Instructions for authors, permissions and subscription information:
E-mail: bilgi@uidergisi.com
Web: www.uidergisi.com

BOOK REVIEW

Eddie J. Girdner: USA and The New Middle East

Simten Coşar

Assoc. Prof. Dr., Başkent University, Department of Political Science and International Relations

USA and The New Middle East

Eddie J. GIRDNER

New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, 2008, 388 pages.

ISBN: 978-81-212-1001-0.

Prepared by Simten COŞAR*

When the world met with what was really going on in Iraq through the public disclosure of the Abu Ghraib incident in the mass media, in one of my second year courses, despite the common abhorrence, most of the students agreed that the torturers were personally not responsible for the violence since they were doing their jobs, acting professionally, obeying the commands of the authorities. In fact, what was going on Iraq had already been apparent and functioning long before the US attack on the country, in alliance with Britain. It had already embraced the world under different masks. But its appearance in the visual media left no room for pretexts and for discursive legitimation of capitalist rationality in terms of "sacrifices" from humanity –in terms of alienation- for the sake of the whole world. In this respect, the comments of the second year students in a country, which has been living under neoliberal capitalist system, sponsored by the IMF and World Bank among other international financial institutions, was telling in terms of the hidden recognition of the extent of self-alienation in the capitalist world. The torturers were assumed to have no responsibility due to their alienation; they were just doing their jobs, abiding by the contracts that they signed. The above argument for personal irresponsibility is cruel and feeds the violence that Iraq and the Iraqis have been facing since the US invasion of Iraq.

Is this state of affairs too human? The liberal human rights approach tells us nothing. It argues for individual rights and liberties, calls for struggling against the violation of these rights and liberties. Included in the list of violations is the "inhumane" treatment of human subjects; i.e., the objectification of humanness. The reproduction of poverty has been one of the latest entries to this list of violations. In line with this argument, what has been happening throughout the world, in Latin America, in South Africa and in the Middle East, as part of the onslaught of neoliberal globalization signals the end of humanity? This marks the dehumanization of humanity; both in respect of those who treat other human beings cruelly and those who are subjected to "inhumane" treatment.

* Assoc. Prof. Dr., Department of Political Science and International Relations, Başkent University, Ankara. E-mail: scosar@baskent.edu.tr

The myth of the human being as the supreme existence in the modern world has long been monopolized by the liberal enlightenment approach. The world has been educated in this myth since the eighteenth century. According to this myth, human reason is the key to a better and more humane world. Of course, the response to this question depends on the definition of the terms "reason" and *"a better world"*. If reason is a calculative one and the better world is one in which one "supreme being" and the rest are positioned in terms of a domination matrix where one has the physical, military, technological power and the means to preserve and reproduce this power over the rest then it is for sure that today the world is a better place when compared to the past. This is also connected to the achievement of enlightenment's aspiration to turn the world into a place for human reason, marked by *man's* ever increasing capacity to explore, to innovate, to develop and to create for controlling, shaping, manipulating and re-ordering his environment – the world in which we all live, breathe and try to survive.

What has been going on since these rather promising arguments of enlightenment thought were launched, however, tells another story: Abstract, universal human reason has never been that universal as supposed by the liberal version of enlightenment. It has been in the monopoly of a certain state/country/class with the material means to dominate, and later, hegemonize the rest of the world. Then, this human reason should be considered not a specific attribute of humanity at large but the attribute of a certain type of human being located in a certain structure at a certain historical period. Since the capitalist order, which first ensured dominance, and then, hegemony all throughout the world, shapes the existential definition of this certain type of human being, in the neoliberal version of capitalism the basic traits of this type of human being were listed as a certain version of rationality – understood in terms of getting things done, competitiveness rather than solidarity – and a state of being that is maintained through cost-profit calculation. That is the economic rationality that permeates through all ranks of life in the capitalist version of enlightened human being.

Eddie J. Girdner, in his book on *USA and the New Middle East* documents the current state of this type of human being, and the structure, which requires and which is reproduced through the domestic and foreign policy preferences that match with his survival. Girdner takes the "Greater Middle East" geography as his modal example to sketch the violence inherent in this rationality. In so doing, Girdner approaches the theme on two axes: he looks both at the program and the mentality that lies behind what has been going on in the region, whose borders have been continuously redrawn, and the policy outcomes of this mentality. In this respect, the author also outlines the shifts and relocations in the priorities of the US. What is more important, he succinctly documents the program, the policies and the consequences of the US's Middle East policy within

the frame of capitalist structure and mentality with regular recourses to the different versions of capitalism that have dominated the international political agenda throughout the twentieth century.

The book is organized around eight main chapters in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first three chapters (Chapters 2, 3 and 4) discuss the US invasion of Iraq in three interrelated aspects. Chapter 2 documents the evolution of "Operation Iraqi Freedom" almost on a day-to-day basis. In-between the lines, different strategies employed during the Operation and the reconstruction of the political and economic space in Iraq by the US are noted, hinting at the almost continuous failure of the US to match its aims with the outcomes of its deeds in the country. This documentation prepares the reader for the successes and failures of the Occupation in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 takes issue with the legitimization maneuvers that the US administration has employed since at least September 11, 2001. In this respect, the chapter outlines the continuities and discontinuities in the neoconservative mind of the Bush administration from emphasis on fighting against the "perceived threat" – weapons of mass destruction (WMD)– to launching a global war against the "axis of evil" in the name of democratizing the Middle East. Common to all the arguments is making first the region, and then the whole world, a better/safer place to live in. The shifts come about when the occupation can no longer be presented as an act "bringing democracy to the Middle East." Thus, when the US fell short of "managing the war", i.e. making the Iraqi people and the world accept that what the US and its allies were doing was the democratic reordering of the country and the region - the discourse of war turned into an open claim for domination. While outlining the attempt for legitimization and the failure to do so with resort to the junction point between the neoliberal policies and neoconservative discourse, in Chapter 4 Girdner gives examples of the occupiers' policy choices in times of public resistance. Thus, while the Iraqi people never conceded to the democracy offer of the US military rule, they were insistently silenced by military violence. The failure of the US administration to portray the occupation as the emancipation of *the* people and the region and its continuous use of militaristic mentality in the reordering of the post-war Iraq has in turn signaled a transition from a search for hegemony to domination in the region. In this transition two factors remained the same: military means and neoliberal corporate interests.

Although the relation between the war economy and neoliberal capitalism runs throughout the book, Chapter 5 (The Greater Middle East Initiative: Regime Change, Neoliberalism and US Global Hegemony) is organized as the connecting part among the case studies from the region that Girdner analyzes in his book. In this respect, after focusing on the Iraqi example in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, Girdner moves on to the wider frame in which the US attack on Iraq is located as the starting point. The frame, which is also hinted above is a mixture of neoconservative emphasis on the supremacy of the US in the world and the

endurance of a neoliberal world economic system. In order to preserve the supremacy of the US any means, but especially war-making, is full-heartedly proposed. This mixture necessitates the task of "increasing freedom for Western capital" in the region through getting the region under US control. The propaganda tools for the justification of this frame had already been laid down in the 1970s under the auspices of Milton Friedman's teachings and his "Chicago school boys"[1] and practiced in different regions of the world beforehand. What is new in the Iraqi and the Middle Eastern case is the strengthening of the militaristic language through a transition from allegories of medical treatment – "shock therapy" where the US is considered as the physicist and the rest as the patients begging for treatment - to pure warist terminology – "shock and awe" in military terms where the US is considered to have the "God-given right … to force the "American way of life upon the rest" (p.301). Thus, the total nullification of the "rest."

In Chapter 6, Girdner takes issue with the traditionalized alliance that the US administrations have so far formed with Israel in dominating the region in reference to the example of Lebanon. The Chapter focuses on the US-Israeli attacks on Lebanon as an extension of the "neo-conservative strategy laid out in 1996 to bring about a "new Middle East" (p.211). In this chapter, again, Girdner puts the cyclical nature of capitalism-militarism-destruction nexus in a nutshell: "The US-Israeli war on Lebanon raised tensions in the Middle East and made the world a more dangerous place. The "war on terrorism" yet again was setting the stage for more terrorism as the neoconservatives recklessly pursued global hegemony through imperial wars" (p. 213).

The warist terminology that marked the neo-conservative mentality can be found in the book by Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe*.[2] In the same book, one can find the *minimalist* approach of the US administration that marked its post-1996 project on the Middle East and that has been evinced since the start of the invasion of Iraq: "seize control of the environment and paralyze or so overload an adversary's perceptions and understanding of events so that the enemy would be incapable of resistance."[3] In Chapters 8 and 9, Girdner further documents how this tactic has been used in the Middle East since the operation began, occupation and reordering of Iraq almost on a day-to-day basis.

What marks *USA and the New Middle East* is a separate chapter on the environmental effects of neoliberal mentality and policies in general and US-led operations to ensure control over the Middle East (Chapter 7). As an extension of his work on *Toxic Waste, Corporate Profit, and the Struggle for*

1 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, London, New York, 2007.
2 Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance,* Washington, DC, NDU Press, 1996.
3 Ullman and Wade, quoted in Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, p. 147.

Environmental Justice,[4] co-authored with Jack Smith, the author argues that so long as the use of depleted uranium (DU) has been "a part of the US military-industrial complex …, which has been the basis for the institutionalization of the US as a war economy and emerging militaristic state" (p.230), environmental destruction is also an essential part of the "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and US administration's plans on the Middle East. More briefly, through eight theses that the author conveys, one gets a clearer insight into the "why"s, "how"s and the consequences of the "Operation Iraqi Freedom" and the plan on the new Middle East. The essence of the author's theses is summarized in the fourth thesis: "the use of DU weapons is an integral part of the extension of American-Western neo-imperialism after WW II and the extension of global control by US capital and transnational corporations." (p. 231) Thus, what has been going on in Iraq and in the Middle East in general is nothing to do with the "world gone crazy" as some would argue. Rather, it is the requisites for the reproduction of the capitalist-militarist-destruction nexus in today's historical context. Finally, this has nothing to do with the dehumanization at the world scale. For as long as capitalism is on the scene as the dominant structure it will produce and, in turn, be reproduced through "shocks," "awes," and structural violence.

Alongside with its significant contribution to the literature on "US foreign policy and the Middle East," "American imperialism," and on the results of the *reel politics* of the US foreign policy in terms of environmental destruction, the book touches upon the course of local resistance against forces imposition of neoliberal capitalism only in relation to how the US policies produced chaos in the region. Though the author notes instances of local resistances against US imperialism in the region as well as on democratic activism as the only solution to the ultimate environmental destruction the course of the narration through the book asks for a separate chapter on the varieties of the local resistance and democratic activism in countering neoliberal capitalism. Lastly, reviewed with a feminist perspective, the account lacks concern with the masculinist reading of (international politics), which would have been a major contribution to the environmentalist approach that Girdner offers in Chapter 7.

USA and the New Middle East is a book that documents the violent combination of the neoliberal version of capitalism and militarism in the deeds of a neoconservative mentality that has found life in the Bush Administration. It reveals the extent of human capability to destroy the world, and humanity. In this respect, it appeals to students of political science, international relations, political economy, peace studies and environmentalists. Lastly, the opponents of neoliberal ideology and practice might also be interested in the book.

---

[4] Eddie J. Girdner and Jack Smith, *Killing Me Softly: Toxic Waste, Corporate Profit, and the Struggle for Environmental Justice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002).