

# Resistance or Retrogression? The Battle of Ideas Over Iraq

**Peter Hudis**

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The U.S. occupation of Iraq has turned into a quagmire of nightmarish proportions, with many now calling it the most serious setback for U.S. foreign policy since the Vietnam War. This is seen in everything from the way western Iraq has come under the control of Taliban-like fundamentalists to the fact that jihadists from neighboring lands are flocking to Iraq to take advantage of hatred of the U.S. occupation and to further their effort to create a reactionary “Islamic state” upon its ruins. Clearly, the U.S. occupation of Iraq—which would have continued even if Kerry won the presidential election—created fertile ground for reactionary and terrorist forces to take root and flourish.

At the same time, many left-wing critics of the war have fallen into an ideological quagmire by failing to acknowledge the reactionary character of much of the Iraqi “armed resistance.” Some are even speaking out in its defense. The most egregious examples are recent comments by Naomi Klein and Arundhati Roy, long considered leading spokespersons of the movement against global capital.

## TAILENDING FUNDAMENTALISM

At the time of the protests at the Republican National Convention in New York last August, Klein wrote in an article “Bring Najaf to New York”: “Muqtada al-Sadr and his followers are not just another group of generic terrorists out to kill Americans; their opposition to the occupation represents the overwhelmingly mainstream sentiment in Iraq.”(1) The statement is patently false. Al-Sadr's militia has fought U.S. troops in the name of a reactionary, fundamentalist agenda that opposes women's rights, gay liberation, and workers' self-emancipation.

In April, when al-Sadr ordered workers in aluminum and sanitary supply plants in Nasariyeh to hand over their factories for use as bastions to fight the U.S. military, the

## U.S. Marxist-Humanists

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workers refused, stating: “We completely reject the turning of workers and civilians’ work and living places into reactionary war-fronts between the two poles of terrorism in Iraq: the U.S. and their allies from one side, and the terrorists in the armed militias, known for their enmity to Iraqi people’s interests, on the other.”(2)

Klein and others fail to distinguish between the fundamentalist agenda of the Shi’ite and Sunni militias and the views of many independent Iraqis. As Frank Smyth, a freelance journalist who has covered Iraq, wrote, “Neither the resistance groups cheered by many on the American Left nor the governing parties championed by the American Right seem to reflect the views and aspirations of most Iraqi people, who seem to be hoping for the rise of groups independent of both Saddam’s regime and the increasingly dictatorial Allawi government.”(3)

Arundhati Roy has also fallen into the trap of failing to distinguish between reactionary and progressive opponents of U.S. policies. She recently wrote in her “Public Power in the Age of Empire”: “The Iraqi resistance is fighting on the frontlines of the battle against Empire. And therefore that battle is our battle... Terrorism. Armed struggle. Insurgency. Call it what you want. Terrorism is vicious, ugly, and dehumanizing for its perpetrators as well as its victims. But so is war. Terrorists... are people who don’t believe that the state has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence.” (4)

Nowhere does Roy mention that these “terrorists” whose “battle is our battle” oppose women’s rights, democracy and self-determination for national minorities. Nowhere does she mention that they want to create a totalitarian religious-based state that makes the reformists she rightly scorns, like Kerry in the U.S. or Lula in Brazil, look like angels by comparison. And nowhere does she mention the genuine liberatory forces inside Iraq, like the Federation of Workers’ Councils and Unions (FWCUI) or the Organization for Women’s Freedom (OWFI)—both of which have come under increasingly sharp attack by both the U.S. occupiers and right-wing Islamists.(5)

How can such a vocal supporter of women’s rights express virtually uncritical support for reactionary forces in Iraq? She writes of the Iraqi resistance: “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.”

Liberation movements are never “pristine.” But that hardly defines al-Sadr, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (the Jordanian-born terrorist behind many attacks on U.S. forces) or Lashkar-e-

Taybe—the Pakistani Sunni group that in the past few months has sent hundreds of “holy warriors” to Iraq. Their problem isn’t (as Roy says) that they suffer from “the iconization of leaders, a lack of transparency, a lack of vision and direction.” They know their “direction” only too well—they want to destroy anything that comes in the way of a totalitarian control of society by religious extremism. Which is why they target not just U.S. soldiers but also Iraqi civilians, feminists, and anyone else who happens to oppose their reactionary agenda.

In this respect the fundamentalist militias fighting the U.S. in Iraq closely resemble the Christian Right in the U.S., which wants to roll the clock back on everything from women’s rights to freedom of expression. One of the supreme ironies of our times is that many leftists who are worried to death about the power of the Christian Right in the U.S. are making excuses for forces in the Islamic world which share its basic agenda!

### **ALL ROADS LEAD BACK TO BOSNIA**

Moreover, some of the same people now making apologies for Islamic fundamentalists, on the grounds that “liberation” movements are never “pristine,” refused to solidarize with the Bosnians and Kosovars in the 1990s against the genocidal policies of Serbia’s Milosevic on the grounds that they were “nationalists” and “not truly revolutionary.” Where was the argument that liberation movements are never “pristine” when it was time to defend the Bosnians and Kosovars (or the Rwandans for that matter) from genocide?

It isn’t that Klein and Roy are uninformed observers. They are surely capable of understanding the reactionary nature of the Iraqi militias. So why are they and so many others falling into such an ideological quagmire? The answer is that they have one standard for judging those who openly oppose the U.S. and another for those who do not. Overwhelmed and frustrated at the failure thus far of mass protests to halt the U.S. drive for world domination, they ally themselves with ANY force, no matter how reactionary, so long as it opposes the U.S.

That such a standpoint is taken by figures who are revered by many in the movement against global capital points to a serious barrier WITHIN the struggle. The collapse of the state-capitalist regimes that called themselves “Communist” between 1989 and 1991 disoriented many radicals, but history didn’t come to an end. New freedom struggles emerged, even if they did not speak in the language of revolution. Of foremost importance in this regard were the national liberation struggles in Bosnia and Kosova in the 1990s. Tragically many anti-Stalinist leftists—from Noam Chomsky to Howard Zinn—failed to

support them. The crisis in the Balkans was hardly noticed by the Western Left until the U.S. belatedly intervened in Kosova in 1998.

It may have seemed that the Seattle protests of 1999 put such contradictions to rest. A large, multidimensional movement emerged that challenged the idea that “there is no alternative” to capitalism. But the failure of many in the movement against global capital to recognize what happened in Bosnia and Kosova came at a great price. It left a festering contradiction that has not gone away, but resurfaces every time a new political crisis emerges—be it September 11 or the occupation of Iraq. By not taking issue with the view that movements are to be judged solely by whether they oppose the U.S., irrespective of their actual political or liberatory content, many have left themselves open for the ideological quagmire that now defines the positions of Klein and Roy.

### **WHAT NEXT?**

In the aftermath of the U.S. presidential election, we can expect such ideological pollution to get worse. The reason is the sense of desperation that afflicts many U.S. radicals. Desperation over how many crimes Bush has been able to get away with. Desperation over the failure of the Democrats to project a principled opposition to U.S. foreign policy. Desperation over the fact that even when mass protests do emerge (be it a Million Man March or worldwide anti-war protests), capitalism still manages to maintain the ideological initiative with its claim “there is no alternative.”

The politics of desperation leads to the politics of tailendism. It was bad enough in the days when that meant tailending repressive state powers that claimed to be “socialist,” like Russia or China. It is far worse today when it means tailending Islamic fundamentalists and former Baathists in Iraq who have nothing to offer in the way of an alternative to capitalism.

The politics of desperation that leads many on the Left to ally with any force that opposes the U.S. cannot even put a dent in capitalism’s ideological hegemony, because it skips over the work of articulating a positive alternative. It only hands the Right the moral high ground by presenting “anti-imperialism” as lacking any positive, affirmative human dimension.

All that is left is mere empty negation, what G.W.F. Hegel called in his PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT “a pure negation entirely devoid of mediation, the negation, moreover, of the individual as a factor existing within the universal. The sole and only work and deed accomplished...is therefore death—a death that achieves nothing,

embraces nothing within its grasp; for what is negated is the unachieved, unfulfilled punctual entity of the absolutely free self.”(6)

Hegel’s words not only anticipate the “empty negativism” of a bin Laden or al-Zarqawi who “oppose” the U.S. without the slightest alternative in view—unless by an “alternative” one means the imposition of an authoritarian religious state aimed at opposing individual freedom and collective self-development. Hegel’s critique of standpoints that “produce neither a positive achievement nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action” is just as applicable to today’s left-wing critics who are willing to ally with any force that tries to bring down the U.S. “Empire.” The only thing that will result from this is a further discrediting of the Left and a strengthening of the power of the Right.

Those opposed to the kind of viewpoints articulated by Klein and Roy need to realize that a merely POLITICAL response to such ideological retrogression is insufficient. That is because the problem facing us is not only political, but most of all PHILOSOPHIC—specifically, a lack of a philosophically grounded concept of an alternative to capitalism. Those who want to see Iraq—and the world—free of the forces of U.S. imperialism and religious fundamentalism need to get down to the hard work of articulating a comprehensive, detailed and positive alternative to this alienated, dehumanizing world. If we fail to do so, we will cede the ideological ground to the Kleins and Roys just as they, unwittingly, are conceding it to the Right.

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### Notes

1. “Bring Najaf to New York,” by Naomi Klein, THE NATION, August 13, 2004.
2. This is discussed in “World Crisis and the search for alternatives to capitalism,” NEWS & LETTERS, July 2004, p. 5. The Federation of Workers Councils and Unions in Iraq (FWCUI) should not be confused with the Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions (IFTU), which has compromised itself by critically supporting the Allawi government.
3. See “Who are the Progressives in Iraq? The Left, the Right, and the Islamists,” by Frank Smyth.
4. “Public Power in the Age of Empire,” by Arundhati Roy, THE HINDU, August 2004.

5. For more on the Organization for Women's Freedom in Iraq, see "Eyewitness view of women in Iraq," by Yanar Mohammed, NEWS & LETTERS, August-September 2004.

6. PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRIT, by G.W. F. Hegel, translated by J.B. Baillie (London: Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 605.