

Review Essay

Intellectuals and the “War on Terror”

MARIA RYAN

Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman (eds.), *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics: Terror, Iraq and the Left* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2008, \$70.00 cloth, \$22.95 paper). Pp. 365. ISBN 978 08147 1686 1, 0 8147 1687 3

Conor Foley, *The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War* (London and New York: Verso, 2008, £14.99). Pp. 272. ISBN 978 1 84467 289 9

Richard Seymour, *The Liberal Defence of Murder* (London and New York: Verso, 2008, £16.99). Pp. 358. ISBN 978 1 84467 240 0

Tony Smith, *A Pact with the Devil: Washington's Bid for World Supremacy and the Betrayal of the American Promise* (New York and London: Routledge, 2007, £21.99). Pp. 255. ISBN 978 0 415 95245 3

Reflecting in the *London Review of Books* in 2006 on the acquiescence of so many American liberal intellectuals to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, New York University's Tony Judt derided such liberals as nothing more than “useful idiots.” Liberal intellectuals were fast becoming “a service class” that, duped by the grandiose rhetoric of the Bush administration, was naively and supinely providing moral justification for Bush's actions by presenting the “war on terror” as a great global ideological struggle between the forces of liberalism and tolerance and those of despotism, tyranny and extremism; high-minded rationales that were not what motivated the neoconservative architects of the war, according to Judt.

Throughout the twentieth century, the American left was bedevilled by factionalism, with bitter ideological wars occurring as leftists tried to respond to the emergence of Stalinism, Trotskyism, the Second World War, the Cold War at home and abroad and the changes in American society in the 1960s, all the while becoming (mostly) more moderate in their socialist views. The 2003 invasion of Iraq witnessed the culmination of a new conflict on the left, a conflict that had been catalysed by the 9/11 attacks but which had been simmering throughout the 1990s. The debate centred on the concept of humanitarian intervention and the purpose of American

School of American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham. Email: maria.ryan@nottingham.ac.uk.

power in a post-Soviet world. Should leftists support the use of American military power if its exercise could promote democracy and end genocide and regional wars? These were surely great ends – but could military power really achieve them, and was this what actually motivated US policymakers anyway? For many mainstream leftist intellectuals, the answer was now “yes.” Liberals had a duty to side with the oppressed and this meant abandoning the old knee-jerk “anti-Americanism” that instinctively criticized every use of military power. Intellectuals such as Christopher Hitchens, Paul Berman and Michael Ignatieff – formerly known as critics of American interventionism – now argued in favour of intervention and the new “responsibility to protect” in places such as Bosnia and Iraq, while “old” leftists such as Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman warned that coopting military power was futile and naive because – to paraphrase Michael Mandelbaum – foreign policy was not social work.

The books under review here are not so much intellectual histories as books about political positions that intellectuals have taken and the impact that this can have on the conduct of foreign policy. In particular, they concern the rise of the humanitarian interventionist agenda amongst progressive intellectuals. The collection of Christopher Hitchens’s writings, edited by Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman, examines one of the most controversial figures in the intellectual debates on terrorism and Iraq. A former Marxist, Hitchens’s move rightwards (although he might say that it is the left that has changed, not him) began in the 1990s, when he openly supported Nato’s campaigns in the Balkans. After 9/11 he became one of the most vociferous proponents of the “war on terror.” Hitchens is presented here as the exemplar of the liberal hawks. The authors’ fascination with him stems from his apparent willingness to forgo “the comfort of ideological conformity” and face ostracism by former comrades (5). What makes this volume intriguing is that it contains not just Hitchens’s writings and a selection of responses from his detractors but also a final word in response from Hitchens himself.

Starting with Hitchens’s response to 9/11, the editors present his views on the new danger of radical Islamism. Like Paul Berman, Hitchens argues that this is “an independent causal force” in the world, wholly unrelated to US foreign policy (12). For him the enemy are pure Occidentalists, motivated only by hatred of the West. In this respect, 9/11 revealed once and for all the bankruptcy of the old left. Its reliance on old frameworks of oppression and victimhood and its reflexive “anti-Americanism” rendered it unable and/or unwilling to acknowledge the existential threat posed by radical Islamism. Thus the left and all who opposed the war in Iraq had degenerated into nothing more than (in the editors’ words) “a status quo force fighting ... to preserve corrupt and repressive regimes” (23). To be anti-war, Hitchens argues, is to be pro-Saddam.

However, as the best of Hitchens’s critics, George Scialabba and Gary Malone, point out in the second section of the book, the Bush administration itself was not motivated by humanitarian ideals but by a power calculus. Ultimately, different groups supported the Iraq War for different reasons. As Malone writes, Hitchens failed to exercise any critical faculties towards the Bush administration, simply assuming its benevolent intentions and that it could be trusted to nation-build in Iraq. Furthermore, as even the editors acknowledge, Hitchens paid virtually no attention to the aftermath of the war, a central part of the anti-war argument. What if

invading Iraq would actually make a bad situation worse? What if it produced millions of displaced persons, led to ethnic civil war and fuelled terrorism at large? Hitchens has a chance to finally respond to this in the epilogue he contributes. Sadly – and rather revealingly – he does not mention his failure to examine the predicted outcomes of the war or the divergent motivations of those who supported it. This is a glaring omission from his work. Instead he simply caricatures the anti-war movement by reducing it to an ossified segment of the old left that is unrepresentative. (At no point does he engage with realist critiques of the war from scholars such as Stephen Walt or John Mearsheimer.) Overall, then, the volume is well put together and a useful resource but unlikely to speak to anyone other than those already converted to the Hitchens way of thinking.

Richard Seymour's provocatively titled book *The Liberal Defence of Murder* offers a long history of liberal support for empire – the back story to the Hitchens affair. Not surprisingly, Seymour takes the Judt position, stating at the outset that contemporary liberal interventionism “has been of great service to the Bush administration” because it is the liberal hawks who “help frame arguments for policy makers in terms more palatable to potentially hostile audiences” (2). Seymour's analysis has truly impressive breadth and depth. He ranges from Alexis de Toqueville's support for colonialism and US treatment of the native population through to Gladstone's annexation of Egypt, the high point of nineteenth-century liberal imperialism in which liberals justified the exercise by “construct[ing] the colonial subjects ... as passive victims needful of tutelage, capable of self-government only after a spell of European supremacy” (35). The dilemmas of how to engage with overweening power continued into the twentieth century. Marxists asked whether colonialism could actually create a proletariat and thereby “force” the colonials into history. For social democrats, the question was more akin to that of today's liberal hawks: was colonialism a way to bring civilization to the dominions? Most of them agreed that it was.

Seymour performs a vital service by charting the impact of white supremacy on the left in this period as well as their more pragmatic considerations regarding the impact of decolonization on domestic industries and the exigencies of electoralism and coalition-building. In some cases, such as the French left and Algeria, there was also the threat of repression from the state if leftist parties took radical (i.e. negative) positions on colonial possessions. As a result, Seymour argues, the European left identified too closely with the priorities of their respective states, which meant that it “sleepwalked into the twin propellers of fascism and war” (77). Here Seymour provides a new European perspective – and a warning – on the left's pragmatic and ultimately shortsighted support for imperialist adventures.

However, the book begins to lose focus in the material on the twentieth century. Chapter 2 provides a conventional revisionist narrative of American expansionism, which contains ideas that would be familiar to readers of both William Appleman Williams and Michael Hunt. Chapter 3 treads what is by now well-worn ground on the post-Cold War emergence of the vital centre liberal consensus, its collapse in the late 1960s and the subsequent emergence of the neoconservatives.

To bring the discussion up to date, Seymour provides a wide-ranging and in-depth discussion of the post-1989 period, but this lacks direction. Seymour is critical of liberal hawks who defended the use of force in Iraq (1991 and 2003) and

Yugoslavia (1995 and 1999), but there is too much material and not enough focus – particularly in the section on the 2003 Iraq War. It is not really clear *why* Seymour believes that the liberals were misguided. Was it because the means of intervention (military power and concomitant civilian suffering) did not justify the ends? Because such intervention provoked more problems than it solved? Or was it because the US government did not undertake these interventions for the reasons that the liberals thought they did? Liberals, Seymour says of the Bosnian case, “provided the perfect alibis” – but for what? Were they naively duped by a government motivated more by interests than by ideals? Or were their ultimate objectives the same as those of the Clinton administration but they were sorely misguided about using force for humanitarian ends? By the time one gets to the end of the book, there is a lack of clarity on the different methods and/or objectives of the liberal hawks and of successive US administrations.

Tony Smith offers a clearer answer to this. His examination of the intellectual origins of the Bush Doctrine suggests that this most recent manifestation of imperialism in American foreign policy was motivated by a combination of power and idealism. This in itself is not a novel position but Smith’s route is highly original and offers a valuable new perspective on the intellectual origins of the Iraq War. Smith’s central thesis is that to find the true lineage of the Bush Doctrine, it is essential to move beyond neoconservative thought and consider the post-1989 evolution of liberal internationalism, which, he argues, evolved into a triumphalist and unashamedly imperialist doctrine during the Clinton years (and something that Smith himself, a long-time liberal internationalist, no longer supports). Smith points to a “transmission belt” of ideas between intellectuals and policymakers and argues that the resulting Bush Doctrine represents a zeitgeist of conservative and progressive internationalist thinking since the end of the Cold War, a combination of the power politics of the neocons and the progressive imperialism of the new liberal internationalism. Smith identifies two “pacts with the devil”: the neocons who “[gave] in to the temptations of a superpower to overplay its hand” and the liberal internationalists who gave in to the neocons by making liberal internationalism “the doctrine of American nationalism in an age of imperialism,” in the process compromising themselves by providing cover for such a dubious undertaking.

There are so many interesting and debatable points in this book that space does not permit discussion of them all. Like Seymour, Smith points to the key role of leftist intellectuals, such as Berman, Hitchens and Thomas Cushman (editor of the aforementioned volume on Hitchens), but also liberal political scientists, such as Larry Diamond, John Rawls and Andrew Moravcsik, in providing cover for the Bush Doctrine. Smith provides some illuminating – and damning – criticisms of the scientific neo-Wilsonianism of the 1990s. The theory that democracies do not go to war with each other lacks the realists’ appreciation of power, especially the stabilizing power of the hegemon, Smith claims, not to mention the statistic propensity for unstable, emerging democracies to go to war. The social constructivists’ notion of democracy as a universal value overlooks structural and cultural preconditions necessary for democracy (an independent judiciary and a democratic political culture, for instance). Echoing Bruce Kuklick’s recent study of intellectuals in power, *Blind Oracles*, Smith states, “Their social science thinking could not appreciate the limits on American power or the self-interested ends of American imperialism”

(193) – although here Smith wants to have his cake and eat it since he himself invokes hegemonic stability theory to critique the notion that democracies do not fight each other.

There are also other aspects of the book that continue to vex. Unlike many studies of the Bush Doctrine, Smith considers it to be “breathtakingly radical” (48). However, he assumes that anyone who stresses its continuity with the past must support it – as though the continuity argument is an attempt to legitimize the doctrine. He offers as proof John Lewis Gaddis’s conciliatory treatise *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience*. But the critical panning that this received and the prominence of other more weighty scholarly studies that stress continuity but are critical of the doctrine, such as Andrew Bacevich’s *American Empire*, make Smith’s argument here seem like a rather crude attempt to cover up criticism of what preceded the Bush Doctrine – i.e. the broad contours of twentieth-century American foreign policy of which he wrote so benignly in his 1994 monograph about promoting democracy, *America’s Mission*.

The book is also frustratingly repetitive. Smith has a great many important points to make but he spends too much time repeating the main argument over and over. Moreover, his assertive, polemical style means that Smith moves beyond being a dispassionate scholar and, in a way, takes on the persona of the public intellectuals he criticizes. Yet ultimately this is still a scholarly book and the tone rankles.

Finally, Smith’s closing chapter gives serious consideration to the possibility that “liberal fundamentalism” – which he describes as a messianic and apocalyptic position – might propel further serious military action and lead to “liberal fundamentalist jihadism.” Like Smith’s tone in much of the book, the suggestion seems overwrought; he does not consider the domestic checks on American power or the cost of the existing two wars, never mind a third.

Conor Foley’s excellent book *The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War* is written from a very different standpoint to the other three. Foley is not an academic or a career writer but a first-time author and long-time employee of the United Nations, Amnesty International, Oxfam and other NGOs at the front line of what he describes as the multibillion-dollar humanitarianism industry. Foley offers part history – of the development of NGOs and the agenda of “political humanitarianism” – and part reportage from many years spent in locations including Kosovo, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Given his experience of the aftermath of American military interventions, he is well placed to judge their effectiveness and the extent to which the proclamations of high ideals that inaugurate them are adhered to when the fighting stops and the television cameras move on. Foley provides a composed but withering account of such interventions that will shock even those already predisposed against them and give pause for thought to those such as Hitchens who advocate military action for humanitarian purposes.

His starting point is the so-called “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P) agenda that emerged in the 1990s. This is the common impulse to *do something* in the face of human suffering – but in practice, Foley argues, this seems to equate to doing anything at all as long as the West is seen to take action. However, action does not always equal an effective outcome.

Foley provides a very useful, and alternative, review of the roots of contemporary political humanitarianism, which transcends the common emphasis placed on

the end of superpower conflict in 1989 and, more recently, the alleged impact of neoconservatism. He traces it back to the suffering of the Biafran people in the war of secession from Nigeria in 1967 and Bernard Kouchner's establishment of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) as a more overtly political and activist counterpart to the Red Cross. MSF subsequently set the standard for other NGOs to follow in terms of political activism. However, what Foley describes in the 1990s is the NGOs' own "pact with the devil," so to speak. Beginning with the Clinton administration's intervention in Somalia in 1992, there was a noticeable tendency for NGOs to work closely with Western governments and compromise their neutrality by calling openly for military action in regions when there were humanitarian crises – a mistake, Foley believes, because partisanship impedes their access to those in need in the country being targeted. They also become tainted by association with the carnage wreaked by the (usually American) military campaign and the mind-boggling, almost unbelievable, ineptness of Western states' post-conflict peace-building efforts that Foley describes firsthand in Somalia, Rwanda, Kosovo and Afghanistan. The failures of the UN mission in Kosovo led to the Kosovar Albanians building their own social structures in health and education which were exclusively Albanian and overtly politicized to support the goal of Kosovan independence – the exact opposite of the UN's objective. In Afghanistan, \$10 billion of the \$20 billion promised in international aid by March 2008 had not arrived and of the money that had been delivered, 40 percent went on corporate profits and consultancy fees.

In some ways, the results of these alleged humanitarian interventions are not surprising, Foley argues, because contemporary international law is, of course, historically contingent and designed to support the interests of the powerful states rather than to protect the weak. This includes the much-heralded International Criminal Court (ICC), often held up by liberals as the ideal example of humanitarianism in international law. By Foley's account this is not the case. He explains how the compromises forced on the court by the US, China and France severely hamper any investigations it can undertake. The court must have the consent of the country in which the crimes are taking place. Moreover, the Security Council can impose an indefinitely renewable year-long suspension on cases or can decide to end them entirely "in the interests of justice and taking into account all the circumstances" (177).

Ultimately, Foley concludes that political humanitarians must lower their expectations of what can be achieved. Attempting to impose a system from outside simply does not work. Successful interventions tend to support locally driven processes, are properly funded and are sanctioned by the UN. Although Iraq is not discussed in detail here, the war looms large in the book and Foley provides a compelling riposte from the front line of nation-building to anyone who thought the invasion and its aftermath would be "a cakewalk."

If there is one weakness in the book it is the assumption that Western states *were* motivated by humanitarian considerations in the cases he describes. It is understandable, given Foley's background, that his focus is on the humanitarian agenda, but perhaps one of the reasons that the nation-building efforts he describes were such failures is that they were simply not priorities for the Western states involved. Even Bill Clinton acknowledged at the time of the Kosovo crisis that humanitarian considerations alone were not sufficient to compel an American

military response. The moral dimension was invoked to support intervention where a perceived vital interest was at stake (in this case the cohesion, vitality and purpose and the Nato alliance and American leadership within it). When dealing with the impulse to intervene in humanitarian contingencies, maybe the best place to start is to recognize that Western states are motivated first and foremost by interests rather than ideals. Nevertheless, the insights provided by Foley about the difficulties of post-conflict peace-building are vital for all with an interest in the political humanitarian agenda to consider.