Editorial

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The impetus driving this special issue of *new formations* is our conviction that the invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq represent a watershed for postcolonial studies. Actually, our premise should be stated in bolder terms than this. We believe that the invasion and occupation of Iraq present a challenge to postcolonial studies of such magnitude and importance that practitioners in the field are not free *not* to rise to it. Where postcolonial studies is concerned, the invasion of Iraq must have as its consequence a fundamental change in the framing assumptions, organising principles and intellectual habits of the field.

This might not, at first glance, seem all that bracing or even interesting a claim. After all, there are lots of commentators - including some scholars who work in or around postcolonial studies - who argue that, with Iraq, or more typically, with '9/11', the world changed, and that 'theory' is therefore obliged to change with it, or else risk anachronism. Our argument is quite different from this. We believe that the dynamics structuring the world order after 2003 are much the same as those structuring it before 2003 - and, for that matter, those structuring it before 2001, or 1989, or even 1973, 1968, 1956, or 1945. What we are proposing is that, 'after Iraq', postcolonial studies must change not because the world has changed but because 'Iraq' shows that, in quite substantial ways, *it has not changed*.

This sounds paradoxical, of course. Why should postcolonial studies have to change if, and indeed *because*, the world has not changed? The answer to this question is that up until now, postcolonial studies, in its predominant aspect, at least, has demonstrated a notable disregard of what Kanishka Goonewardena and Stefan Kipfer, in their contribution to this issue, call 'the contemporaneity of imperialism, colonialism and capitalism', that is, of the deep structural dimensions of the world system. This disregard has been symptomatic rather than casual or incidental: it initially stemmed, as Neil Larsen among others has argued, from a misperception that 'the decline of the national liberation movements of the "Bandung era"'[1] corresponded to an historical terminus: the downturn in the fortunes of insurgent anticolonial movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s was taken to demonstrate the definitive, once-and-for-all historical eclipse of progressive nationalist and anti-imperialist struggle. After 1989 this misperception was widened when the collapse and demise of the Soviet system was taken to signal the definitive, once-and-for-all historical defeat of socialism and of all forms of revolutionary political practice too. As elsewhere in social and cultural theory, so too in postcolonial studies, the post-1989 shibboleth of 'globalisation' was routinely wheeled out to herald the end of modernity, unevenness, revolution, the

1. Neil Larsen, 'Imperialism, Colonialism, Postcolonialism', in Sangeeta Ray and Henry Schwarz (eds), *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, pp24-25.

world system of nation-states, even imperialism itself. 'Imperialism is over', Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt famously declare, with their characteristic mix of recklessness and sheer intellectual perversity, in *Empire*: 'no nation-state can today … form the center of an imperialist project'. As is so often the case, American neoconservatism itself is far less coy; according to one of its ideologues: 'We could use a Colonial Office in the State Department'.[2]

2. Charles Krauthammer, 'In defense of democratic realism', <http://www.aspenberlin.org/interesting_articles.php>, accessed on May 15, 2006.

The specific significance of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, in these terms, is to make it obvious, not only that imperialism is *not* over, but, on the contrary, that any attempt to formulate a theory of the contemporary conjuncture must begin with this category, in both of its major received usages, political and economic. It is the transparency of this fact that does the work where 'Iraq' is concerned. Blood and lucre - 'Iraq' brings incontrovertibly to widespread attention, as no imperialist enterprise since Vietnam has been able to do, evidently, that imperialism runs like a bloodied thread, unbroken, throughout the long twentieth century. As Crystal Bartolovich puts it in her contribution to this issue, imperialism looms as a dominant 'uncompleted project' of capitalist modernity. 'Iraq' signals this in a way that Nicaragua, Haiti, Grenada, Panama, the Philippines, Angola, Somalia, Cuba, Venezuela, and any number of other recent political examples that might be cited here, seem not to. The 'Iraq enterprise'[3] conjoins violence and military conquest with expropriation, pillage and undisguised grabbing for resources. As the collective Retort put it in an essay published in 2005,

3. Geoffrey Wheatcroft, 'They should come out as imperialist and proud of it', *The Guardian*, 15/05/06.

> what the Iraq adventure represents is … a radical, punitive restructuring of the conditions necessary for expanded profitability - it paves the way … for new rounds of American-led dispossession and capital accumulation. This was a neo-liberal putsch, made in the name of globalisation and free-marked democracy. It was intended as the prototype of a new form of military neo-liberalism.[4]

4. Retort, 'Blood for Oil?' *London Review of Books*, 21, 4, (2005): 12-16.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq therefore enjoin us to redirect the energies of postcolonial studies. There are signs everywhere of resistance to imperialism accompanied by a renewal of radical, even revolutionary, energy and imagination: in Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Nepal, South Africa, and even within the United States, where the unprecedented demand for immigrants' rights might yet signal the rebirth of a massive labour and civil rights movement. This spirit of renewal is reflected in contemporary social, political and cultural theory and the essays in this volume suggest that it is present in at least some of the work now being conducted in postcolonial studies, too. Some of these essays contribute to the opening up of new or relatively under-represented fields of enquiry: Goonewardena and Kipfer write on global cities and 'urbicide', Bhatt on Asian communities and 'religious absolutism', Macdonald on 'devolutionary' British culture, Murphy on 'Francophone postcolonial studies', Mukherjee on the relationship between postcolonial studies and eco-criticism, Harlow on Guantánamo and

human rights. Others contribute to the politicising and critique of existing paradigms: Lazarus writes on the ideology of postcolonial studies itself, Bartolovich on right-wing and left-wing 'counterfactualisms', Gopal on recent attempts to rewrite corporate globalisation as 'humanitarianism', Spencer on humanism in the work of Edward Said, Westall on Mike Marqusee's critique of chauvinism in English cricket. Abu-Manneh writes on the invisibility of Israel in postcolonialist discussions of American imperialism even as the rulers of this nation, with the full might of the US behind them, inflict vast and bloody collective punishment on innocent Lebanese civilians. Rising mockingly above international law and seceding from any notion of global ethical norms is, of course, constitutive of contemporary imperialism. What all of the essays featured here have in common is their desire to contribute to the elaboration of a body of work that registers the actuality of the world system and the structuring effects of this system (upon consciousness, culture and experience as well as upon material conditions of existence) - a body of work that registers this actuality, that is to say, by way of opposing and criticising it: for postcolonial studies is *constitutionally* a politically progressive intellectual field. The central task enjoined upon scholars working in the field of postcolonial studies 'after Iraq', we would say, is to work towards the production of a new 'history of the present' - a new reading, above all of the twentieth century, liberated from the dead weight either of the Cold War or of a compensatory 'Third Worldism'.