

The polite crushing of dissent and truth

Over the past two weeks, the contrast between two related “global” events has been salutary. The first was the World Tribunal on Iraq held in Istanbul; the second the G8 meeting in Scotland and the Make Poverty History campaign. Reading the papers and watching television in Britain, you would know nothing about the Istanbul meetings, which produced the most searing evidence to date of the greatest political scandal of modern times: the attack on a defenceless Iraq by America and Britain.

The tribunal is a serious international public inquiry into the invasion and occupation, the kind governments dare not hold. “We are here,” said the author Arundathi Roy in Istanbul, “to examine a vast spectrum of evidence (about the war) that has been deliberately marginalised and suppressed, its legality, the role of international institutions and major corporations in the occupation, the role of the media, the impact of weapons such as depleted uranium munitions, napalm, and cluster bombs, the use and legitimising of torture . . . This tribunal is an attempt to correct the record: to document the history of the war not from the point of view of the victors but of the temporarily anguished.”

“Temporarily anguished” implies that, even faced with such rampant power, the Iraqi people will recover. You certainly need this sense of hope when reading the eyewitness testimonies which demonstrate, as Roy pointed out, “that even those of us who have tried to follow the war closely are not aware of a fraction of the horrors that have been unleashed in Iraq.”

The most shocking was given by Dahr Jamail. Unless you read the internet, you will not know who Dhar Jamail is. He is not an amusing Baghdad blogger. For me, he is the finest reporter working in Iraq. With the exception of Robert Fisk, Patrick Cockburn and several others, mostly freelancers, he shames the flak-jacketed, cliché crunching camp followers known as “embeds”. A Lebanese with American citizenship, Jamail has been almost everywhere the camp followers

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have not. He has reported from the besieged city of Fallujah, whose destruction and atrocities have been suppressed by western broadcasters, notably by the BBC. (See www.medialens.org/alerts).

In Istanbul, Jamail bore his independent reporter's witness to the thousands of Iraqis tortured in Abu Ghraib and other American prisons. His account of what happened to a civil servant in Baghdad was typical. This man, Ali Abbas, had gone to a US base to inquire about his missing neighbours. On his third visit, he was arrested without charge, stripped naked, hooded and forced to simulate sex with other prisoners. This was standard procedure. He was beaten on his genitals, electrocuted in the anus, denied water and forced to watch as his food was thrown away. A loaded gun was held to his head to prevent him from screaming in pain as his wrists were bound so tightly that the blood drained from his hands. He was doused in cold water while a fan was held to his body.

"They put on a loud speaker," he told Jamail, "put the speakers on my ears and said, 'Shut up, fuck, fuck, fuck!' He was refused sleep. Shit was wiped on him and dogs were used on him. "Sometimes at night when he read his Koran," said Jamail, "(he) had to hold it in the hallway for light. Soldiers would buy and kick the Holy Koran, and sometimes they would try to piss on it or wipe shit on it." A female soldier told him, "Our aim is to put you in hell . . . These are the orders from our superiors, to turn your lives into hell."

Jamail described how Fallujah's hospitals have been subjected to an American tactic of collective punishment, with US marines assaulting staff and stopping the wounded entering, and American snipers firing at the doors and windows, and medicines and emergency blood prevented from reaching the hospitals. Children were shot dead in front of their families, in cold blood.

The two men responsible for this, George Bush and Tony Blair, attended the G8 meeting at Gleneagles. Unlike the Iraq Tribunal, there was saturation coverage, yet no one in the "mainstream" – from the embedded media to the Make Poverty History organisers and the accredited, acceptable celebrities – made the obvious connection of Bush's and Blair's enduring crime in Iraq. No one stood and said that Blair's smoke-and-mirrors "debt cancellation" at best amounted to less than the money the government spent in a week brutalising Iraq, where British and American violence was the cause of the doubling of child poverty and malnutrition since Saddam Hussein was overthrown (Unicef).

In Edinburgh, a shameless invitation-only meeting of Christian Aid supporters and church leaders was addressed by Britain's treasurer, Gordon Brown, the paymaster of this carnage. Only one person asked him, "When will you stop the

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rape of the poor's resources? Why are there so many conditions on aid?" This lone protestor was not referring specifically to Iraq, but to most of the world. He was thrown out, to cheers from among the assembled Christians.

That set the theme for the G8 week: the silencing and pacifying and co-option of real dissent and truth. It was Frantz Fanon, the great intellectual-activist of Africa, who exposed colonial greed and violence dressed up as polite do-goodery, and nothing has changed, in Africa, as in Iraq. The mawkish images on giant screens behind the pop stars in Hyde Park beckoned a wilful, self-satisfied ignorance. There was none of the images that television refuses to show: of murdered Iraqi doctors with the blood streaming from their heads, cut down by Bush's snipers.

On the front page of the Guardian, the Age of Irony was celebrated as real life became more satirical than satire could ever be. There was Bob Geldoff resting his smiling face on smiling Blair's shoulder, the war criminal and his jester. Elsewhere, there was an heroically silhouetted Bono, who celebrates men like Jeffrey Sachs as saviours of the world's poor while lauding "compassionate" George Bush's "war on terror" as one of his generation's greatest achievements; and there again was Brown, the enforcer of unfair rules of trade, saying incredibly that "unfair rules of trade shackle poor people"; and Paul Wolfowitz, beaming next to the Archbishop of Canterbury: this is the man who, before he was handed control of the World Bank, devised much of Bush's so-called neo-conservative putsch, the mendacious justification for the bloodfest in Iraq and the notion of "endless war".

And if you missed all that, there is a downloadable PDF kit from a "one Campaign" e-mail to "help you organise your very own ongoing Live8 party". The suppression of African singers and bands, parked where Geldoff decreed, in an environmental theme park in Cornwall, in front of an audience of less than 50 people, was described correctly by Andy Kershaw as "musical apartheid".

Has there ever been a censorship as complete and insidious and ingenious as this? Even when Stalin airbrushed his purged comrades from the annual photograph on top of Lenin's mausoleum, the Russian people could fill in the gaps. Media and cultural hype provide infinitely more powerful propaganda weapons in the age of Blair. With Diana, there was grief by media. With Iraq, there was war by media. Now there is mass distraction by media, a normalising of the unmentionable that "the state has lost its mind and is punishing so many innocent people", wrote the playwright Arthur Miller, "and so the evidence has to be internally denied."

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Deploying the unction of Bono, Madonna, Paul McCartney and of course Geldoff, whose Live Aid 21 years ago achieved nothing for the people of Africa, the contemporary plunderers and pawnbrokers of that continent have pulled off an unprecedented scam: the antithesis of 15 February 2003 when two million people brought both their hearts and brains to the streets of London.

“(Ours) is not a march in the sense of a demonstration, but more of a walk,” said Make Poverty History’s Bruce Whitehead. “The emphasis is on fun in the sun. The intention is to welcome the G8 leaders to Scotland and ask them to deliver trade justice, debt cancellation and increased aid to developing countries.”

Really?

In Lewis Carroll’s classic, Alice asked the Cheshire Cat and the Mad Hatter to show her the way out of wonderland. They did, over and again, this way, that way, until she lost her temper and brought down her dream world, waking her up. The people killed and maimed in Iraq and the people wilfully impoverished in Africa by our governments and our institutions in our name, demand that we wake up.