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Callinicos Rejoinder to Gilbert Achcar's reply

"In this case you have no influence on me..."

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

Publication date: Wednesday 26 January 2005

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Dear Gilbert,

Thank you for your reply to my letter, which sheds some light on your original article (“On the Forthcoming Election in Iraq”), but leaves much else in obscurity. It is clear at least that the dismay your piece caused me was, in a sense, welcome to you, since it might be a therapeutic shock, helping you to educate “sections of the Western anti-imperialist movement”, and in particular “the antiwar movement in the US and Britain”. I fear, however, that, for this member of your target audience, neither your first article nor your reply has succeeded in this pedagogic purpose.

You accuse me (somewhat inconsistently, I have to say) of both inconsistency and of shifting my position under the influence of your analysis. The two charges are connected. The inconsistency is that, you claim, I say that it was OK to support elections in Iraq when the Iraqi masses were demanding them a year ago but not now that Bush, Blair, & Co are supporting them. Excuse me, but can you point out where I said this, either in my letter to you or elsewhere? The pathos you seek rhetorically to build up to expose the absurdity of the position you attribute me is a waste of words.

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Alex Callinicos

What I did in my letter was to criticize your assertion that the United States is currently seeking to undermine the elections, and to argue that Bush and Blair are now adamant that the elections should take place, so that they can confer some legitimacy on the client regime they are trying to construct. You implicitly concede this point, saying that “Bush and Blair are now trying to make the most of the elections (with quite limited success)”. (I’ll come back to the reason for this “quite limited success”.)

You are quite right that it would be politically immature and indeed plain silly to oppose the elections just because of this shift in stance on the part of the imperialist political leadership. To repeat, nowhere do I say this. Indeed, I say that we have simply to accept that the Iraqi resistance remains divided over whether or not to participate in the elections¹, the implication of which is that one should accept that, in principle, participation (on the basis of opposition to the occupation) is, like armed resistance, a legitimate political response to the present situation.

You take this position as evidence that your “arguments have apparently had an impact on [my] views”. Despite my great respect for you, I’m afraid that in this case you have had no influence on me. The Iraqi elections have been a looming issue for months, long before you wrote your piece. You further accuse me of “declaring the forthcoming elections “illegitimate”, but you have not read my letter with sufficient care. What I deny is that “the elections [will] produce a legitimate democratic regime in Iraq”. Do you think Bush and his proconsul John Negroponte will surrender control of the country to a popular assembly after the elections? Come off it.

As to whether the elections themselves will be a genuine expression of the Iraqi people's will, this is an open question. Robert Fisk is one of many to have pointed out that half the population of Iraq lives in the four provinces where the US says elections will be hard to hold. The Financial Times reports the United Nations¹ concern that the elections will not be properly monitored - hardly surprising given the carnage in much of the country.(1)

You are very keen to discover (in my case imaginary) inconsistencies in others, yet your own position is hardly

straightforward: "I am not saying that the antiwar movement or the anti-imperialist left should support the elections - and still less that we should support their outcome regardless of the circumstances. I am just saying that it is dead wrong for the movement and the left to condemn the elections in advance".

I won't engage in chop logic and make fun of this rather tortuous formulation, because I recognize that the situation in Iraq is complex and dynamic, and that the demands we pose should reflect this. I think you should extend this courtesy to others.

Where I do get a little irritated is when, apropos of Zarqawi, you claim that I refrained from such an explicit condemnation [of the atrocities committed by Zarqawi's group] until such a vicious campaign was launched against your party and the antiwar coalition you have so effectively built and led in Britain, by some right-wingers in the trade-union movement who seized on the pretext of the atrocious torture and murder of Iraqi Communist Party member and trade unionist Hadi Salih.

This assertion is both false and mischievous. The Stop the War Coalition is much broader, at every level from its national officers downwards, than the Socialist Workers Party (to which I belong). Rightly, as I pointed out in my earlier letter, the Coalition does not take a stand for or against the armed resistance and campaigns for the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq. It is therefore not primarily its responsibility to take a position on this or that armed action by Iraqi groups, but rather to denounce and help to bring an end to the much larger violence being perpetrated by the US, Britain, and its allies.

Nevertheless, the Stop the War Coalition, did, for example, together with the Muslim Association of Britain, issue a statement in September 2004 calling for the immediate release of the British hostage Kenneth Bigley, who was later killed by Zarqawi's group. The statement specifically states: "It is not possible to condone the kidnapping, still less execution, of hostages." (2) In June 2004, Michael Berg, father of Zarqawi's first Western victim, travelled specially to London to speak to a Coalition protest. As for myself, speaking on behalf of the SWP at one of the largest plenaries at the European Social Forum in London last October, I made a specific point of attacking Zarqawi. So, here again, my "shift in attitude" is a pure invention.

You know perfectly well the political context in which the row over Salih's murder has unfolded in Britain. The Communist Party of Iraq, which controls the Iraqi Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), has (as you acknowledge in a footnote) supported the occupation from the start and participated in Paul Bremer's Quisling "Governing Council". At the Labour Party conference last October an IFTU leader spoke from the platform successfully to help persuade the delegates to vote down a resolution calling for a date to be set for British withdrawal from Iraq. In doing so he gave cover to the leaders of the main trade unions, allowing them to help Blair out a hole, and in the process to violate the troops out policy of their own unions and of the Trade Union Congress.

It was when the Stop the War Coalition criticized the IFTU for its role at the Labour Party conference and for its collaboration with the occupation that right-wing elements in some unions (notably the largest, UNISON, which has provided offices for the IFTU in its headquarters) launched an assault on the Coalition. This campaign has been fuelled by the disruption by some sectarian idiots of an ESF plenary where an IFTU representative had (mistakenly) been invited to speak, and now by Salih's murder.

Of course, the IFTU's collaborationist role doesn't for a moment justify torturing and killing Salih. But it is important to distinguish sharply between condemning atrocities such as this and supporting a "union" whose "Communist" leaders simultaneously benefit from Saddam's authoritarian trade-union law and acquiesce in the occupation's illegal attempt to remake Iraqi society along neo-liberal lines. And where were hypocrites like the British pro-war columnists Nick Cohen and Johann Hari who have waxed so indignant over Salih's killing when the US Marines were storming Falluja?

Of course you know all this, but the point is an important one - Salih's assassination is being used to split one of the most important antiwar groups in the US, Labor against the War. And, in this context, to misrepresent the attitude of supporters of the Stop the War Coalition towards thugs like Zarqawi is - once again - not helpful. If you dislike my criticism that sometimes you veer too close to the official Anglo-American rhetoric you should choose your words with more care.

In some ways, however, important though all these issues are, they are secondary to the main point, which is your ambivalent attitude towards the armed resistance to the occupation. You insist that you consider some attacks "legitimate", but in a footnote you say: "I do believe the first Palestinian Intifada with its mass demonstrations and stone throwing was much more effective than the second than the second one with its resort to firearms and suicide attacks. This does not mean that the armed actions in Iraq are ineffective; they are effective, much more so than in Palestine."

Your position then seems to be that you would prefer it if Iraqis took part in peaceful mass demonstrations, but you acknowledge that armed struggle, though less preferable, is "effective". I think it's important to distinguish one's preferences from realities. I would prefer to see in Iraq the kind of mass movement that developed during the Revolution of 1958, whose history has been so magnificently reconstructed by your friend Hanna Batatu.(3) Indeed, I would prefer mass strikes and workers' and peasants' councils (a little Utopian perhaps, given that unemployment is 70% plus). But the reality is that it is classical guerrilla warfare waged by a variety of political forces, most of them very far ideologically from the two of us, that has brought the occupation to its present plight.

The elections - wrested from the US by the demonstrations a year ago - have contributed to this crisis, but are not at the heart of it. The reason why armed struggle is more effective in Iraq than in Palestine is very simple. The Palestinians confront a settler state with a mass base and a heavily armed citizen army that leaves them outnumbered in Israel and the Occupied Territories. In Iraq a couple of hundred thousand occupation troops face a population of 26 million that, outside the Kurdish areas, overwhelmingly rejects their presence. This is a recipe for defeat for the US - not, of course, military defeat in open battle, but the remorseless attrition of the political will of the occupying powers to remain.

This is why the Shia card is so important to them. The worst moment for Bush so far came in April last year, when Bremer foolishly launched an offensive on two fronts - against Falluja in the Sunni Triangle and against the Sadrists in Baghdad and the south. After making the necessary retreat, the Americans (perhaps learning from their British predecessors, who were masters of this kind of imperial tactic) adopted a salami strategy - attacking Sadr in August and then Falluja in November in an effort to eliminate piecemeal the most maximalist centres of resistance to the occupation.

This strategy has been facilitated by Sistani, the key figure in the Shia establishment. He used the Najaf crisis in August to sideline Sadr, his most important political rival among the Shi'ites. And he stood by while Falluja was flattened. I wonder why you don't respond to what I said about this in my earlier letter. I also wonder what you think about the apparent retreat by the electoral list endorsed by Sistani from demanding an American pull-out after the election. The Financial Times reports:

"The United Iraqi Alliance, bringing together the country's main Shia Islamist parties, also included a call for the negotiation of a withdrawal timetable. Although it was a top priority in the draft, the proposal has been "diluted", calling instead for building Iraqi capabilities to achieve "security independence", said Mouwaffak al-Rubbaie, national security adviser to the government and an Alliance candidate.(4)

In one sense, your claim that the US is seeking to envelop Iraq in chaos may well be vindicated. Chaos - barbarous bloodshed, the breakdown of everyday life, sectarian strife in what was once among the most advanced Middle

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Eastern societies – may indeed prove to be the real legacy of an imperialist mission to bring the “democratic revolution” in Iraq. This is the dirty little secret behind Bush's inaugural sermon about the “untamed fire of freedom”. Seldom has the judgement Tacitus passed on the Roman Empire – “Soliditudinem faciunt, pacem appellant” (They create a wilderness and call it peace) – been more apt. Whatever our differences, we stand together against this monstrous American Empire.

All the best,
Alex Callinicos

- (1) OUN Worried over Monitoring of Iraqi Elections¹, Financial Times, 21 January 2005.
- (2) OMAB and STW urge for immediate release of Kenneth Bigley¹, 23 September 2004, www.stopwar.org.uk.
- (3) H. Batatu, The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq (Princeton, 1978).
- (4) OElection Hopefuls Pay Lip Service to Idea of US Troop Withdrawal¹, Financial Times, 19 January 2005.