

War and Civilisation

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The US soldiers who invaded Iraq in March 2003 knew little or nothing of the ancient Mesopotamian civilisations that inhabited this country for more than 5,000 years. The barbarism unleashed by a botched geopolitical strategy meant that, for many Iraqis – whose culture by tradition tends to hospitality towards foreigners –, all Westerners were seen as invaders. The author asks how we will be judged by the children who are victims of the “collateral effects” of the conflict.

I arrived in Baghdad in February 2003, when the demonstrations against the war were taking place throughout the world. In those moments I was able to share with Iraqis the hope that the war could be avoided and the fears that there was already no possibility of stopping the launch of Bush’s military machinery. But as the deadline of the ultimatum came closer, resignation took over: “Let it start but let it finish quickly!” That was the only wish of people already exhausted by other wars (first against Iran between 1980 and 1988, and then, in 1991, the first Gulf War) and by thirteen years of embargo. Some tragedies that, despite everything, had not undermined the people’s great sense of dignity, a sense based on the awareness of living in a place that had brought about the birth of one of the oldest existing civilisations. Indeed, six thousand years ago, in Mesopotamia – the land between the two rivers –, a civilisation would see the light that would leave indelible marks all over the world: that of the Sumerians, the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

But what did the invaders know of this civilisation? Nothing. So much so that in the first days of the occupation they allowed the Museum of Baghdad to be looted. But that was not all, because they even built a landing pad for war helicopters levelling part of the ruins of

Babylonia, the first modern capital of the Middle East from the 3rd millennium BC. When they arrived, the American soldiers had no idea of where they had been sent to fight and the only litany learnt off by heart was: “I am here to save the United States of America, I am here to save my future and that of my children!” As if there could be anything positive about war! The results are now more than clear.

While the bombs fell over Iraq, day and night without respite, and the tanks moved closer to the Iraqi capital, I looked, with some embarrassment, the Iraqis in the eye, but in our exchange there was no hate, even though the truth is that they had all the reasons in the world to hate us. But they still considered us “guests”, in a country where hospitality is sacred, and they positively valued the fact that we, the Western journalists, had remained to report what was happening. The most important thing was to let the outside world know the “day to day” of the war and the suffering of the civil population, especially the women and children, who were dying because of the bombs.

But the worst would come later, with the occupation of the country. The Western soldiers, especially the Americans (although they were often of Latin or Asian origin) should also have looked the enemy in the eye, at the people who



The traditional Iraqi hospitality decreased as the conflict worsened. Iraqi women with a female Coalition soldier (Contacto Agency).

became increasingly more hostile to the foreign military presence. But from the top of the tanks the only concern of the soldiers was to defend themselves. The Iraqis' bewilderment would increase towards that unknown enemy, especially because of the war strategists enclosed within the hyper-protected green zone. Many of these strategists remained enclosed for months inside what had been one of Saddam's most luxurious buildings, without ever venturing outside and without even seeing Baghdad.

It is an occupation that day after day has been wearing down the country and its inhabitants. With increasingly more difficult day to day living conditions – without security, without electricity, without water, without petrol, without work...–, with “collateral” deaths (whose number, although unknown, can be

estimated at between tens and hundreds of thousands), with tortures – the most shocking case is that of Abu Ghraib –, and with cities, such as Faluja, destroyed by the use of chemical weapons – especially white phosphor, although napalm was also used – authorised by the Pentagon itself.

Life has become unbearable for the Iraqis, to such a point that, today, the only hope they have is to leave the country. But it is not easy to obtain a passport and even less so a visa for a Western country.

The degeneration provoked by the war has no limits. And we have already had good evidence of it with a civil war which is bleeding the country dry and with the use by the resistance of “weapons” that until now had never been used in Iraq: that of kidnapping. At first,

it was the turn of the contractors, and later of the workers of humanitarian organisations and journalists. Hospitality no longer has a place in Iraq, a land occupied by foreign troops. The attitude of the Iraqis towards foreigners has changed a great deal; although at first they were hospitable to everyone (the Iraqis were aware that very often the choices of the people did not coincide with those of governments), with the passage of time they would begin to distinguish between those whose passport was of a country that supported the war and had participated in the occupation, and those of a country that had confronted Bush; but they had finally ended by treating all foreigners as one. From June 2004 (the date of the “transfer” of powers to the provisional Iraqi government), we suddenly all became “Americans”. “You must all leave,” my kidnappers told me. And in their eyes I saw a hatred that I had never seen until that moment; it was the product of years of war, and it still continues. Naturally, that attitude does not concern all Iraqis: there are those that do not have the power of weapons and do not resign themselves to this state of things. But in the current situation they have no strength to oppose either the occupants or the violence that characterises some groups that say they oppose the occupation. Moreover they, the cultural elite of Iraq, are in the target sight. If they work under the occupation (if they did not, what would be the fate of the hospitals, schools or the university?), they are considered “collaborators”, and they find themselves threatened and kidnapped, and are often even murdered. This is the reason that many flee the country. A “brain drain” is taking place which in the end will damage the development of Iraq.

But this is not a clash of civilisations. Quite the opposite, it is rather a clash of “uncivilisations”. The war incites the most violent and cruellest feelings, those that have brought the Iraqis to use civilians as a weapon in an asymmetric war in which it is not possible to fight

with conventional weapons. The exit of the international operators, of the volunteers from humanitarian organisations and the journalists have taken Iraq to international isolation, which makes the population even more vulnerable, as it lacks witnesses. The journalists are in danger (since 2003, 159 have been murdered, and of these more than 100 are Iraqis); none of the combatant armed forces wants witnesses: neither the occupiers nor the occupied, who say that they are fighting the former, and even less so the terrorists.

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Only the end of the war and of the occupation will be able to re-establish the relations that existed before between the Iraqis (many of whom have studied in Europe, in the United States and in the former Soviet Union) and the rest of the world. But that will take time. This war has already devoured at least one generation: children who have not had a childhood and cannot go to school (Iraq boasted one of the highest educational levels in the Arab world), who cannot play and are unable to sleep after having suffered searches, destructions and bombings. Something that a friend said to me comes to mind: when the bombings began, his daughter hid under the carpet. But unfortunately this was not enough to avoid the devastating effect. The parents are obliged to give Valium to their children so they can sleep. How will these children see us when they are adults? And their children? And the women who before – despite the repression inflicted by Saddam’s dictatorial regime – were able to enjoy freedom and some rights superior to those of other Muslim countries, and who now cannot leave home

without the threat of being kidnapped, raped and even, who knows, killed by their relatives to satisfy the honour of the family through a crime which goes unpunished?

How in the future will we be seen by the Iraqis, isolated in a country which is occupied

by the biggest Western power and its allies? We should not deceive ourselves: the stereotypes that feed the West's vision of the rest of the world can finally provoke the same effect in relation to us. So, who benefits from the "uncivilisation"?