

The Resistance and the Antiwar Movement

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THE KEY CHALLENGE FOR the left today remains that of ending the occupation of Iraq, which did not end with the January 30 elections. A majority of people in the United States now thinks the invasion of Iraq was not worth the high price that has been paid as a consequence. Yet an enormous gap exists between this sentiment and the level of political activity against the occupation. Even as the antiwar movement has been proven correct on issue after issue — weapons of mass destruction, the cost of this war, the fact that Iraqis would oppose their occupation — the movement has declined in size and influence, a pattern that we saw in a number of countries, though it was more pronounced in the countries where the radical left had less influence or was consciously pushed to the side.

The antiwar movement weathered the storm best where it maintained its political independence. The worst counterexample to this, unfortunately, has been the United States. Large sections of the U.S. antiwar movement threw themselves into the project of mobilizing for a candidate, John Kerry, who supported the so-called war on terror, who was calling for more troops to be sent to Iraq, and who stood opposed to many of the most fundamental demands of the antiwar movement. This forced sections of the left into the most tortured mental gymnastics and apologetics for Kerry. And it meant that the left was largely silent as the crimes of the occupation were being exposed even on the pages of the corporate press. The fact that no mass national demonstration took place against the brutality of Abu Ghraib is appalling, and cannot be separated from the support much of the antiwar movement gave to Kerry and the Democrats.

In this context, it is no surprise that some who organized against the invasion of Iraq are today calling for a continuation of occupation, suggesting that U.S. occupation is the lesser evil among bad choices. The alternative, they claim, is "abandoning Iraq," allowing the country to degenerate into a civil war, or "leaving Iraq to the terrorists." Indeed, significant ideological support for the occupation rests on the demonization of Islam broadly and of the Iraqi resistance in particular. In the dominant media lens, every act of Iraqi opposition is seen as terrorism, while the far greater state terrorism of the occupying forces is ignored or indeed justified as "humanitarian."

Rather than challenging this situation, significant sections of the left now serve as an echo chamber for elements of this distorted worldview. Indeed, Wadood Hamad has the matter entirely upside down. Far from it being the case that "[a]n uncritical stance of support for the current 'resistance' in Iraq has dominated political discourse on the left," left discussions of the Iraqi resistance, to the extent that they have occurred at all, have been taking their cues from the very people hoping to militarily crush it and are framed in the very terms of the "war on terror" or the global conflict of "democracy against Islam." Of the three essays on Iraq in the Winter 2005 *New Politics* forum, only Glenn Perusek's excellent contribution showed any real engagement with the specificity, diversity, and character of Iraqi resistance to occupation — or the conditions of "force asymmetry" under which Iraqis are fighting. Hamad and Finger's characterizations of the Iraqi resistance, in stark contrast, could have been penned by Christopher Hitchens, Donald Rumsfeld, or Paul Wolfowitz.

Imperialism is being justified today through a very conscious repackaging of the white man's burden. Racism and Islamophobia have been used to sell not just the occupation of Iraq, but the entire war on terrorism and the restriction of civil liberties at home. In this context, it is especially important that the left should reject the racist and elitist idea that it is for us in the United States to decide the future of Iraq. Contra Hamad and Finger, it is not our job to dictate to the Iraqi people what form their resistance to occupation must take — let alone to require that it be "rational," as

Hamad suggests in language less from Hitchens than from Samuel Huntington, or that a movement facing the greatest military power in history must use "peaceable means" against its enemy.

Iraqis themselves are perfectly capable of rejecting those actions that are not about liberation from occupation, but sectarian violence. The key question for the U.S. left is not to decide which Iraqi faction we support or do not support, but to organize against the greatest enemy, which as John Reed reminded us, is at home.

ARUNDHATI ROY IS absolutely right when she argues, "[I]t is absurd to condemn the resistance to the U.S. occupation in Iraq as being masterminded by terrorists or insurgents or supporters of Saddam Hussein . . . The Iraqi resistance is fighting on the front lines of the battle against Empire. And therefore, that battle is our battle. Like most resistance movements, it combines a motley range of assorted factions. Former Baathists, liberals, Islamists, fed-up collaborationists, communists, etc. Of course, it is riddled with opportunism, local rivalry, demagoguery and criminality. But if we are only going to support pristine movements, then no resistance will be worthy of our purity. This is not to say that we shouldn't ever criticize resistance movements. Many of them suffer from a lack of democracy, from the iconization of their 'leaders,' a lack of transparency, a lack of vision and direction. But most of all, they suffer from vilification, repression and lack of resources. Before we prescribe how a pristine Iraqi resistance must conduct their secular, feminist, democratic, nonviolent battle, we should shore up our end of the resistance by forcing the United States and its allied governments to withdraw from Iraq." That will do far more to advance possibilities for the development of democratic, secular, and socialist currents in Iraq, the Middle East, and indeed globally, than anything Hamad or Finger have to offer.

Footnotes