and even powerful economic actors like Germany and Japan are prepared to follow its political lead. It has even been argued that the US governs a unipolar world and that this will be the case for some time to come.

But the US isn’t running the world at the moment. Nobody is. It’s just that the US reaction to a particular world event is much more important than that of anyone else. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait provided it with a rare opportunity to exercise its power successfully. The strategic importance of the region, the brutal nature of the aggression and the lack of a skilled opponent weighed the odds heavily in America’s favour. This combination is unlikely to occur again.

The Gulf War also revealed a central weakness in the position of the US. It may well be that there is no great power interested in pushing America off its perch. But the US is economically reliant on other great powers to stay there. The demands for economic contributions during the war against Iraq showed that the US does not have the domestic base to sustain its solitary superpower status. In fact, America’s military machine is now being cut to the size of a declining national economy.

Perhaps America did win the Cold War, but it certainly exhausted itself in the process. The collapse of Soviet power and the failure of a new challenger to emerge, makes the US look much stronger than it actually is. Imagine if after World War Two the United States and the Soviet Union did not exist, leaving only Britain and Germany. Britain would still be exhausted by war, but the remnants of its former power would seem to be more important. Germany, by contrast, would be even more devastated — economically crushed and shattered as a unified nation-state — because Britain couldn’t afford to help her. This analogy, though flawed, captures an important truth about the current international situation.

Furthermore, if the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe continue to be dominated by old elites wearing ‘new hats’, the same is also true of the United States. The President is a former UN ambassador, envoy to China and director of the CIA. He was Reagan’s vice-president throughout Cold War II. Those around him also have impeccable elite and CIA credentials. Together, they run a Cold War military-industrial apparatus which not only remains intact, but is searching for new missions to justify its existence. Drug traffickers and terrorists compete to be the new number one enemy, while the threat of an Islamic bomb is the latest justification for continuing with the expensive Star Wars program.

The continuous rule of Cold War elites in a post-Cold War era also has an ideological effect. Put bluntly, these rulers lack a strategic vision for the role of their nation in the new international system. Gorbachev’s blindness in this regard almost had fatal consequences for him personally. Bush’s strategic myopia has resulted in disasters in Panama and the Middle East.

Bush’s failure to define the exact meaning of his New World Order and how it might be implemented has been hidden by some great successes in the day-to-day management of US foreign policy. But reactive political ad-hoc-ery cannot sustain New World Order Three. The US administration palpably lacks the vision and the means to develop its version of the New World Order. It has simply provided the world with an empty phrase to cover its own lack of strategy in the post-Cold War era.

East European democracy is a thin electoral veneer.

It has often been pointed out that one of the great ironies of this century has been that the Left has been ‘nationalised’ as capitalism becomes internationalised. European socialist parties, with the exception of the Italians, supported their nation-states in World War One. ‘Socialism in One Country’ became the motto of Eastern and Western communist parties. In the Third World, marxist-leninist organisations were, at best, movements for national liberation. Almost everywhere, social democracy and marxism-leninism became statist strategies for increasing power and wealth.

The collapse of the Bolshevik model means that one path of national development for the Left has been closed off. The current crisis of social democracy (since the mid-1970s) shows that ‘Social Democracy in One Country’ isn’t possible either. Thus the Left must be de-nationalised and re-internationalised if it wants to solve its own problems and help resolve those of the world. The historic split of 1917 is no longer relevant, and it is time to fundamentally re-examine these basic issues.

None of the three dominant world orders, as presently defined, will solve the problems of superpower decline and the eruption of regional conflicts. The four ‘P’s of poverty, patriarchy, pollution and proliferation also remain unaddressed by existing alternatives. This should not give us satisfaction, but instead spur our thoughts and our actions. One can only hope that a pluralistic and international Left can meet the exciting challenges of this new post-Cold War world. If it doesn’t, it will deserve its current media caricature as offering no concrete solutions to real and pressing global problems.

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