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The New World Disorder

They Knew Exactly What They Were Doing

by TARIQ ALI

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Three decades ago, with the end of the Cold War and the dismantling of the South American dictatorships, many hoped that the much talked about ‘peace dividend’ promised by Bush senior and Thatcher would actually materialise. No such luck. Instead, we have experienced continuous wars, upheavals, intolerance and fundamentalisms of every sort – religious, ethnic and imperial. The exposure of the Western world’s surveillance networks has heightened the feeling that democratic institutions aren’t functioning as they should, that, like it or not, we are living in the twilight period of democracy itself.

The twilight began in the early 1990s with the implosion of the former Soviet Union and the takeover of Russia, Central Asia and much of Eastern Europe by visionless former Communist Party bureaucrats, many of whom rapidly became billionaires. The oligarchs who bought up some of the most expensive property in the world, including in London, may once have been members of the Communist Party, but they were also opportunists with no commitment to anything other than power and lining their own pockets. The vacuum created by the collapse of the party system has been filled by different things in different parts of the world, among them religion – and not just Islam. The statistics on the growth of religion in the Western world are dramatic – just look at France. And we have also seen the rise of a global empire of unprecedented power. The United States is now unchallengeable militarily and it dominates global politics, even the politics of the countries it treats as its enemies.

If you compare the recent demonisation of Putin to the way Yeltsin was treated at a time when he was committing many more shocking atrocities – destroying the entire city of Grozny, for example – you see that what is at stake is not principle, but the interests of the world's predominant power. There hasn't been such an empire before, and it's unlikely that there will be one again. The United States is the site of the most remarkable economic development of recent times, the emergence on the West Coast of the IT revolution. Yet despite these advances in capitalist technology, the political structure of the United States has barely changed for a hundred and fifty years. It may be militarily, economically and even culturally in command – its soft power dominates the world – but there is as yet no sign of political change from within. Can this contradiction last?

There is ongoing debate around the world on the question of whether the American empire is in decline. And there is a vast literature of declinism, all arguing that this decline has begun and is irreversible. I see this as wishful thinking. The American empire has had setbacks – which empire doesn't? It had setbacks in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s: many thought the defeat it suffered in Vietnam in 1975 was definitive. It wasn't, and the United States hasn't suffered another setback on that scale since. But unless we know and understand how this empire functions globally, it's very difficult to propose any set of strategies to combat or contain it – or, as the realist theorists like the late Chalmers Johnson and John Mearsheimer demand, to make the United States dismantle its bases, get out of the rest of the world, and operate at a global level only if it is actually threatened as a country. Many realists in the United States argue that such a withdrawal is necessary, but they are arguing from a position of weakness in the sense that setbacks which they regard as irreversible aren't. There are very few reversals from which imperial states can't recover. Some of the declinist arguments are simplistic – that, for example, all empires have eventually collapsed. This is of course true, but there are contingent reasons for those collapses, and at the present moment the United States remains unassailable: it exerts its soft power all over the world, including in the heartlands of its economic rivals; its hard power is still dominant, enabling it to occupy countries it sees as its enemies; and its ideological power is still overwhelming in Europe and beyond.

The US has, however, suffered setbacks on a semi-continental scale in South America. And these setbacks have been political and ideological rather than economic. The chain of electoral victories for left political parties in Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia showed that there was a possible alternative within capitalism. None of these governments, though, is challenging the capitalist system, and this is equally true of the radical parties that have recently emerged in Europe. Neither Syriza in Greece nor Podemos in Spain is mounting a systemic challenge; the reforms being proposed are better compared to the policies pushed through by Attlee in Britain after 1945. Like the leftist parties in South America, they have essentially social democratic programmes, combined with mass mobilisation.

But social democratic reforms have become intolerable for the neoliberal economic system imposed by global capital. If you argue, as those in power do (if not explicitly, implicitly), that it's necessary to have a political structure in which no challenge to the system is permitted, then we're living in dangerous times. Elevating terrorism into a threat that is held to be the equivalent of the communist threat of old is bizarre. The use of the very word 'terrorism', the bills pushed through Parliament and Congress to stop people speaking up, the vetting of people invited to

give talks at universities, the idea that outside speakers have to be asked what they are going to say before they are allowed into the country: all these seem minor things, but they are emblematic of the age in which we live. And the ease with which it's all accepted is frightening. If what we're being told is that change isn't possible, that the only conceivable system is the present one, we're going to be in trouble. Ultimately, it won't be accepted. And if you prevent people from speaking or thinking or developing political alternatives, it won't just be Marx's work that is relegated to the graveyard. Karl Polanyi, the most gifted of the social democratic theorists, has suffered the same fate.

We have seen the development of a form of government I call the extreme centre, which currently rules over large tracts of Europe and includes left, centre left, centre right and centre parties. A whole swathe of the electorate, young people in particular, feels that voting makes no difference at all, given the political parties we have. The extreme centre wages wars, either on its own account or on behalf of the United States; it backs austerity measures; it defends surveillance as absolutely necessary to defeat terrorism, without ever asking why this terrorism is happening – to question this is almost to be a terrorist oneself. Why do the terrorists do it? Are they unhinged? Is it something that emerges from deep inside their religion? These questions are counterproductive and useless. If you ask whether American imperial policy or British or French foreign policy is in any way responsible, you're attacked. But of course the intelligence agencies and security services know perfectly well that the reason for people going crazy – and it is a form of craziness – is that they are driven not by religion but by what they see. Hussain Osman, one of the men who failed to bomb the London Underground on 21 July 2005, was arrested in Rome a week later. 'More than praying we discussed work, politics, the war in Iraq,' he told the Italian interrogators. 'We always had new films of the war in Iraq ... those in which you could see Iraqi women and children who had been killed by US and UK soldiers.' Eliza Manningham-Buller, who resigned as head of MI5 in 2007, said: 'Our involvement in Iraq has radicalised, for want of a better word, a whole generation of young people.'

Before the 2003 war Iraq, under the authoritarian dictatorship of Saddam and his predecessor, had the highest level of education in the Middle East. When you point this out you're accused of being a Saddam apologist, but Baghdad University in the 1980s had more female professors than Princeton did in 2009; there were crèches to make it easier for women to teach at schools and universities. In Baghdad and Mosul – currently occupied by Islamic State – there were libraries dating back centuries. The Mosul library was functioning in the eighth century, and had manuscripts from ancient Greece in its vaults. The Baghdad library, as we know, was looted after the occupation, and what's going on now in the libraries of Mosul is no surprise, with thousands of books and manuscripts destroyed.

Everything that has happened in Iraq is a consequence of that disastrous war, which assumed genocidal proportions. The numbers who died are disputed, because the Coalition of the Willing doesn't count up the civilian casualties in the country it's occupying. Why should it bother? But others have estimated that up to a million Iraqis were killed, mainly civilians. The puppet government installed by the Occupation confirmed these figures obliquely in 2006 by officially admitting that there were five million orphans in Iraq. The occupation of Iraq is one of the most destructive acts in modern history. Even though Hiroshima and Nagasaki were nuked, the social and political structure of the Japanese state was maintained; although the Germans and Italians

were defeated in the Second World War, most of their military structures, intelligence structures, police structures and judicial structures were kept in place, because there was another enemy already in the offing – communism. But Iraq was treated as no other country has been treated before. The reason people don't quite see this is that once the occupation began all the correspondents came back home. You can count the exceptions on the fingers of one hand: Patrick Cockburn, Robert Fisk, one or two others. Iraq's social infrastructure still isn't working, years after the occupation ended; it's been wrecked. The country has been demodernised. The West has destroyed Iraq's education services and medical services; it handed over power to a group of clerical Shia parties which immediately embarked on bloodbaths of revenge. Several hundred university professors were killed. If this isn't disorder, what is?

In the case of Afghanistan, everyone knows what was actually behind this grand attempt, as the US and Britain put it, to 'modernise' the country. Cherie Blair and Laura Bush said it was a war for women's liberation. If it had been, it would have been the first in history. We now know what it really was: a crude war of revenge which failed because the occupation strengthened those it sought to destroy. The war didn't just devastate Afghanistan and what infrastructure it had, but destabilised Pakistan too, which has nuclear weapons, and is now also in a very dangerous state.

These two wars haven't done anyone any good, but they have succeeded in dividing the Muslim and Arab world, whether or not this was intended. The US decision to hand over power to clerical Shia parties deepened the Sunni-Shia divide: there was ethnic cleansing in Baghdad, which used to be a mixed city in a country where intermarriage between Sunni and Shia was common. The Americans acted as if all Sunnis were Saddam supporters, yet many Sunnis suffered arbitrary jail sentences under him. But the creation of this divide has ended Arab nationalism for a long time to come. The battles now are to do with which side the US backs in which conflict. In Iraq, it backs the Shia.

The demonisation of Iran is deeply unjust, because without the tacit support of the Iranians the Americans could not have taken Iraq. And the Iraqi resistance against the occupation was only making headway until the Iranians told the Shia leader Muqtada al-Sadr, who'd been collaborating with Sunni opponents of the regime, to call it off. He was taken to Tehran and given a 'holiday' there for a year. Without Iranian support in both Iraq and Afghanistan it would have been very difficult for the United States to sustain its occupations. Iran was thanked with sanctions, further demonisation, double standards – Israel can have nuclear weapons, you can't. The Middle East is now in a total mess: the central, most important power is Israel, expanding away; the Palestinians have been defeated and will remain defeated for a very long time to come; all the principal Arab countries are wrecked, first Iraq, now Syria; Egypt, with a brutal military dictatorship in power, is torturing and killing as if the Arab Spring had never happened – and for the military leaders it hasn't.

As for Israel, the blind support it gets from the US is an old story. And to question it, nowadays, is to be labelled an anti-Semite. The danger with this strategy is that if you say to a generation which had no experience of the Holocaust outside of movies that to attack Israel is anti-Semitic, the reply will be: so what? 'Call us anti-Semitic if you want,' young people will say. 'If that means opposing you, we are.' So it hasn't helped anyone. It's inconceivable that any Israeli

government is going to grant the Palestinians a state. As the late Edward Said warned us, the Oslo Accords were a Palestinian Treaty of Versailles. Actually, they are much worse than that.

So the disintegration of the Middle East that began after the First World War continues. Whether Iraq will be divided into three countries, whether Syria will be divided into two or three countries, we don't know. But it would hardly be surprising if all the states in the region, barring Egypt, which is too large to dismantle, ended up as bantustans, or principalities, on the model of Qatar and the other Gulf States, funded and kept going by the Saudis, on the one hand, and the Iranians, on the other.

All the hopes raised by the Arab Spring went under, and it's important to understand why. Too many of those who participated didn't see – for generational reasons, largely – that in order to hit home you have to have some form of political movement. It wasn't surprising that the Muslim Brotherhood, which had taken part in the protests in Egypt at a late stage, took power: it was the only real political party in Egypt. But then the Brotherhood played straight into the hands of the military by behaving like Mubarak – by offering deals to the security services, offering deals to the Israelis – so people began to wonder what the point was of having them in power. The military was thus able to mobilise support and get rid of the Brotherhood. All this has demoralised an entire generation in the Middle East.

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What is the situation in Europe? The first point to be made is that there isn't a single country in the European Union that enjoys proper sovereignty. After the end of the Cold War and reunification, Germany has become the strongest and strategically the most important state in Europe but even it doesn't have total sovereignty: the United States is still dominant on many levels, especially as far as the military is concerned. Britain became a semi-vassal state after the Second World War. The last British prime ministers to act as if Britain was a sovereign state were Harold Wilson, who refused to send British troops to Vietnam, and Edward Heath, who refused to allow British bases to be used to bomb the Middle East. Since then Britain has invariably done the Americans' bidding even though large parts of the British establishment are against it. There was a great deal of anger in the Foreign Office during the Iraq War because it felt there was no need for Britain to be involved. In 2003, when the war was underway, I was invited to give a lecture in Damascus; I got a phone call from the British embassy there asking me to come to lunch. I thought this was odd. When I arrived I was greeted by the ambassador, who said: 'Just to reassure you, we won't just be eating, we'll be talking politics.' At the lunch, he said: 'Now it's time for questions – I'll start off. Tariq Ali, I read the piece you wrote in the *Guardian* arguing that Tony Blair should be charged for war crimes in the International Criminal Court. Do you mind explaining why?' I spent about ten minutes explaining, to the bemusement of the Syrian guests. At the end the ambassador said: 'Well, I agree totally with that – I don't know about the rest of you.' After the guests had left, I said: 'That was very courageous of you.' And the MI6 man who was at the lunch said: 'Yeah, he can do that, because he's retiring in December.' But a similar thing happened at the embassy in Vienna, where I gave a press conference attacking the Iraq war in the British ambassador's living room. These people aren't fools – they knew exactly what they were doing. And they acted as they did as a result of the

humiliation they felt at having a government which, even though the Americans had said they could manage without the UK, insisted on joining in anyway.

The Germans know they don't have sovereignty, but when you raise it with them they shrug. Many of them don't want it, because they are over-concerned with their past, with the notion that Germans are almost genetically predisposed to like fighting wars – a ludicrous view, which some people who should know better have expressed again in marking the anniversaries of the First World War. The fact is that – politically and ideologically and militarily, even economically – the European Union is under the thumb of the global imperial power. When the Euro elite was offering a pitiful sum of money to the Greeks, Timothy Geithner, then US secretary of the treasury, had to intervene, and tell the EU to increase its rescue fund to €500 billion. They hummed and hawed, but finally did what the Americans wanted. All the hopes that had been raised, from the time the European idea was first mooted, of a continent independent of the other major powers charting its own way in the world, disappeared once the Cold War ended. Just when you felt it might be able to achieve that goal, Europe instead became a continent devoted to the interests of bankers – a Europe of money, a place without a social vision, leaving the neoliberal order unchallenged.

The Greeks are being punished not so much for the debt as for their failure to make the reforms demanded by the EU. The right-wing government Syriza defeated only managed to push through three of the 14 reforms the EU insisted on. They couldn't do more because what they did push through helped create a situation in Greece which has some similarities with Iraq: demodernisation; totally unnecessary privatisations, linked to political corruption; the immiseration of ordinary people. So the Greeks elected a government that offered to change things, and then they were told that it couldn't. The EU is frightened of a domino effect: if the Greeks are rewarded for electing Syriza other countries might elect similar governments, so Greece must be crushed. The Greeks can't be kicked out of the European Union – that isn't permitted by the constitution – or out of the Eurozone, but life can be made so difficult for them that they have to leave the euro and set up a Greek euro, or a euro drachma, so that the country keeps going. But were that to happen conditions would, at least temporarily, get even worse – which is why the Greeks have no choice but to resist it. The danger now is that, in this volatile atmosphere, people could shift very rapidly to the right, to the Golden Dawn, an explicitly fascist party. That is the scale of the problem, and for the Euro elite to behave as it's doing – as the extreme centre, in other words – is short-sighted and foolish.

And then there's the rise of China. There's no doubt that enormous gains have been made by capitalism in China; the Chinese and American economies are remarkably interdependent. When a veteran of the labour movement in the States recently asked me what had happened to the American working class the answer was plain: the American working class is in China now. But it's also the case that China isn't even remotely close to replacing the US. All the figures now produced by economists show that, where it counts, the Chinese are still way behind. If you look at national shares of world millionaire households in 2012: the United States, 42.5 per cent; Japan, 10.6 per cent; China, 9.4 per cent; Britain, 3.7 per cent; Switzerland, 2.9 per cent; Germany, 2.7 per cent; Taiwan, 2.3 per cent; Italy, 2 per cent; France, 1.9 per cent. So in terms of economic strength the United States is still doing well. In many crucial markets – pharmaceuticals, aerospace, computer software, medical equipment – the US is dominant; the

Chinese are nowhere. The figures in 2010 showed that three-quarters of China's top two hundred exporting companies – and these are Chinese statistics – are foreign-owned. There is a great deal of foreign investment in China, often from neighbouring countries like Taiwan. Foxconn, which produces computers for Apple in China, is a Taiwanese company.

The notion that the Chinese are suddenly going to rise to power and replace the United States is baloney. It's implausible militarily; it's implausible economically; and politically, ideologically, it's obvious that it's not the case. When the British Empire began its decline, decades before it collapsed, people knew what was happening. Both Lenin and Trotsky realised that the British were going down. There's a wonderful speech of Trotsky's, delivered in 1924 at the Communist International, where, in inimitable fashion, he made the following pronouncement about the English bourgeoisie:

Their character has been moulded in the course of centuries. Class self-esteem has entered into their blood and marrow, their nerves and bones. It will be much harder to knock the self-confidence of world rulers out of them. But the American will knock it out just the same, when he gets seriously down to business. In vain does the British bourgeois console himself that he will serve as a guide for the inexperienced American. Yes, there will be a transitional period. But the crux of the matter does not lie in the habits of diplomatic leadership but in actual power, existing capital and industry. And the United States, if we take its economy, from oats to big battleships of the latest type, occupies the first place. They produce all the living necessities to the extent of one-half to two-thirds of what is produced by all mankind.

If we were to change the text, and instead of the 'English bourgeois character' say the 'American bourgeois character has been moulded in the course of centuries ... but the Chinese will knock it out just the same,' it wouldn't make sense.

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Where are we going to end up at the end of this century? Where is China going to be? Is Western democracy going to flourish? One thing that has become clear over the last decades is that nothing happens unless people want it to happen; and if people want it to happen, they start moving. You would have thought that the Europeans would have learned some lessons from the crash that created this recent recession, and would have acted, but they didn't: they just put sticking plaster on the wounds and hoped that the blood would be stemmed. So where should we look for a solution? One of the more creative thinkers today is the German sociologist Wolfgang Streeck, who makes it clear that an alternative structure for the European Union is desperately needed and that it will necessitate more democracy at every stage – at a provincial and city level as well as a national and European level. There needs to be a concerted effort to find an alternative to the neoliberal system. We have seen the beginnings of such an attempt in Greece and in Spain, and it could spread.

Many people in Eastern Europe feel nostalgia for the societies that existed before the fall of the Soviet Union. The communist regimes that governed the Soviet bloc after the arrival of Khrushchev could be described as social dictatorships: essentially weak regimes with an authoritarian political structure, but an economic structure that offered people more or less the

same as Swedish or British social democracy. In a poll taken in January, 82 per cent of respondents in the old East Germany said that life was better before unification. When they were asked to give reasons, they said that there was more sense of community, more facilities, money wasn't the dominant thing, cultural life was better and they weren't treated, as they are now, like second-class citizens. The attitude of West Germans to those from the East quickly became a serious problem – so serious that, in the second year after reunification, Helmut Schmidt, the former German chancellor and not a great radical, told the Social Democratic Party conference that the way East Germans were being treated was completely wrong. He said East German culture should no longer be ignored; if he had to choose the three greatest German writers, he said, he would pick Goethe, Heine and Brecht. The audience gasped when he said Brecht. The prejudice against the East is deeply ingrained. The reason the Germans were so shocked by the Snowden revelations is that it was suddenly clear they were living under permanent surveillance, when one of the big ideological campaigns in West Germany had to do with the evils of the Stasi, who, it was said, spied on everyone all the time. Well, the Stasi didn't have the technical capacity for ubiquitous spying – on the scale of surveillance, the United States is far ahead of West Germany's old enemy.

Not only do the former East Germans prefer the old political system, they also come at the top of the atheism charts: 52.1 per cent of them don't believe in God; the Czech Republic is second with 39.9 per cent; secular France is down at 23.3 per cent (secularism in France really means anything that's not Islamic). If you look at the other side, the country with the highest proportion of believers is the Philippines at 83.6 per cent; followed by Chile, 79.4 per cent; Israel, 65.5 per cent; Poland, 62 per cent; the US, 60.6 per cent; compared to which Ireland is a bastion of moderation at only 43.2 per cent. If the pollsters had visited the Islamic world and asked these questions they might have been surprised at the answers given in Turkey, for instance, or even in Indonesia. Religious belief is not confined to any single part of the globe.

It's a mixed and confused world. But its problems don't change – they just take new forms. In Sparta in the third century BCE, a fissure developed between the ruling elite and ordinary people following the Peloponnesian Wars, and those who were ruled demanded change because the gap between rich and poor had become so huge it couldn't be tolerated. A succession of radical monarchs, Agis IV, Cleomenes III and Nabis, created a structure to help revive the state. Nobles were sent into exile; the magistrates' dictatorship was abolished; slaves were given their freedom; all citizens were allowed to vote; and land confiscated from the rich was distributed to the poor (something the ECB wouldn't tolerate today). The early Roman Republic, threatened by this example, sent its legions under Titus Quinctius Flamininus to crush Sparta. According to Livy, this was the response from Nabis, the king of Sparta, and when you read these words you feel the cold anger and the dignity:

Do not demand that Sparta conform to your own laws and institutions ... You select your cavalry and infantry by their property qualifications and desire that a few should excel in wealth and the common people be subject to them. Our law-giver did not want the state to be in the hands of a few, whom you call the Senate, nor that any one class should have supremacy in the state. He believed that by equality of fortune and dignity there would be many to bear arms for their country.