

# New world order

## David Harvey's post-Iraq primer

BY JOHN H. SUMMERS

The conquest of Iraq is the central political fact of our time. Every actor in our political culture, accordingly, has found a role. Soldiers are killing and dying. Economists are calculating the costs of reconstruction. Civil libertarians are bewailing the loss of freedoms. Moralists are grandstanding. International agencies are monitoring the Guantanamo prison camp. Congressmen are holding hearings, before which bureaucrats are testifying.

Yet the big questions go begging for answers: Why did the American government invade Iraq? And why has the government announced its intention to dominate the world by force? The absence of credible explanations cries out for answers. The most immediate cause is the collapse of civil society in the 1990s. Without critical control, politics becomes a continuous campaign. It generates slogans aplenty but few chances to express honest confusion. Back of this collapse, of course, lies the failure of our political intellectuals. Bereft of alternatives to neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, the best of them attach themselves to the party oligarchy.

*The New Imperialism*, then, merits the widest possible public. David Harvey is a social theorist known for a cool, analytical style born of interdisciplinary inquiry, coupled with a keen feeling for political significance. This book showcases his talent. Written on the eve of the invasion, as millions worldwide took to the streets in protest, the book draws on the geography, history, politics, and economics of imperialism to propose a structure of explanation from which everyone can learn something.

According to Harvey, addressing the war as a political contingency overlooks a broader pattern of elite action. That pattern has unfolded as a dynamic relation between two "logics of power." Recurrent financial crises, the driving force of the "capitalistic logic," have led American elites across the globe in search of "spatio-temporal fixes" — that is, strategies by which to absorb the gluts of capital and commodities that prey on the system. These "fixes," now managed by the International Monetary Fund and the

World Bank, include limitless consumerism at home and the prying open of markets abroad, as in the invasion of Iraq.

The administration's economic plan for Iraq bears out Harvey's suggestion that the invasion implements one such fix. The plan, approved at a meeting of the World Bank and the IMF in the fall, provides for massive liberalization of trade and capital flows.

Iraq's financial system will be

controlled by a handful of foreign banks; restrictions on foreign investment will be abolished; taxes and social spending will sink to almost nothing.

Yet Harvey, in contrast to fellow Marxists, does not believe in the omnipotence of capitalism. He demonstrates in detail how a "territorial logic" often pits the state and its military retinue against the capitalistic logic. For example, investment in transportation infrastructures (airports, roads, railroads) helps to "fix" the excess capital produced by unbounded financial speculation. But financial elites also need the local powers of the state to regulate these investments. So, on the one hand, financial crises put pressure upon states to engage in geopolitical struggle, to match the limitless pursuits of financial power with a limitless pursuit of political power such as we have seen in Iraq. On the other hand, relationships between these two logics are riddled with tensions. In the most provocative section of the book, Harvey suggests that the Bush administration has masked these contradictions behind a rhetoric of Christian apocalypse.

Harvey writes with arresting clarity but without felicity to enliven his subject. Some readers might find his explanations nuanced enough to frustrate their patience. That would be a shame. The significance of the book pivots not upon its details but upon the fact of its publication. To generations of thinkers schooled in the petty arts of self-aggrandizement, the very idea that the intellectual class might oppose political power seems merely silly. Anyone willing to risk their jeers, however, will find in *The New Imperialism* a fresh rallying ground, and in David Harvey a reminder of what intellectual leadership can mean in dark days. ■

### The New Imperialism

By David Harvey. Oxford University Press, 264 pages, \$24.

Boston Phoenix

JAN. 30, 2004