

In my editorial introduction to *New Formations 10, Radical Difference*, I wrote briefly of the internment of German nationals as enemy aliens in World War II, despite the status of many as resistance fighters, or members of Jewish and other persecuted minorities in Nazi Germany. While reading the mass internments of the late 1930s as one instance of a 'peculiarly British form of authoritarian nationalism, which banishes threatening elements to a tightly guarded place' (a form still pervasive in British cultural politics: viz. for a more recent example the attempts of government under Clause 25 of the Criminal Justice Bill to legitimate the imprisonment of homosexuals for such 'sexual crimes' as public affection – kissing, hugging, holding hands etc. –, or cruising), I cautioned none the less against the cyclical understanding of history that envisions a 'return' of past oppressions in present circumstances. 'History', I suggested, 'is rarely so obligingly simple as to repeat itself.'

Just under a year after the publication of *New Formations 10*, the British government launched its second military mission this decade, this time against an enemy vilified as the late twentieth century's new Hitler: Saddam Hussein. In the light of events in Britain since the beginning of the war, my comments of a year ago may seem retrospectively premature. There are clear historical parallels between the war of 1939–45, waged in defence of democratic freedoms and liberties, but legitimating a casual disregard for democracy at home, and the war of '91, in which the British government's (cruelly belated) outrage at the Iraqi regime's violation of democratic principles and, more recently, of Kuwaiti sovereignty, screen out the continuing erosion of democratic processes at home. A handful of examples: since August 1990 – and with increased rigour since the outbreak of war – the British government has imposed deportation orders on Iraqi and other Middle Eastern residents deemed threatening to national security. Deportees have no right to legal representation, nor are they permitted to know on what grounds they have been detained. Amongst the first of the detainees was Abbas Shiblak, a long-standing opponent of President Saddam Hussein, publicly defended by colleagues and friends since his imprisonment as Britain's 'most prominent, most consistent advocate of human rights and peace' between Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>1</sup> When released after three weeks in detention, Abbas Shiblak spoke in eloquent defence of other detainees rendered, as he had been, 'helpless and defenceless' by the absence of recourse to legal channels.

A second example: in the US, Germany and elsewhere, government decisions on participation in the Gulf War were made only after the full parliamentary debates deemed constitutionally necessary to secure mandates for military action. In Britain, the war was debated in the lower house on a point of order: the British government needs, and has secured, no direct parliamentary mandate to go to war. And more: the exiled opposition to Saddam Hussein, until now implacably hostile to the ruling regime, has been forced, since the outbreak of hostilities, to line up behind Saddam Hussein, in the belief that 'they will lose the moral right to oppose the president's

regime if they do not side with Iraq against the war'.<sup>2</sup> So much for Allied action as a pathway to Iraqi democracy.

In these ways and more, then, the claims of Western military and governmental elites to a status as sole defenders of democratic rights and freedoms in the Gulf, ring tragically hollow – tragically, given the cost of human lives and international resources of a long and bloody war. How then to respond? For *New Formations* – a journal in which much ink has been spilled in the critique of authoritarian and nationalist political excesses – the Right, in times of war, establishes itself as an easy target: its political claims are a sham, its aims imperialist, its leaders corrupt, etc., etc.

And yet . . . There is no evidence that an easy recourse to established 'left' positions provides perspectives for critical opposition to the injustices of war. In Britain, the ultra-Left has mobilised deftly around the Middle East crisis: the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is for example the dominant street presence in campaigns against the war. Sandwiched as I was on a recent anti-war march between a Class War delegation chanting 'Eat the Rich', and SWP poll tax protestors, I was moved, not only wryly to reflect on my own symbolic muzzling as critical intellectual (the ultra-Left has bigger megaphones); more positively, the disconsolate response of other marchers, including a group of Quakers close behind, underlined for me the crucial theoretical point that there is no necessary equation between leftist aims, and the demands of social movements such as that for peace in the Gulf. As Anna Marie Smith recently argued in *Marxism Today*, social movements are neither natural allies of socialism, nor can either term in the opposition – in this case, the Left versus the peace movement – be conceived as unitary or united in its perspectives, positions and aims. Anna Marie Smith, reflecting on what she terms the 'undecidable nature of social movements', argues therefore, following Laclau, Mouffe and Bhabha amongst others, for a politics in which 'the project of working with social movements would take the form of an ongoing process of decision-making, as decisions between these conflicting positions would have to be continually taken'.<sup>3</sup>

For *New Formations*, that is of particular pertinence. Committed as we have been for some time to a 'politics of translation and negotiation',<sup>4</sup> we will in future continue to provide a space for the critical elaboration of competing cultural-political claims and interests, not least in relation to the war in the Gulf. Our aspiration here, as ever, will be to steer a course between, on the one hand, the comfortable certainties of a bipolar Right/Left politics that fails so dismally to encompass the political realities of cultural antagonism and difference: and on the other, the moral absolutism often misrecognised as the sole effective vehicle of cultural resistance. In relation to the current crisis in the Middle East, this may entail difficult choices: refusing easy equivalences between 'left' and pacifist positions for instance, or arguing against opposition to war on moral grounds alone.

The articles in this collection are not concerned directly with events in the Gulf: they were submitted prior to the commencement of hostilities, as contributions on questions of general concern to *New Formations* readers. They span issues from the political future of cultural studies (Angela

McRobbie's assessment of neo-marxism and New Times politics; Colin Mercer's critique of cultural studies' exegetical tradition), via reflections on psychoanalysis as a route to an understanding of symbolic power (Slavoj Žižek, Lyndsey Stonebridge), to Thatcherite ideologies of enterprise (Paul du Gay) and (Peter Nicholls) critical readings of 'consumer' modernism. What these contributions share, however, is a commitment to maintaining the space of intellectual enquiry, not simply for the practice of critique as negation, but for the elaboration of future cultural-political perspectives. In his article on European broadcasting, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith suggests for instance that a critical response to changes in the international information order demands a recognition of the ambiguity and historical indeterminacy of current developments. His assessment that the broadcasting order has witnessed 'no apocalypse yet' offers a salutary reminder of this journal's role as a forum for the critical evaluation, from the perspective of as-yet-undecided conflicts and negotiations, of possible futures – even in wartime.

February 1991

ERICA CARTER

#### NOTES

- 1 Simon Louvish, 'Murky justice amid unspoken accusations', *The Guardian*, 4 February 1991, 4.
- 2 Falih 'Abd al-Jabbar, 'Saddam's spoils of war', *The Guardian*, 23 January 1991, 21.
- 3 Anna Marie Smith, 'The End of the Rainbow', *Marxism Today*, February 1991, 25.
- 4 see Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to Theory', *New Formations*. Summer 1988, *Identities*, 11ff.

*New Formations* 13 is the last issue of the journal on which Erica Carter will work as managing editor. *New Formations* 14, *On Democracy*, with contributions from Chantal Mouffe, Mladen Dolar, Joan Copjec, Renata Salecl, Slavoj Žižek and others, will be edited jointly with Judith Squires of the University of Bristol, who will take over the managing editorship from issue 15.