

**IR Theory in Practice Case Study:
The Iraq War, 2003**

Section 5

Alternative Approaches to IR Theory and the Iraq War

From reading Chapter 12 of The Globalization of World Politics (3e.), you should now be familiar with the basic Alternative theories in International Relations (IR). You are advised to consult this crucial chapter if you have not done so already as its contents will not be repeated here. Where you see bracketed chapter references, for example (see ch.12), this refers to the relevant chapter in The Globalization of World Politics (3e.).

Introduction

In addition to this section you should consult the Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, and Constructivism sections of the case study for important alternatives to the theories discussed here. The purpose of this section is to suggest ways in which the insights you will have learnt from Chapter 12 of *The Globalization of World Politics* (3e.) illustrate important aspects of the Iraq War from some of these alternative theoretical perspectives. As with the previous section, however, by no means can the following be an exhaustive survey of the possible ways alternative theories might help you think about the Iraq War and its aftermath. We will briefly focus on 1) Orientalist representations of Iraq; 2) the politics of 'accidental' civilian casualties; and 3) discourse analysis and Iraq.

1) Orientalist representations of Iraq

One idea central to postcolonial scholarship is the concept of Orientalism, and this was discussed in chapter 12. The term was used by theorist Edward Said to describe the way in which the 'West' has constructed an image of the 'East' as its Other, the opposite against which it defines itself. Representations of the 'East', including the Middle East, have been a central to the economic and political domination. Before Said's untimely death in late 2003 he wrote that the concept of Orientalism revealed much about representations of Iraq in the West that were used to justify the war. In his words, 'There's been so massive and calculatedly aggressive an attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment, and democracy are by no means simple, and agreed-upon concepts...' (*Orientalism* 25 years later).

Mainstream Western assumptions about the identity of the insurgents in post-war Iraq are also problematic from the perspective of post-colonial

scholarship. In the words of Tarak Barkawi, 'The role of the Iraqi people is to want to be free, for only then can the United States understand itself as a liberator. Accordingly, the growing resistance to US occupation must be represented as somehow not emanating from 'real' Iraqis. It is very important that the fiction that the resistance in Iraq is mounted only by "Saddam loyalists" and "foreign terrorists" be maintained, for to admit otherwise is to switch from discourses of liberation to those of occupation' (2004: 33).

Box 1.1 Edward Said on Orientalism and Iraq

Today bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists pretending to knowledge imparted to them and others by experts who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of the strange Oriental peoples... Without a well-organized sense that these people over there were not like "us" and didn't appreciate "our" values--the very core of traditional Orientalist dogma--there would have been no war.

Edward Said, Orientalism 25 years later.

The clash of civilisations that George Bush and his minions are trying to fabricate as a cover for a preemptive oil and hegemony war against Iraq is supposed to result in a triumph of democratic nation-building, regimes change and forced modernization *à l'américaine*. Never mind the bombs and the ravages of sanctions which are unmentioned. This will be a purifying war... Meanwhile, the soul-and-body destroying situation in Palestine worsens all the time.

Edward Said, 'An Unacceptable Helplessness', p.446.

2) The Politics of 'Accidental' Civilian Casualties In Iraq

From a normative perspective, how do we assign responsibility when 'accidents' during military interventions involve death to civilian populations? What is the effect of efforts to normalise these events as accidents, unfortunate events for which the United States and its allies cannot properly be held to account? This is a more difficult question than at first glance because the meaning of an accident is never given (Der Derian, 2001). A decision to assign the label to an event, with its usually related idea of 'no fault', can be contested by different and unequal parties via arguments supporting particular social and ideological ends.

During the Iraq War, the political and military leadership in the United States sought to ensure that all civilians who died as a result of the bombing campaign were portrayed as doing so 'accidentally'. Because specific non-combatant deaths were not wilfully intended as unique events, they should be classed as 'accidents'; the United States and its allies cannot be held responsible (or even criticised). In response a number of writers have suggested that large numbers of civilian casualties have come to *undermine* -

if not downright contradict - the humanitarian claims made by the United States and its allies during and after the war. Can they in no way be held negligent or even strictly liable for what Martin Shaw has called the 'militarism of small massacres' (2002), the death of thousands of civilians in discreet pockets of tens, twenties, and even hundreds?

Box 2.1 Civilian Casualties in Iraq

Just as it is commonly suggested liberal citizens are especially averse to causing non-combatant death, the targeting of civilians is portrayed as something that only non-liberals do in spite of the historical evidence. Based on a quantitative analysis of all interstate wars between 1815 and 1999, Alexander Downes suggests democracies have been *more* likely to target civilians than non-democracies. Yet the comparison between the 'due care' taken by liberal states and the indiscriminate killing by terrorists or rogue regimes... has been constructed as so obviously valid as to be almost beyond question or doubt. Death appears like the ideal accident, where neither the victim nor the agent could possibly have been aware of the pending calamity hence neither can be held to account.

Owens, 'Accidents Don't Just Happen', p.607-8

3) Discourse Analysis and Iraq

A major strength of post-modern research is its ability to reveal the way in which political action cannot be understood outside of discourse, language and speech. Moreover, the meaning of a particular discourse is always contested and, indeed, 'truth' does not exist outside of (historically constructed political) discourse. As suggested in ch.12 of *Globalization*, 'various regimes of truth merely reflect the ways in which through history both power and truth develop together in a mutually sustaining relationship. The way to uncover the workings of power is to undertake a detailed historical analysis of how the practices and statements about the social world are only 'true' within specific discourses. Accordingly, post-modernism is concerned with how some discourses and therefore some truths dominate over others in very concrete ways'.

From a post-modern perspective it therefore becomes necessary to investigate how the Bush administration tried to establish the 'truth' of its interpretation of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and the fictive weapons of mass destruction. It is necessary to investigate thoroughly the rhetorical devices used in public statements that tried to convince the world of the threat. How was the discourse about the war, when it started, controlled? Central to the way in which the battlefield narrative could be constructed was the runaway victory of the White House communications operation in the way the war was spun, especially to the American audience. Why was the administration propaganda machine so effective? Extremely important was the Pentagon's decision to 'embed' more than 500 journalists with the US troops as the invasion began which meant that the first hand were highly

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sympathetic to the United States. A content analysis from a post-modern perspective of the mainstream media would be necessary to show how the identities of the participants were partly constructed and represented thereby making certain actions possible.