

## **Thinking About Human Rights During the Iraq War: Toward a Cartography of the Cognition of Western “Thought Communities”**

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Any symposium in academic quarters these days on the war in Iraq is likely to contain primarily accounts that share a common narrative of negativity about the justifications for the war, the conduct of the war, the effect of the war on civil liberties in the United States, and bleak prognostications about how the war has made the world more unstable and dangerous. The most common thread of this narrative is that the war was ill conceived, illegitimate, and unjust and has led Iraq into a more precarious situation than it was in even under the brutal rule of Saddam Hussein. From a Durkheimian point of view, antiwar narratives have become rituals of sorts, which identify and strengthen the solidarity of groups, primarily on the left of the political spectrum; it is in this sense that negative narratives of the war have served as very strong forms of symbolic capital for the personal and political agendas of Western spectators of the conflict in Iraq. The mass demonstrations that have occurred worldwide, the campus teach-ins, the academic symposia, and the antiwar blogosphere all constitute a constellation of cultural discourse with immense power to unify antiwar groups and foster political action.

In this environment, it has been difficult, if not impossible, to sustain any type of argument that supports the war in any way shape or form, which focuses on positive outcomes of the war, or which considers the fate of the Iraqi people under their former master, Saddam Hussein, who aspired to counter US hegemony, destroy Israel, and control the Middle East, or their would be masters, al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which aspires to defeat the United States and set up a Taliban-style fascist theocracy in Iraq. What Paul Berman (2003) has seen as the traditional value system of the liberal internationalist—antifascism, pro-democracy, solidarity with the oppressed, and the expansion of human rights—has become, ironically, a value system that is not at all at home within the cultural constructions of those from the left who have opposed the war. Among most people on the left, an argument for the war, especially one made in terms of human rights, is likely to produce, in its most benign forms, curiosity and puzzlement, and in its most hostile forms, anger, hostility, shunning, and banishment from the ideological collective. In the present-day left narratives

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of the war it is virtually impossible to find arguments in support of the democratization of Iraq and in support of the human rights of the Iraqi people. Instead, as the narrative goes, the most “demonic” force in the war has been defined as the United States, which has conquered and occupied Iraq to control its resources and the resources of the Middle East more generally and to foist its own version of democracy on a people who are both unable and unwilling to embrace it. In short the dominant left-wing narrative on the war is starkly negative, full of despair, and without an inkling of the positive and progressive utopianism that has so long been a defining characteristic of the left. Why is this so? And what does it mean for the future of the left in the inevitable struggles for human rights in a new century that shows no signs of giving up the despotisms and tyrannies of the previous century?

In this brief essay, I would like to offer an autobiographical-ethnographic-theoretical account of the Iraq war that focuses less on ascertaining some empirical reality of the “truth” of the war in Iraq than on understanding the patterns of cognition of the war among Western spectators. The only empirically verifiable truth about the war in Iraq is that it has led to the deaths and suffering of many people and the destruction of a large part of the infrastructure of Iraqi society. It is this death and destruction that has been subject to evaluation and judgment by Western spectators and it is here where we enter the realm of “multiple truths” about the war.<sup>1</sup> What is the meaning of the Iraq war? Is it right or wrong? Is it an exercise in imperialism or a liberation from Baathist fascism? Is it for or against human rights? Is it a disaster or will it lead to freedom? The answers to these questions are beyond the realm of empirical, ontological, objective understanding of some essential “reality” of the war in Iraq, even though those who provide answers to them often act as if these answers are the *essence* of the war rather than a *perspective* that is just one of many in a universe of plural understandings.

### **Thought Communities and the Meanings of War: A Cognitive Sociological Approach**

In this essay, I present an outline of what I will call a cognitive sociology of the Iraq war. Cognitive sociology focuses not so much on ascertaining valid empirical knowledge of the world, but on how various groups, or “thought communities,” perceive and construct the world, quite apart from any considerations of the empirical facticity of that world (Zerubavel 1999). Cognitive sociology is primarily a sociology of perception, which focuses on what Eviatar Zerubavel refers to as “social optics”; those lenses through which our experiences are normally “filtered” through various interpretive frameworks. For Zerubavel, “separating the act of ‘pure’ physical perception from the mental processing of the sensory information we obtain through it makes very little sense from an epistemological standpoint. . . our social environment plays a major role in how we actually interpret things. The way we mentally process what we perceive through our senses is to a large extent socially mediated” (1999: 24). The elementary cognitive sociology that I present here focuses primarily on the social mediation of perceptions of Iraq and in particular on the social construction and definition of these perceptions as negative, and their naturalization as inherently “evil.”

This perspective, which is a kind of radical social constructionism, might seem odd when applied to war, since it is war perhaps more than any other sensory experience that provides undeniably horrific sensory experiences that nobody can deny. War is an assault on the senses and this is especially the case in modernity, where the sights and sounds of

war are part of the very fabric of modern consciousness, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But these sights and sounds do not *mean* anything in and of themselves in any fundamental or fixed sense of meaning. Rather, they are filtered through the social optics of what Zerubavel refers to as *thought communities*, which are collectives that develop and share knowledge, perceptions, and thought itself as naturalized forms of truth. Any given social phenomenon produces a wide variety of thought communities that are united by certain common perceptions and communicative sharing of these perceptions; a particular phenomenon can be seen in ways that are completely incompatible with each other and that may lead to quite protracted conflicts regardless of the impossibility of ascertaining any empirical truth about the reality under discussion. The socially mediated perceptions of thought communities become the central reality of such communities and the perceptions of others are either willfully attacked or simply denied or unacknowledged in acts of what Zerubavel refers to as “co-denial,” a collective conspiracy of silence that simply ignores alternative realities that would threaten the perceptions and realities of the thought community (Zerubavel 2006: 47). (Zerubavel’s logic for cognitive sociology would thus seek to understand, for example, why some groups think a zebra is a black animal with white stripes and why some think it is a white animal with black stripes, and more importantly, why they would believe so strongly in either interpretation that they are willing to completely deny any validity to the other group’s perceptions, or to engage in conflict or even war over them.)

So from the perspective of a cognitive sociology, war has no essential meaning whatsoever; it is a phenomenon perceived and defined quite variably in different times and places. For some thought communities, war can be considered a kind of sport, a violent game to be adored as such, as a “force that gives us meaning” in Chris Hedges’ (2003) terms. For comfortably ensconced suburbanites in an affluent community, war might be simply thought of as something other people do “over there” and that is quite outside the ken of consciousness or concern. For communities devoted to a variety of ideological causes under the slogan of “peace and justice,” war might be considered as the ultimate evil, something to be fought against and that should never be a means of engaging in politics, no matter what the historical circumstances. For still others, war might be seen as a necessary evil, embarked upon hesitatingly for the sake of countering greater evils, or for the protection and advancement of freedom and human rights, especially in the face of threats to the latter from totalitarian dictators and despots.

In modern societies, with their plural effusion of different groups, there are a variety of thought communities with a variety of social optics that refract different realities and create different realities about the phenomenon of war, and it is variations and conflicts in perception among various thought communities that is the focus of cognitive sociology. War has no inherent meaning, just as its causes and consequences do not. The meanings of war are made and communicated within specific fields, in Pierre Bourdieu’s sense, and among the various groups that inhabit those fields and create, share, and value the meanings of war. In modern societies, this “conflict of thought communities” must be seen as something that, in general and quite often, goes out at a great distance from the actual events that are being thought about. It is this distancing from what Luc Boltanski (1999) refers to as “distant suffering” that allows for a wide variety of interpretations to occur among Western spectators, who in modernity and through the media witness suffering on a vast scale; since very often members of thought communities do not actually experience the realities that they share—especially in the case of war—they are much more subject to the influence of the social optic of the communities to which they belong in terms of determining their own

awareness, consciousness, and attitudes toward the things of the world, and especially of social suffering.

### **Antiwar and Human Rights Thought Communities: Conflicting Social Optics**

In talking about the Iraq war, I would like to focus on two different thought communities in relation to the war. The first is what I broadly describe as the antiwar thought community; the second is what I shall call the human rights thought community. I refer to plural antiwar thought communities, because there are many different groups whose positions against the war are based on quite different perceptions and definitions of the war. There are, for instance, right-wing isolationists who do not believe in intervening in the affairs of other nations, and realpolitik leaders who prefer containment over intervention, especially on moral grounds, and each of these might be said to constitute a particular antiwar thought community. My focus in this essay is what I will call the left-liberal antiwar thought community, which consists of those who perceived the war as wrong on moral and ethical grounds derived from a variety of left-wing ideological positions. It is probably a matter of some debate as to whether we can speak of a "left-liberal" thought community that shares a single social optic and therefore similar perceptions, but my assumption is that this is the case. Even though there might be some variation of perspectives within the left-liberal thought community, the structures of thinking about the war are similar enough that they might be considered to be the cultural foundation of a distinct group. The singular "human rights thought community" refers to a more specific and certainly much smaller and less differentiated group, which perceived and defined the Iraq war as a legitimate enterprise aimed at destroying a dangerous outlaw and totalitarian state and developing a liberal democratic republic that would foster and respect human rights and become a member of what John Rawls (2001) refers to as "The Society of Peoples."

It is in this thought community that I have located myself since the Fall of 2002, and in which I have remained throughout the war, both as a participant and as a producer of ideas, perceptions, and definitions of a set of meanings about the Iraq war. I take note of my participation in this thought community, since much of the essay that follows is a kind of rendition of my experiences with other thought communities, in which the perception and definition of reality was quite different and opposed to my own, and that led to protracted intellectual conflicts, usually of a scholarly nature but often of a highly charged personal nature.

The best description of the human rights thought community to which I belong might be considered the community that made the argument that the war in Iraq was just on humanitarian grounds; that Saddam Hussein had continually flaunted and violated international law (both in terms of his treatment of his own people and violations of the United Nations resolutions that followed the first Iraq War); that he was a tyrant and a totalitarian leader who denied popular sovereignty to his own people; that the Iraqi people had the right to claim their human rights and since they had not the means to claim them they had the right to ask assistance from those in the world community who could provide them; and that the duty of liberals was to assist them in their quest to build a liberal democratic republic that could take its place among the other liberal democratic republics that Immanuel Kant envisioned as the basis for an international community of perpetual peace. In no way do I presume that these statements are true in some intractable, ontological sense. In other words, I cannot derive these value positions from sociology, and especially not from a cognitive sociology. But having derived them, as a political being, I find them consistent with my own definition

of what it means to be a liberal internationalist and am guided in my own political action based on them.

Though a member of this “thought community,” that is to say, someone who shared the perceptions of the war laid out above, I was also very active in promoting these perceptions and definitions of reality, and so ought to point out that I was not so much a recipient of the views of my community but a producer of them (Cushman 2005a, 2005b). Having said that, there were other significant thinkers who shared these views or looked at the war through the same social optic (albeit not in ways not completely the same as mine): writers and academics such as Paul Berman; Mitchell Cohen, co-editor of *Dissent*; the British philosopher Norman Geras; the Anglo-American writer Christopher Hitchens; the British journalist John Lloyd; and in American politics, Senator Joseph Lieberman; in the United Kingdom, Welsh MP, Ann Clwyd, who was The Prime Minister’s Special Envoy for Human Rights; and, of course, the Prime Minister of England, Tony Blair, whose speeches on the human rights case for the war in Iraq are at the core of the human rights thought community. In common, non-sociological parlance, this thought community has often been described as the “liberal hawks,” its members believing that the UN has failed abysmally to stop gross violations of human rights, that tyrants and despots take advantage of pragmatic diplomats who only want to contain them rather than stop them, and that people whose rights are denied them have the right to ask for assistance and that the powerful have a right to assist them, through military means if necessary, and without the consent of international bodies who are not guided by moral principle, but rather by the national self-interests of their members.

This thought community was not a specific group with regular associations (although these did occur in some instances), but more a constellation of thinkers from different sectors who more or less shared a similar perception that the war was justifiable on human rights grounds and that the proper duty of liberals in the aftermath of war was to construct a decent, liberal society in Iraq (this latter point being one of the central moral injunctions of John Rawls’ liberal political philosophy as laid out in his *Law of Peoples* [2001]).

From the point of view of the dominant left-liberal thought communities on the war, the views of the human rights thought community were treated as heretical. Western left-liberal thought communities were decidedly against the war. But they were so not based on any ontological truth about the war, but on the basis of a perceptually mediated truth that fit their own ideological agendas, theoretical schemes, their own historical biographies and experiences as antiwar activists, or as proponents of global governance and deference to the procedures and laws of the United Nations. The arguments of antiwar thought communities are quite well known and include a broad range of perceptions and interpretations: the war was for oil and the expansion of American hegemony and empire; it was Bush’s personal vendetta against Saddam Hussein; that the Bush administration lied about the existence of weapons of mass destruction to justify an illegal war; that the war in Iraq actually has made the world more dangerous by destabilizing the Middle East and serving as a recruiting ground for future generations of America-hating al-Qaeda Islamic fanatics. As with the human rights thought community, the perceptions of the antiwar thought community were quite diverse, and not often in total agreement about precisely *why* the war was wrong, but more specifically united around the idea that it *was* wrong.

The benefit of looking at conflicts in terms of the differing perceptions of thought communities is that one is obligated to consider that the arguments of any thought community *could* be true and, conversely, that one’s own are not the sole truth of the matter under observation. In the case of those who opposed the war, arguments against it were taken as true, believed to be true and served as the basis for specific political actions against

the war. Yet what was most remarkable in the case of the Iraq war—and here is where my own ethnographic data and experiences are salient—is that barriers of antiwar thought communities were virtually impenetrable by perceptions and arguments that differed from their own, and especially resistant to the human rights case for the war. The human rights argument was deemed as naïve and flawed and it was adjudicated as misguided because it was not an argument that the Bush administration had made in justification for the war, at least in the initial phases leading up to the war. In other words, for critics of human rights defenders of the war, the human rights argument had no validity because human rights was not perceived to be the central motivation of the Bush administration, so therefore it could not have been a “human rights” war.

This criticism is understandable if one believes that motivations are the primary measure by which one ought to gauge the “meaning” of human events. But from a strictly sociological point of view, it is neither possible nor desirable to attribute meaning to events based on the motivations of actors. One of C. Wright Mills’ most enduring contributions to sociology was his argument that the best we can do in terms of understanding motivations is to understand “vocabularies of motive,” the linguistic and cultural constructions that actors themselves use to explain their motivations (Mills 1940). So, at least from my point of view, the task of the human rights thought community was to admit frankly that we could never really understand any of the motivations that led to war, but we could add to the mix of motives a new vocabulary of motive, the human rights case for the war, which was consistent with basic liberal internationalist principles, among them the refusal to allow totalitarian regimes such as that of Saddam Hussein to oppress their own people with impunity and often with the complicity of Western powers, and an avowed solidarity with the Iraqi people who asked for assistance to claim the rights that are guaranteed to them under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In my own position at the beginning of the war, the motives of the Bush administration had little to do with my own arguments, since it was entirely clear that no international body would or even could accept a moral argument for the war. It was important then to add to the mix of political and legal motives a moral argument that would not in and of itself justify the war, but that would direct attention to the necessity of working toward liberal outcomes in Iraq.

Indeed, Bush could have made the human rights case when he brought his arguments for war to the United Nations. Instead he had to rely on the language of realpolitik to make the case for immanent threat to national security, which ultimately did not persuade members of the Security Council to authorize the war. Moral argument, especially arguments in defense of human rights, do not go far in the chambers of the UN. But it was precisely because of this that it was necessary to develop a thought community, which would focus on the moral arguments for the war, for the right of the Iraqi people to be free from genocide and tyranny, and for their right to have rights. This was a vocabulary of motive that could have—and in many of our minds should have—been promoted and fostered by Western liberals as a way of holding the Bush administration to the principles of liberal internationalism and to the liberal duty of social reconstruction in its conduct of the war.

Instead, quite the opposite reaction occurred, and left-liberal energy was turned primarily against George Bush and against the war, but at the cost of ignoring the plight of the Iraqi people. Throughout its history, Western left-liberal thought communities had been advocating for solidarity with various oppressed groups: Tibetans, Chechens, various peoples of Central and Latin Americans, Bosnians, Rwandans, Darfuris, just to name a few. What was striking in the run-up to the war, and indeed, throughout the war, was the glaring and even willful indifference on the part of left-liberals to the Iraqi people as a community of suffering people. The facts of Saddam’s brutality were well known and the suffering of

the people of Iraq was definitely on the radar screen of Western leftists (even though in the 1990s it was primarily the UN sanctions against Iraq, which hurt the Iraqi people and strengthened Saddam Hussein that were considered to be the primary cause of the suffering, the pattern being established then that such suffering was always a result of external causes rather than the specific agency of Saddam himself and the radical evil that was the product of this agency). Yet, the Iraqis did not, indeed, could not, find a space within the cognition of Western leftist thought communities as “sufferers,” that is, as victims worthy of liberal solidarity.

So the human rights argument was not so much a support of the rationales and the strategies of the Bush administration; on the contrary, human rights advocates had every reason to be highly critical of that administration for failing to specify the exact nature of the liberal duties of the American state subsequent to its removal of a rogue dictator. The logic was, at least in my estimation, roughly as follows: let us assume that for most of us, there is little we can do as intellectuals, writers, or professors to stop the most powerful army in the world from invading Iraq. Instead, let us assist, in keeping with Rawlsian definition of liberal duty, the Iraqi people to claim their rights and to build a democratic society. Let us, each in our own way, find some aspect the nascent civil society—whether it be labor unions, women’s movements, networks of intellectuals and scholars, free newspapers, and other media—and focus our energies on providing assistance to these various sectors in the hope that, collectively, our efforts could contribute something positive to the reconstruction of a basic civil society in Iraq.

In retrospect, it might be said that the human rights thought community simply appealed to fellow liberals to act liberally in relation to the Iraqi people, as they had done so often in the past with other groups who have experienced collective trauma at the hands of dictators. Many liberals had supported the illegal NATO war against Bosnia and then against Milosevic over Kosovo, acknowledging that the wars were technically illegal, but morally legitimate (see for instance, Independent International Commission on Kosovo 2000). Speaking from my own position, I could see support of the Iraqi people as in keeping with that very same logic, and even more so in some respects, since Saddam Hussein was much more dangerous than Slobodan Milosevic, both within his own country and in the international arena. I should mention as well, that quite outside of the human rights argument, I was also guided by the moral impulse that lay behind the US Congress H.R. 4655 Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, passed and signed into public law by President William Jefferson Clinton and declared that “it should be the policy of the United States to seek to remove the Saddam Hussein regime from power in Iraq and to replace it with a democratic government” (later critics of the war seemed flummoxed by the powerful moral language in this law when I invoked it within the context of the present war, since that language was hardly different than the language used by George Bush in defending his decision to go to war).

This appeal, however, had virtually no effect on the antiwar thought communities of the West and, indeed, seemed to have bred more hostility than understanding, with human rights supporters of the war being treated in general as unwitting dupes (or in one rendition “useful idiots”) or facilitators of the Bush administration’s “imperial agenda.” For most antiwar thought communities, the war was considered illegitimate in its very essence, so there could be no possibility of rendering any legitimate assistance to the Iraqi people. The solution for them was to *not* have a war, but this solution, of course, begged the question of the morality of leaving the Iraqis to live under the regime of Saddam Hussein. Indeed, one of the most notable outcomes of the war was that the Iraqi people, as a collective, virtually disappeared in the cognitive consciousness of Western liberals and leftists as a suffering collective of people worthy and in need of assistance. If there was any attention given to the

war itself, it was on the suffering of the Iraqi people presumed to be caused by the United States for invading and the toppling of Saddam Hussein and by logical extension (and sometimes through rather tortuous statistical logic), the Iraqi people were often considered “better off” before the war than after. In various talks around the country, I heard this argument made, quite off the cuff by left-liberal intellectuals, who seemed, in saying so, to have no understanding of the assent given to Saddam’s bloody regime through such a performative utterance.

### **Tragic Narratives and the Engorgement of Evil**

The most simple, perhaps even too simplistic, explanation for such positions is that, by default, the cognition of left-wing thought communities is deeply inflected with a social construction of war, in general, as an ultimate kind of evil and, the United States, in particular as a force of evil in the world (even if this is specified in softer terms such as “hegemon” or “empire”—we seldom think of the latter as being “nice”). With the tracks of cognition laid thusly, it is not hard to maintain a conspiracy of silence and denial regarding the atrocities of dictatorial regimes that were and are the “victims” of US aggression. My theoretical interpretation of such a view was that it was in keeping with a general tendency of the left in the twentieth century to side with fascist dictators as long as the latter were considered enemies of the American imperialistic juggernaut. This tendency has been shown to be quite pronounced by Christian Rocca (2006), in a brilliant work of comparative-historical sociology that shows pronounced support of 45 dictatorial regimes by the left in the twentieth century.

It was shortly after the war that a very interesting pattern started to develop in Western antiwar thought communities. This was the development of what might be called a “tragic narrative” of the Iraq war, and it became the dominant cultural narrative and perceptual construct for interpreting the war on the left. The tragic narrative began even before the war, with dire predictions of disaster, which were followed by the emergence of a structure of perception that confirmed these predictions by focusing on the inevitable negative consequences of war. The structure of antiwar sentiment was maintained by an active process of selection and amplification on the “bad news” coming from Iraq, on the intransigencies of the Bush administration’s handling of the war, and on the “threat” of the expansion of executive power in relation to civil liberties on the home front. In the terms of cognitive sociology, this aforementioned process might be called “the cognitive sort.” The cognitive sort is an active process whereby members of particular thought communities refract data and events through the lenses of their social optic to form, to solidify, and to strengthen their initial and most basic perceptions and interpretations and thus reproduce them as the central core of meaning of their community.

The eminent sociological theorist Jeffrey Alexander, in his attempt to develop a sociology of evil, notes that this sorting process is fundamental to the construction of what he calls “sacred-evil.” In Alexander’s terms, “Sacred-evil . . . is a sociological term, and it suggests that defining radical evil, and applying it, involves motives, and relationships, and institutions, that work more like those associated with religious institutions than with ethical doctrine. In order for prohibited action to be powerfully moralized, the symbol of this evil must become engorged. An engorged evil overflows with badness. Evil becomes labile and liquid; it drips and seeps, ruining everything it touches” (Alexander 2003: 68). Alexander’s prescient concept of “the engorgement of evil” is very useful for understanding the process by which antiwar thought communities constructed the social meanings of the

Iraq war and, by way of that, the Bush administration as well. It is important to stress that this engorgement is an active process, a willful structuring of attention in order to construct an almost magico-religious construction of evil that is functional for the solidarity of antiwar groups and their more general political agendas. And it should be stressed that the engorgement of evil in one entity means that, in general, it is less likely that other entities can be engorged with evil as well. Thus, in antiwar accounts, there is virtually no moral condemnation of the atrocities of Saddam Hussein or al-Qaeda to be found and those who have focused on the prewar atrocities of Saddam (and supported the war on those grounds) have been virtually ignored and, indeed, shunned.

One prominent example of this is the Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya, whose account of Saddam's atrocities (1998) outlined the gory details of Saddam's regime and served as a fundamental ethical rationale for the war. At the time of its publication, since there was no specific action against Saddam and his cruelty had not yet disappeared among the liberal intelligentsia, Makiya enjoyed high status among left intellectuals. Yet, as soon as he used his data on Saddam and his inventory of Iraqi public support for the war to support a US led invasion, he was virtually excommunicated and demonized by such high-status antiwar leftists as Tariq Ali (2002) and Edward Said (2002). Said, in particular, unleashed a vicious *ad hominem* attack on Makiya that became something like a boilerplate for future discourse on those who made the human rights case for the war:

In and of himself, Makiya is a passing phenomenon. He is, however, a symptom of several things at once. He represents the intellectual who serves power unquestioningly; the greater the power, the fewer doubts he has. He is a man of vanity who has no compassion, no demonstrable awareness of human suffering. With no stable principles or values, he is typical of the cynical anti-Arab hawks (like Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and Donald Rumsfeld) who dot the Bush administration like flies on a cake. British imperialism, Israel's brutal occupation policies, or American arrogance do not detain him for a moment. Worst of all, he is a man of pretension and superficiality, flattering himself on his reasonableness even as he condemns his own people to more travail and more dislocation. Woe to Iraq!

Said's attack on Makiya is, indeed, precisely the kind of engorgement of evil of that I have been speaking, in this case the turning of Makiya from a noble dissident into a stooge who "has no compassion, no demonstrable awareness of human suffering!" This sort of attack and excommunication of a heretic is just one example of the more general rituals of exclusion of members of the human rights thought community within the more general antiwar thought communities. The attacks were notable for their exclusion from cognition of the perceptions and viewpoints of those who made the human rights case for war. It should also be pointed out that further study of this phenomenon of exclusion ought to focus on the emotional energy of the attacks by antiwar advocates; the vitriol and overt viciousness of such attacks varied in inverse proportion to the willingness to hear the arguments of alternative thought communities. Indeed, attacks were even more intense against those who had once been in the leftist fold, but who were now seen as "traitors" and "apostates" for taking a different line of thought on the war. The leftist corridors are littered with the shards of rhetorical witch-burnings of leftists who supported the war.

Because war inevitably produces death and destruction, there was a virtual multitude of negative events that could be selected and sorted into strengthening the cognitive base of antiwar thought communities. Any increase in the death toll, car bombings of innocent

civilians, and other atrocities could be sorted and used to strengthen the perceptual basis of the war as a disaster, to amplify the war as evil, and to insinuate that the United States and “Bush’s war” was the source of this evil. This is a perhaps more complex way of saying rather simply: if one defines something as a disaster, or as evil, one will most certainly look for evidence that confirms rather than disproves this definition, and one will look the other way or deny evidence that does not confirm such a perception. This was precisely the sorting mechanism that was central to the operation of antiwar thought communities.

It was also during this time of the amplification of evil, that antiwar thought communities could not see that source of evil that reposed in the agency of counterinsurgents and religious fanatics. This disappearance of the agency of terrorist counterinsurgents from the field of perception has been consistent and constant throughout the social construction of disaster; indeed, in a banal kind of logic of causation, “insurgents” were seen to have been made to rebel because the United States was occupying the country (this kind of logic was very similar to that of leftist responses to the destruction of the World Trade Center towers: it was our policy, our structures, which explained the evil, not the agency of the evildoers themselves). So, if an al-Qaeda terrorist were to behead a captured prisoner, the causal logic favorable to the cognitive sort of the antiwar thought community would be that the event would not have happened if the war had not happened, since al-Qaeda would not have come to Iraq. The agency of the swordsman would be rendered completely invisible, lost in a welter of mistaken causal statements. Any explanation of the atrocity would be acceptable as long as it engorged the United States and the war itself with evil, and any explanation of the independent cultural sources of the al-Qaeda insurgent acting as an agent through his own cultural perceptions would be lost from view, either intentionally, or by default. It is as if al-Qaeda would do nothing of its own volition, indeed, would not even exist, if the Americans packed up from the entire Islamic world and left.

### **Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo as Spectacles of Evil**

The negative narrative of the war and the possibilities of engorging the United States with evil got an incredible cultural injection of support from the various intransigencies of the US government and military policies and practices during the war. The most important of these was, of course, the discovery not long after the taking of Baghdad of prisoner abuse and torture at the Abu-Ghraib prison in Baghdad. This event, perhaps more than any other, became the signature event in the construction of the tragic narrative of the war and a prime opportunity to intensify the engorgement of the evil of the United States. Abu Ghraib became a veritable icon of American evil, not only among antiwar thought communities but in the worldwide global village of the mass media. The events in Abu Ghraib became a media spectacle: *The New York Times* became an especially instrumental agent in constructing Abu Ghraib as a spectacle of evil. From April to May, 2004, the paper published front page coverage of Abu Ghraib for 34 out of 37 days, more than any other event during the war, before or since.<sup>2</sup> Following in this exercise of the symbolic production of American evil, the *Times* summarized the entire year of war in 2004 in its “Year in Review” section with a full-page photograph of the now iconic hooded Iraqi prisoner with electrodes attached to his body. Subsequently, book after book has been published on Abu Ghraib and the use of torture, drawing on the iconography of evil that became a mainstay of the antiwar movement. Some representative examples include Danner 2004; Strasser 2004; Greenberg and Dratel 2005; McKelvey 2007 (the latter with the appropriate title *Monstering*), and these are just a few of the plethora of books on the subject of Abu Ghraib and torture that rhetorically

construct the narrative of evil, with America as its principal agent. In addition to such analytical treatises (which barely mask their moral agendas and their social constructions of evil), Abu Ghraib has also become aestheticized by artists, most notably by Colombian artist Fernando Botero, who likened his representations of Abu Ghraib to Goya's *Caprichos* and Picassos *Guernica*.<sup>3</sup> All of these cultural productions have been readily consumed by eager members of the antiwar thought community who had no reason to doubt, based on their already solidified conceptions of the war, that Abu Ghraib was the worst thing that has happened in Iraq during the war, and that it is directly comparable to the mass slaughter unleashed on *Guernica* by fascist airplanes. To my knowledge, there is not one book in existence that treats the mass murder, beheadings and other executions, torture, and persecution of Iraqis, especially those who support democracy, by fascist insurgents and religious fanatics *as human rights abuses* and with the same kind of iconography of evil as has been displayed with reference to Abu Ghraib. Indeed, as I have been trying to stress in this essay, the existence of such an account could most likely *not even be produced* within antiwar thought communities because to do so would involve a distancing from the cognitive frames that constitute the dominant reality of the war within such communities.

Without downplaying the factuality or the moral excesses of the events at Abu Ghraib, it is important to underscore the active use of the perverse symbolism of these events in the social process of engorging the United States and "its war" with evil. Indeed, Abu Ghraib became the master representation of evil during the war, eliding and masking all other acts of barbarity and cruelty committed by insurgent forces. The stress on the intransigencies and implied if not overt evil of the United States completely occluded from cognition the acts of atrocity that were committed by Saddam Hussein in that very prison, and the heinous acts committed regularly on Americans and civilians in Iraq (I have in mind here, the series of public beheadings of foreigners by al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, which were deemed to be too graphic to print by most major media, including the *New York Times* and the almost complete lack of any narrative of condemnation of any of the gross acts of cruelty and murder of tens of thousands of Iraqis by insurgents and religious fanatics). The logic here is quite apparent: had it been American forces who had beheaded civilians, it would have almost certainly been deemed "fit to print," and one can surmise with some degree of certainty based on the experience of the representation of Abu Ghraib that an engorgement of evil of epic proportions would have ensued.

As a way of showing how the structure of perception is conditioned within thought communities, consider that also in 2005, for the first time in Iraqi history, millions of Iraqis voted in free and fair democratic elections. The symbol of the purple finger being proudly displayed by jubilant voters, a symbol that was used by human rights supporters of the war, was virtually nowhere to be found in the media most favored by antiwar thought communities.<sup>4</sup> Positive iconography of the war was for the most part written off by antiwar communities as propaganda for the war or simply ignored in favor of the iconography of evil that dominated their worldview. Antiwar intellectuals such as Juan Cole performed the necessary "negativizing" procedures, which ensured that such elections would not be seen as something positive and in violation of the strict codes of negativity that governed public discourse on the left.<sup>5</sup>

There is no question that what went on at Abu Ghraib was macabre torture, a puerile excess by troops who were not qualified or able to be doing what they were supposed to be doing in that facility. The events there, even without the excessive amplification by antiwar forces in the West, were a direct challenge to the human rights case for the war. Ironically, while antiwar communities virtually ignored the mass suffering and violations of human rights suffered by the Iraq people at the hands of Baathist and Muslim extremists, they were

disproportionately fixated on the evils of the American forces. This was also the case with the other most notable “evil” of the US administration, the detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. This has been yet another source of symbolic material for the engorgement of the United States with evil. Without taking a specific stance for or against the detention and supposed torture of detainees at Guantanamo, it is only necessary to note that, as with Abu Ghraib, the attention of antiwar thought communities was almost entirely dominated by the alleged human rights abuses of prisoners there. It is fascinating to consider the sheer amount of energy that has been expended in defense of the prisoners there, many of whom were captured in battle, as opposed to a consideration of the abject suffering of tens of thousands of Iraqis at the hands of the types of prisoners held in detention at Guantanamo. Indeed, the amount of attention given to the happenings at Guantanamo and the concerns for the human rights of the inmates there is entirely disproportionate to the attention given to events in Iraq and the gross violations of human rights of the Iraqi people.

I am not trying to downplay or whitewash the events at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo but simply trying to take note of the centrality they have come to play in the consciousness of Western liberals who opposed the war and their function as highly charged forms of symbolic capital that are actively used to create resistance to the war. The point I am trying to stress here, and one that needs far more research and empirical detail, is the variation in the social structure of attention and perception to events that have occurred during the Iraq war. While I could agree, as an advocate of human rights, that attention *ought* to be paid to such things as the excesses at Abu Ghraib, warrantless detention and possible torture of detainees at Guantanamo, or the violations of the rights of Americans by the Patriot Act, what I wish to point out is that the structure of attention to and the amplification of these events by antiwar thought communities worked very strongly to occlude perceptions and attention toward the progress of human rights in various sectors of Iraqi society. For example, it is entirely plausible to surmise that most people are well aware of the violations of human rights of prisoners in Guantanamo but have virtually no inkling of the dramatic democratic and social advances of human rights in Iraqi Kurdistan, or in other parts of Iraq that are pacified.

This is somewhat “normal” in the sense that the news seldom focuses on the “good” and traffics in tragedy and death—indeed, even objective news provides the symbolic material from which even the most neutral people could come to despair (and this constant plethora of negative images, over time and in intense concentrations has much to do, I think, with the change of opinion among Americans from support of the war to support of withdrawal). Since representations of war frame perceptions in almost entirely negative images and accounts, it is not surprising that the dominant perception of the war in Iraq would be negative, that the war would be unpopular, and that Americans would lose their resolve to continue it. They would especially be inclined to do this because of the invisibility of positive outcomes in Iraq, which are not as newsworthy as negative events and that most Americans can never see in any systematic way. I would add one ethnographic note: when lecturing around the country on advances in human rights in Iraq, especially among women’s groups and labor unions, invariably the discussion almost always completely ignored the positive advances that I was trying to stress and drifted always and invariably back to the “atrocities” of Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo or Haditha or Fallujah. Only in very rare instances, was I able to assume that members of audiences (usually on campuses and therefore most likely either members of antiwar thought communities or people who were otherwise constantly exposed to their definitions of reality) might consider thinking about the human rights case and perhaps imagine a society of 26 million people who deserved some measure of support from comfortably ensconced liberals in such environs.

To sum up the point made above: the negative representations of the Iraq war were central in forming perceptions of the war as a disaster, as something “evil” that should be resisted by decent thinking liberal people. This is not surprising, since all I am saying is that negative perceptions will lead to negative social constructions of reality and I am in no way inferring that those who are part of this process are somehow “duped” into the view of the war that they share. It is more a matter of noting the existence of a conditioned perception, which reinforces an already held view and keeps one’s consciousness from attending to other perceptions and therefore other views.

### **Iraq and the “Impossibility of the Good”**

It is useful for the sake of a cognitive sociology of the Iraq war to recall a very interesting “countercultural” effort on the part of the pro-war Western thought community. From March, 2004 until November, 2006, a young man from Australia named Arthur Chrenkoff began a weblog that focused explicitly on the “Good News From Iraq.”<sup>6</sup> The archive of information is a fascinating “renarration” of events in Iraq that, taken collectively, run almost entirely counter to the negative narratives of the war that were the staple of standard media outlets, and the main source of information for antiwar thought communities. Chrenkoff’s brilliance was to completely avoid the reporting of the usual negative material from which most news accounts are constructed and to focus on a rather dispassionate reportage of events that, in usual liberal quarters (say if it were discussing the progress of people formerly held sacrosanct by the American left, such as South Africans, El Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, etc.) would be considered very good news indeed. Chrenkoff reported on the amazing successes of new and free media, the rise of nongovernmental organizations devoted to causes such as labor rights, women’s rights, and freedom of association, and new economic projects that seemed to be developing the basis for a vibrant civil society. He did not downplay or whitewash the negative consequences of the war; rather, he assumed that the bulk of news from Iraq focused on these and he simply reported on events and occurrences that he considered to be progressive. In our previous theoretical terms, he provided an “alternative cognitive sort.” For the most part, Chrenkoff’s archives represent a vastly different set of perceptions of events that did not, and indeed *could not*, be attended to by antiwar thought communities since it was, by definition, anomalous and destructive of the narratives of negativity that grounded these communities.

As an ethnographic sociological experiment during the period when Chrenkoff was publishing his “good news from Iraq,” I made it a point when discussing or lecturing on the war to bring up some of the things he mentioned. I discovered quite first-hand that most audiences assumed that the kinds of things I was mentioning simply could not exist in Iraq. In lucky cases, curiosity was aroused and people began to expand their cognitive frames to include at least the possibility of a progressive narrative on the war. But in most cases, the data I presented from Chrenkoff’s archives was met with haughty cynicism and sometimes downright anger (and it should be noted that the most aggressive display toward me, bordering on a physical confrontation, was by the director of a Peace and Justice program at a small college in upstate New York. A close second place falls to a group of students at a nearby college who, having burned an effigy of Paul Bremer during his talk the week before mine, more civilly, but still threateningly, trapped me in a room and verbally assaulted me while the dean stood by and did nothing). I did not expect to change anyone’s point of view by introducing positive outcomes into the discourse on the war. I simply felt, as a member of the human rights thought community, that these were worth mentioning.

But in doing so, I became acutely aware of the power of cognitive frames of reference and the social facticity and obdurate reality of negative constructions of the war. For most audiences, the negativity of the Iraq war was as real as the sun shining in the sky. I would mention as well, that I thought it always rational and ethical to acknowledge the negative aspects of the war that were the cultural integument of antiwar thought communities. Yet at the same time, I felt no reciprocation whatsoever, a fact that I note not to evoke pity but to simply point out that thought communities can be highly unreflexive and resistant to self-examination and even hostile to data and perceptions that do not fit their preexisting frames of reference.

My own sense of the cultural and ideological formations of the antiwar left was that they were quasi-religious in their inability to engage in reflexivity or self-refutation. In this sense, Leszek Kolakowski's classic formation of the similarities between ideology and religion are extremely relevant for the cognitive sociology I am trying to establish here: "What is common to both ideological and religious belief systems is that they both purport to impose an a priori meaning on all aspects of human life and on all contingent events, and that they are both built in such a way that no imaginable let alone real facts could refute the established doctrine" (Kolakowski 1997: 232).

Chrenkoff's archive dropped off (as I understand it, for personal reasons rather than historical events on the ground in Iraq), right about the same time as the war became more difficult and it appeared that Coalition strategy was greatly enabling the successes of counterinsurgency forces. As the war took a turn for the worse, antiwar thought communities were greatly strengthened by data that seemed to confirm that their prophecies of disaster seemed to be coming true. The dominant view had been that the war had been a disastrous decision, and the consequences had been disastrous, destroying not only Iraq but America's public image abroad and the safety of Americans at home. One could even sense a certain Schadenfreude in antiwar thought communities, as if every act of violence served the purpose of ratifying the core perceptions and proving members of these communities with the satisfaction of being "right."<sup>7</sup> It was clear that among the leading doyens of anti-American intellectuals such as Noam Chomsky, Tariq Ali, and Arundhati Roy, there was a certain perverse pleasure in seeing the American "imperialists" take a good pounding, especially at the hands of a small, ragtag group of heroic insurgents (I might add as well, the filmmaker Michael Moore, who referred to these terrorists, whose principal means of combat is to kill innocent civilians in as large numbers as possible, as the equivalent of American Minutemen).

### **The Worsening Situation and the Fulfillment of Antiwar Prophecies**

Even the Iraqis, who had been shown to indicate remarkable hope and optimism from the time of the beginning of the war until 2006 (see Cushman 2005b), began to grow weary of the carnage, which was precisely the goal of the terrorist insurgency in specifically targeting them. The data on Iraqi public opinion from the time of the beginning of the war until about the middle of 2006 was extremely positive, however, indicating broad based support of the war, and, especially, hope for the future. Yet, toward the end of 2006, it was increasingly clear that the majority of Iraqi people wished to see an end to the American occupation (WorldPublicOpinion.org 2006). It became difficult to sustain the human rights argument for the war as the war proceeded to go badly for Coalition forces, and as more and more Iraqis were being murdered as a strategy for driving out these forces. As the progress of the war turned increasingly bad, some of the most committed members of

the human rights thought community decided that they had made a mistake in supporting the war, based on how it was turning out. One of the most notable of these was the British philosopher Norman Geras, who was an intellectual leader of the human rights thought community, but whose principles sagged under the increasingly bloody consequences of the war. In general, for those who had considered themselves lifelong leftists, like Geras, supporting the war was an extremely heretical act and the increasingly negative situation on the ground gave them ample excuse to recant and to rejoin the leftist fold and to get back to the more general business of being democratic socialists. While the arguments of human rights supporters of the war had been “solidarity with the Iraqis,” it was perhaps too much for many supporters to continue that solidarity as the war turned bad and the majority of Iraqis seemed to indicate that they wanted the occupation to end. While this is a point that is probably better made in a sociology of left-wing intellectuals, it is important for readers to know (without expecting any pity of course), just how difficult it was for those who broke with the leftist antiwar orthodoxies to maintain meaning and identity within their previous reference groups and how many of them suffered shunning and banishment at the hands of the antiwar thought community (the best example of this is to be found in the experience of Christopher Hitchens, which is documented in detail in Cottee and Cushman 2008). For many supporters of the Iraq war on the left, the increasingly bloody and murky situation on the ground, much of it a result of a president whose other political principles they detested, gave them an opportunity to get back into the fold.

In my own original formations of the war, I had made an argument based on solidarity with the Iraqis and their right of self-determination. Such solidarity was harder to maintain given that most Iraqis wanted the US forces to leave and even appear to sanction violence against the latter. In addition, since this seemed to be the will of the people, it would seem obligatory to honor it. Yet, I had supported the idea of popular sovereignty through democratically elected officials, and the latter have not asked US forces to leave. It has become clear that the only situation in which rights can be ensured in the future is in a situation where there is a strong degree of national security; in this case through an army that can successfully combat religious factions, al-Qaeda foreigners, and former Baathists, all of whom aim to ruin the new country for their own ends. This somewhat Hobbesian view is not incompatible with a human rights argument; there can, as Hobbes noted, be no covenants without swords. By extension, there can be no human rights either.

For the most part, antiwar thought communities that had amplified bad news, engorged the United States with evil, ignored the human rights aspirations of the Iraqi people and ignored anything good coming out of Iraq, began to declare even more earnestly that the Iraq war was a total loss and demanded an immediate pull-out of US forces. This was the platform by which the Democrats, the leading political force of the American antiwar thought community, regained control of the US Congress. With the ascension of the Democrats, all available energy went into discrediting the war, personally blaming Bush for waging it in the first place and waging it badly, withholding funds for the war, advocating the immediate withdrawal of US troops—which was the functional equivalent of abandoning an ally and the training of its own security forces—and declaring the war lost and allowing al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia and various religious and political factions in the country to fight it out among themselves. This strategy made sense, if one adhered to a negative narrative of the war, and it is important to point out that from the standpoint of cognitive sociology, we are in no position to make any assessment of the rightness or wrongness of the position. In fact, quite the opposite: within such communities, there is no doubt that the structure of perception and the attendant definition of the situation were “authentic” in terms of being sincerely

believed by members of the thought community. We can, however, outline an alternative that consists of different sets of perceptions and definitions of reality and, outside of being social scientists, adhere to these as morally valuable and as guides to our own political views.

### **From Cognitive Sociology to Liberal Ethics**

It is perhaps useful to end on thinking about what the consequences might be if the war is declared lost and the American forces are withdrawn. In the most immediate sense, it is hard to see how such an act would not increase the death and destruction that so vexes the antiwar community. The advocacy of such a position strikes me as extremely solipsistic and completely lacking in any kind of future orientation. The position is solipsistic in two senses. The first would be in a narcissistic sense, in which the antiwar person wants the war to end because he or she as an individual dislikes war; a personal value position is projected onto the social environment in such a way as to be ego gratifying but, if implemented, would result in carnage to an even greater degree than we have seen in Iraq so far. The second sense in which the antiwar position is solipsistic—and I have mentioned this at length already—is that it focuses almost entirely on the flaws and evils of the American government and relegates to the margins of consciousness the evils of bands of terrorist political and religious fanatics, some of whom have declared all out war on Western civilization and democracy.

But the most glaring omission of the antiwar position, not only as it existed in the antiwar thought communities but in the elected representatives of such communities, was (and is) the abject invisibility of the human rights future of Iraq if the war were to be declared lost now and US forces were to be withdrawn, either immediately or according to a timetable published in the *New York Times* and thus known to the enemy with which we are at war. As we have seen, there will always be Bush to blame if the war is lost, and there is no sense in which any members of the antiwar thought community could offer a description of what it would mean to win the war since the entire narrative of the war has presumed, ever and always, failure. It is certainly a matter of continuing debate as to whether the war will have been seen as a mistake or will lead to a democratized Iraq in which the majority of the population at least has a chance to enjoy the human rights that members of Western democracies take for granted. It is far too early to surmise what will happen in the future. It does seem as if the Western bourgeois, born as they are into full-blown democracies, seem to have no consciousness of the fact that these democracies have been forged in blood and have taken far more than five years to come into existence (I often think of the American Civil War, which was necessary to resolve the tensions that had been left unsettled at the time of the founding of the Republic: the carnage of the war was horrific, but I am in no position to say now that it was not worth it). Even if the highest numbers of losses estimated by critics of the war are correct, then it would make no moral sense to abandon the hope and dreams of many of the dead for the kinds of lives that those who enjoy human rights and democracy in the Western societies have. In my mind, and speaking from the standpoint of ethics rather than cognitive sociology, there can be no defensible liberal moral argument for consigning Iraqis to abandonment and, therefore, to a miserable and genocidal fate.

### **Notes**

1. There is a stark and controversial debate going on at present about the exact numbers of people who have been killed as a result of the war, with estimates ranging from 80,000 to 1.2 million. The higher estimates have been derived from research methods that have been subjected to intense

scrutiny and criticism, both on ideological and methodological grounds. It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve into the morbid politics of mortality, but it is important not to occlude the empirical fact that many people have died in the Iraq war and that it is, in this sense, objectively a tragic event. Yet, as I will argue, it is not sufficient to narrate the story purely as a tragic narrative, since to do so occludes any sense of the ends of the war, who has killed whom and for what reasons, and the future of Iraqi society.

2. The full text of the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 can be found at: <http://www.iraqwatch.org/government/US/Legislation/ILA.htm>
3. An interesting Web site that shows many of Botero's paintings and provides a kind of sociological critique of the spectacularization of American evil at the University of California at Berkeley can be found at: [http://www.zombietime.com/botero\\_abu\\_ghraib/](http://www.zombietime.com/botero_abu_ghraib/)
4. For an example of how the purple finger has been used by one organization within the human rights thought community, and as a contrast to the usual negative iconography of antiwar thought communities, see [www.Labourfriendsofiraq.com](http://www.Labourfriendsofiraq.com).
5. See Cole's weblog at: <http://www.juancole.com/2005/01/mixed-story-im-just-appalled-by.html> for an example of this.
6. See <http://chrenkoff.blogspot.com>, which contains a 33-part detailed archive of positive developments, especially in human rights.
7. I discuss this phenomenon in another article on the liberal response to the war in the magazine *Dissent*, see Cushman 2007.

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