A striking incidental feature of the Gulf War was the philosophical conflict attending the military hostilities. Norberto Bobbio or Jürgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky or Ted Honderich, to name only a few of the participants, felt compelled, in their contrasting ways, to adopt and seek to justify some kind of position on it. In the majority of cases they did so, not on the basis of a Realpolitik, whether of the Left or the Right, but by reference to an avowed set of political principles and moral values. And if moral discourse was an explicit feature of the intellectual debate, it was also to the fore – predominant, indeed – in the idiom of the popular controversy.

The central category throughout was justice – mobilised by supporters and opponents of the UN operation alike – as recourse was invariably had to some version of the doctrine of the Just War. This was equally apparent, for example, in the contribution of the Italian socialist Bobbio, who concluded in favour of the justice of the ‘liberation of Kuwait’; and in that of the head of the one holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, who proclaimed ‘Desert Storm’, urbi et orbi, an unjust war (though declining to invoke papal infallibility, presumably because of the embarrassment this might have occasioned some of the more prominent of his flock, the Italian Cabinet included).

Intimations of incommensurability

Now, philosophically, few things are more discreditable today than moral universalism (unless it is universal moralism). Disdain for it was always marked the classical Marxist tradition, which tended to regard ethics as class ideology inimical to revolutionary realism about the existing social order and the prerequisites for its replacement. Witness Trotsky’s derision, in Terrorism and Communism, of ‘Kantian-priestly and vegetarian-Quaker prattle about “sacredness of human life”’. Yet historical materialism does secrete an implicit ‘revolutionary morality’ – a ‘long-range consequentialism’, in Steven Lukes’s words – in which actions are judged by their good or bad consequences for the project of collective human self-emancipation. In a manner akin to Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain, it is possible to speak ethical prose without knowing it.

A more pervasive contemporary opponent of universalism would be philosophical postmodernism in its many guises. It would detect mere ethnocentrism in the dispensation of Occidental norms to the Orient, and suggest that ‘we’ have no ‘right’ to judge – to project ‘our’ value-system onto others (let alone precision shower them with the blessings of Western Civilisation).

The first thing to observe about this orientation is that, whilst affecting to abstain from judgement, it effectively delivers a judgement. It declines to criticise, therewith implicitly exonerating. More generally, its theoretical underpinning is provided by the postulate of the incommensurability of discourses, moral codes included. As has been argued, however, ‘incommensurability’ deters a politically progressive position by eliding three distinct propositions. It can mean one, more or all of: incompatibility, incommensurability in the strict (mathematical) sense (i.e. having no common standard or measure); or incommensurability. The first and second propositions do not entail the third. After all, no-one would think it worthwhile to announce the incommensurability of relativity theory and sociobiology.

In this context, what is so instructive about the Gulf War debate is the extent to which it represents a counter-example to postmodernism. North and South there was a shared lexicon – justice, self-determination, democracy, rights, etc. – offering some common ground amid shifting lines in the sand. Even if people differed over what these goals might concretely consist in (as well as over whether they were served by the actions of the UN, Iraq, or neither), they were largely consensual terms for the weapon of criticism and the critique of arms.

The problem, I want to suggest, is not one of incommensurability, but rather of ininterminability at a general moral-discursive level. If abstraction from what we might conveniently call history and politics reduces politics to ethics, it also converts the latter into a mere moralism, stripping ethics of the kind of socio-historical realism indispensable to morally aware or informed political judgement. This is emphatically not to imply that to understand everything is to pardon everything. It is to maintain that due understanding is a precondition of appropriate judgement.

Lines in the sand

I want to explore some of these issues further with reference to the case of the Gulf War, conscious that time constraints require sacrifice of necessary nuance and qualification, even if they militate against repetition, hesitation and deviation (Trotskyist or otherwise).

Let me start, then, by outlining a rudimentary typology of positions on the Gulf assumed by the Left. (Consistent pacifism – i.e. pacifism – is excluded on the dogmatic ground that I simply do not see how it can reasonably be defended.) There were, basically, three types of left-wing response:

1. The Iraqi invasion and annexation of Kuwait were legitimate and hence any measures to reverse them were illegitimate;

2. Although the invasion and annexation of Kuwait were illegitimate, no war against their perpetrator orchestrated by the US could be legitimate, since it would commit other, more grievous wrongs;
The invasion and annexation of Kuwait were illegitimate and a war to expel the aggressor state, and to restore Kuwaiti national sovereignty – even if conducted by the US – was legitimate, because it would have beneficial consequences.

The first position is essentially pro-Iraq: it is that of the régime itself, its supporters in the Arab world, and a tiny minority of the international peace movement. The arguments adduced in its favour adverted to Arab nationalism; the inequitable distribution of oil wealth in the Middle East; the denial of national self-determination to the Palestinian people; and the regional deprivations of Western imperialism.

The second position – that of the vast majority of the peace movement – might be characterised as anti-Iraq and anti-US. There is, however, a critical distinction to be made here. In one camp were those who opposed any coercive measures against Baghdad, on the grounds that their successful application would constitute a victory for US imperialism, principal antagonist of socialism, which alone could solve the problems of the Middle East and every other region of the world. As Trotsky encapsulated the point in Their Morals and Ours, ‘That is permissible ... which really leads to the liberation of mankind.’ Accordingly, revolutionary-socialist morality dictated a reaction of ‘plague on both your houses’ to the inadmissible claims of both contestants: neither Washington, nor Baghdad. In another camp were those who likewise rejected a US-sponsored war, but who, following through the logic of identification of Iraq’s primary culpability, endorsed some combination of UN sanctions (targeted on oil exports and military supplies) and negotiations to secure Iraqi withdrawal, meanwhile supporting the internal Kuwait resistance to the Ba’athist occupation.

The third position is pro-war, but not uncritically pro-US. The rationale offered by the small minority of socialists who embraced it was that if, as many of those who subscribed to the second position agreed, Iraq was internally a quasi-fascist state and externally an expansionist regional power; if, contrary to the optimistic scenario entertained by the peace movement, sanctions would not work, then – regardless of the past record of the parties to the international coalition – the latter was the only plausible vehicle to redress a manifest and intolerable wrong. Consequently, should Iraq refuse the ample opportunity afforded it to withdraw with (comparative) impunity, a war to evict and subdue it would be legitimate.

Let me now briefly examine each position. The pro-Iraq option was, on the most charitable reading, an ingenious ‘Third Worldism’, which blithely assumed that our enemy’s enemy is our friend. In the shape of Saddam Hussein, he was no such thing. Indeed, as in the past, our enemy’s enemy proved to be one of his best, if inadvertent, friends, furnishing the excuse for unprecedented American intervention. All the Iraqi self-justifi-

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which will help us to pose the significant questions, make the requisite discriminations, adjudicate between incomparable claims, prioritise competing values, and thus unequivocally determine what position the Left should have taken on the Gulf War?

**Means, odds and ends**

As I mentioned earlier, the obvious candidate is some version of the doctrine of Just Wars, whose basic components are as follows: A war is just if (and only if) it is (a) waged by a legitimate body (in international law, a state); (b) in pursuit of a just cause; (c) whose agency has right intentions; and (d) employs just means (e.g. does not target non-combatants).

This doctrine disclaims the principle that the end justifies the means. It therefore seeks to synthesise a teleological or consequentialist ethics, according to which actions are right or wrong inasmuch as they produce good or bad consequences (where the relevant good has yet to be specified), and a deontological, or duties- and rights-based ethics (where at least some actions are right or wrong regardless of their consequences). In order, then, to transcend the conflict between teleology (for which no action is intrinsically right or wrong), and deontology (for which some actions are), modern versions of Just War theory involve a kind of consequentialism of rights. They aspire to arbitrate the consequences of the violation of different and competing rights.

In the matter at issue, where, if anywhere, will this get us? The first component – the legitimate body (or agency of war) – presents the first problem. For I assume that those committed, in all or some cases, to the principle of national self-determination must logically reject the identification of legitimate bodies with existing nation-states which may be the very negation of the principle (e.g. Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians, Iraq vis-à-vis the Kurds).

As regards just cause – the end or goal of the war – the immediate stumbling-block resides in its explication. Does returning Kuwait to the map from which it had been erased – a fate without precedent for a member of the UN – in and of itself amount to a just cause? Does the Left necessarily subscribe to the cause of national sovereignty? To pose the question is virtually to supply the answer: surely not. For there are instances where armed infringement of that sovereignty – condemned, as such, by the UN General Assembly – has been legitimate. Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1978 and the termination of a genocidal régime is an arguable case in point. The key issue, presumably, is not the eradication of the internationally recognized Kuwaiti régime, but the Iraqi denial of self-determination to the people of Kuwait. But if that is the case, then a relevant consideration is the Al-Sabah dynasty’s prior denial, to a greater or lesser degree, of civil, political and social rights to the inhabitants of Kuwait. Thus the ‘liberation of Kuwait’, without further ado, is insufficient as a putative just cause for war – not automatically compelling if it entails reversion to the pre-war state of affairs.

Reversing the order, how do things stand with just methods – the consonance of means and ends? Three crucial indices figure here: discrimination between combatants and non-combatants; minimum force (or ‘proportionality’); and the manner of killing (proscription of gratuitous cruelty, etc.). Official propaganda effused over the avoidance of what, in Pentagon-speak, is known as ‘collateral damage’, courtesy of ‘smart weapons’ and dumb generals. By contrast, it was generally silent about the ‘proportionality’ and how the other half died – with good reason.

It is true that, compared with the saturation bombing of Vietnam or North Korea, direct civilian casualties were minimised and were even, in some cases, unintentional. At the same time, however, deliberate destruction – ‘precision-bombing’, indeed – of the civilian infrastructure of Iraqi cities could and did have only one effect: to inflict agonizing death on countless non-combatants. As subsequent international commissions of inquiry have reported, the killing may soon have ceased; the dying continues. The citizenry of Baghdad and Basra are still reaping the rewards of the peace dividend.

So much for the fate of Iraqi non-combatants. Turning to ‘proportionality’ and cruelty, we may simply record the decimation, by fuel-air explosives and immuration, of Iraqi troops – the vast majority of them conscripts. The volunteer Republican Guard was thereby preserved to exact sanguinary revenge on the Shi’ites and Kurds who subsequently rebelled at the rhetorical behest of Bush et al. Finally, there was the hideous slaughter, at
the war’s close, of retreating, defenceless forces (the ‘turkey shoo’ of which, so the Foreign Secretary later confided, Allied pilots eventually sickened). Conduct of the Gulf War was neither proportionate nor clement.

This brings us to the issue of ‘right intentions’. Truth being the first casualty of war, no country is going to advertise wrong intentions as casus belli. Hence the question can either be investigated retrospectively (after the fatal events); or by an empirically informed prior estimate as to the actual motivation of the belligerents. Now, take the roll-call of: US direct armed interventions since the Second World War (in Korea, Santo Domingo, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama); US interventions by proxy in the same period (in Greece, Guatemala, Angola, El Salvador, Nicaragua); US indulgence of invasion, occupation or annexation by its allies (by Indonesia in East Timor, Turkey in Cyprus, South Africa in Angola and Namibia, China in Vietnam, Israel in Palestine and Lebanon, to cite some recent examples).

In view of this legacy of sins of commission and omission, it was implausible to claim that the head of the international coalition had undergone some conversion to respect for international law, let alone global social justice, however liberally construed. Realism, one might think, would furnish sound presumption against the very idea.

After the deluge

It is manifest, I would argue, that such scepticism was vindicated by the war’s consequences – the ultimate court of appeal of the case advanced for it. In other words, even assuming that we are prepared to bracket or relax the exacting deontological clauses case advanced for it. In other words, even assuming that we are prepared to bracket or relax the exacting deontological clauses (concerning means) of Just War theory, the teleological causes (concerning ends) weigh decisively in favour of the opposition to the Gulf War.

A problem endemic to consequentialism is the relevant range of consequences and the pertinent time span for their calibration. (As the Leader of the Free World himself pithily expressed it, when justifying the retention of NATO, ‘One cannot predict with totalty’.) In this instance, however, even restricting ourselves to the declared aims and legitimising rhetoric of the operation, the consequences were predictable and are unambiguous. They might be summarised as follows:

Firstly, at best the restoration of the pre-war status quo in Kuwait (autocracy, etc.); at worst a regression compared to that (persecution and expulsion of Palestinians and Yemenis, etc.);

Secondly, the preservation of the Ba’athist order in Iraq (whatever the hostility to the Supreme Leader), to the detriment not only of the Shi’ites and the Kurds (literally trapped between a rock and a hard place), but of the Iraqi people generally;

Thirdly, no progress in the direction of even an interim solution to the myriad miseries afflicting the Middle East, but instead consolidation of the post-imperial settlement there and reinforcement of Israeli intransigence.

In short, the UN was effectively reduced to a cipher for an imperial Presidency, with other parties to the unholy alliance donating multinational clothes to an otherwise exposed American Emperor. Granted the ambition and the opportunity, in the impending Pax Americana, ‘to kick the Vietnam syndrome once and for all’ (that is, to demonstrate to the Third World its allotted place within the post-Cold War comity of nations), for the Americans there was a danger of underkill. Hence the refusal to negotiate and the determination to pursue the military option. General Schwarzkopf was not to be some latter-day Duke of York; once the further massive deployments of November 1990 had been made, this was a desert storm set to rage. Alternatively put, the ‘Mother of Battles’ threatened by Saddam was engaged by Bush, in a veritable hecatomb to the New World Order.

Unwarranted conclusions

No more than any other was this evaluation of the Gulf War reached by resort to a moral theory which could pretend to found and prescribe political practice. This is not to deny that political commitments and actions secrete moral values (are, as it were, moral-theory-laden), or that those values can be isolated, explicated and rationally justified. On the other hand, it is to suggest that no moral theory will do the political trick. Realism dictates such a weight and range of (explicit or implicit) empirical premises that the decisive political battle must of necessity be fought elsewhere than the philosophical battle-ground. At the level of moral theory, in any minimally contentious case, the debate will be interminable and the issue undecidable.

It should not be inferred from this that moral theory is useless – that a version of Just War doctrine, for example, is either a sheer imposture or a mere distraction. For it can, as I hope to have shown, help to formulate some of the pressing questions: a minimal condition, after all, for the requisite answers. To that extent, the Owl of Minerva can spread its wings before twilight descends.

Moreover, if to philosophise morally is ‘to reason on the basis of convictions’ (Althusser), this does not warrant the conclusion that there are no good or bad reasons that can be characterised as such. And yet, if one can be right (for good or bad reasons) or wrong (for good or bad reasons), then the crucial thing (for the non-academic philosopher – viz., everyone else) is to be right. Even if sometimes for bad reasons, the majority of the Left opposed the Gulf War; it was right to do so.

As the above sufficiently betrays, the position on ethical values involved here is anti-subjectivist, even (or especially) when subjectivism is decked out as anti-ethnocentrism. Possibly the worst contribution to the Gulf controversy derived from the facile ideologue of postmodernism, Jean Baudrillard, who proclaimed that war was a hyper-real non-event, paradigmatic of the era of the simulacrum (an analysis in which iniquity and hyper-vacuity contend for precedence). One salutary effect of the real Gulf War was to remind us of something fashionably reviled as ‘essentialism’ by those for whom life is not a recurrent emergency (i.e., cross-cultural), and upon whose satisfaction, whatever its precise modality, human beings are dependent for survival and hence any conceivable well-being. These are the essentials. Such empirical facts about human nature impart an unimpeachably objective cast to certain ethical values – and especially the values with which socialists are concerned.

It may be, as Samuel Beckett’s Neary would have it, that ‘the syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation’. And yet it remains the case that the syndrome known as life is sufficiently compact to permit of ready extinction – courtesy, on this as on so many occasions, of the power intent upon dispelling the syndrome known as Vietnam.