

What's Left?

How liberals lost their way



Nick Cohen

NICK COHEN

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*In memory of Hadi Saleh,
the last of the socialists
(1949 to 2005)*

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*Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.*

W. H. Auden

IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, my mother searched the supermarkets for politically reputable citrus fruit. She couldn't buy Seville oranges without indirectly subsidizing General Francisco Franco, Spain's fascist dictator. Algarve oranges were no good either because the slightly less gruesome but equally right-wing dictatorship of António Salazar ruled Portugal. She boycotted the piles of Outspan from South Africa as a protest against apartheid, and although neither America nor Israel was a dictatorship, she wouldn't have Florida or Jaffa oranges in the house because she had no time for the then American President, Richard Nixon, or the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

My sisters and I did not know it, but when Franco fell ill in 1975, we were in a race to the death. Either he died of Parkinson's disease or we died of scurvy. Luckily for us and the peoples of Spain, the dictator went first, although he took an unconscionably long time about it.

Thirty years later, I picked up my mother from my sister Natalie's house. Her children were watching a Disney film; *The Jungle Book*, I think.

'It's funny, Mum,' I said as we drove home, 'but I don't remember seeing any Disney when I was their age.'

'You've only just noticed? We didn't let you watch rubbish from Hollywood corporations.'

'Ah.'

'We didn't buy you the *Beano* either.'

'For God's sake, Mum, what on earth was wrong with the *Beano*?'

'It was printed by D. C. Thomson, non-union firm.'

'Right,' I said.

I was about to mock her but remembered that I had not allowed my son to watch television, even though he was nearly three at the time. I will let him read the *Beano* when he is older – I spoil him, I know – but if its cartoonists were to down their crayons and demand fraternal support, I would probably make him join the picket line and boycott it as well.

I come from a land where you can sell out by buying a comic. I come from the Left.

I'm not complaining, I had a very happy childhood. Conservatives would call my parents 'politically correct', but there was nothing sour or pinched about their home, and there is a lot to be said for growing up in a political household in which everyday decisions about what to buy and what to reject have a moral quality.

At the time, I thought it was normal and assumed that all civilized people lived the same way. I still remember the sense of dislocation I felt at 13 when my English teacher told me he voted Conservative. As his announcement coincided with the shock of puberty, I was unlikely to forget it. I must have understood at some level that real Conservatives lived in Britain – there was a Conservative government at the time, so logic dictated that there had to be Conservative voters. But it was incredible to learn that my teacher was one of them when he gave every appearance of being a thoughtful and kind man. To be good you had to be on the Left.

Looking back, I can see that I got that comforting belief from my parents, but it was reinforced by the experience of living through the Thatcher administration that appeared to reaffirm the Left's monopoly of goodness. The embrace first of monetarism and then of the European Exchange Rate Mechanism produced two recessions that Conservatives viewed with apparent composure because the lives wrecked by mass unemployment and business failure had the beneficial side effect of destroying trade union power. Even when the Left of the Eighties was clearly in the wrong – as it was over

unilateral nuclear disarmament – it was still good. It may have been astonishingly dunderheaded to believe that dictators would abandon their weapons systems if Britain abandoned hers, but it wasn't wicked.

Yet for all the loathing of Conservatives I felt, I didn't have to look at modern history to know that it was a fallacy to believe in the superior virtue of the Left: my family told me that. My parents joined the Communist Party but left it in their twenties. My father encouraged me to read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's exposés of the Soviet Union and argue about them at the dinner table. He knew how bad the Left could get, but this knowledge did not stop him from remaining very left wing. He would never have entertained the notion that communism was as bad as fascism. In this, he was typical. Anti-communism was never accepted as the moral equivalent of anti-fascism, not only by my parents but also by the overwhelming majority of liberal-minded people. The Left was still morally superior. Even when millions were murdered and tens of millions were enslaved and humiliated, the 'right cause' of crimes beyond the human imagination was the perversion of noble socialist ideals.

Every now and again, someone asks why the double standard persists to this day. The philosophical answer is that communism did not feel as bad as fascism because in theory, if not in practice, communism was an ideology which offered universal emancipation, while only a German could benefit from Hitler's Nazism and only an Italian could prosper under Mussolini's fascism. I'm more impressed by the matter-of-fact consideration that fascist forces took over or menaced Western countries in the Thirties and Forties, and although there was a communist menace in the Cold War, the Cold War never turned hot and Western Europe and North America never experienced the totalitarianism of the Left.

There were many moments in the Thirties when fascists and communists cooperated – the German communists concentrated on attacking the Weimar Republic's democrats and gave Hitler a free run, and Stalin's Soviet Union astonished the world by signing a pact with Nazi Germany in 1939. But after Hitler broke the terms of the alliance in the most spectacular fashion by invading the Soviet Union in 1941, you could rely on nearly all of the Left from nice liberals through to the most compromised Marxists to oppose the tyrannies of the far right. Consistent anti-fascism added enormously to the Left's prestige in the second half of the twentieth century. A halo of moral superiority hovered over it because if there was a campaign against racism, religious fanaticism or neo-Nazism, the odds were that its leaders would be men and women of the Left.

For all the atrocities and follies committed in its name, the Left possessed this virtue: it would stand firm against fascism. After the Iraq war, I don't believe that a fair-minded outsider could say it does that any more.

Iraqis have popped up throughout my life – indeed, they were popping up before I was born. My parents had Iraqi communist friends when they were students who came along to their wedding in the late Fifties. God knows where they are now. My mother certainly doesn't. Saddam's Baath Party slaughtered the Iraqi left and in all likelihood the Baathists murdered her friends years ago and dumped their bodies in unmarked graves.

I grew up in the peace and quiet of suburban Manchester, started out in newspapers in Birmingham and left for Fleet Street in 1987 to try my luck as a freelance. I wangled myself a desk next to a quiet and handsome young Iranian called Farzad Bazoft in the old *Observer* newsroom round the corner from St Paul's Cathedral. In 1989, he went to Iraq. Extraordinary reports were coming out about Saddam Hussein imitating Adolf Hitler by exterminating tens of thousands of Iraqi Kurds with poison gas. Farzad was a freelance like me, and perhaps he was looking for a scoop to make his name and

land himself a staff job. More probably, he was just behaving like a proper reporter. He had heard about a sensational story of gigantic explosions at secret rocket bases and wanted to nail it down regardless of the risk or reward. The secret police caught him, and after taking him to a torture chamber, they murdered him, as they had murdered so many before.

It is hard to believe now but Conservative MPs and the Foreign Office apologized for Saddam those days. Tories excused Farzad's execution with the straight lie that he was an Iranian spy – and one reptilian Thatcherite declared that he 'deserved to be hanged'. By contrast, Saddam Hussein appalled the liberal-left. When I went to leftish meetings in the late Eighties, I heard that Iraq encapsulated all the loathsome hypocrisy of the supposedly 'democratic' West. Here was a blighted land ruled by a terrible regime that followed the example of the European dictatorships of the Thirties. And what did the supposed champions of democracy and human rights in Western governments do? Support Saddam, that's what they did. Sold him arms and covered up his crimes. Fiery socialist MPs denounced Baathism, while playwrights and poets stained the pages of the liberal press with their tears for his victims. Many quoted the words of a brave and meticulous Iraqi exile called Kanan Makiya. He became a hero of the Left because he broke through the previously impenetrable secrecy that covered totalitarian Iraq and described in awful detail how an entire population was compelled to inform on their family and friends or face the consequences. All decent people who wanted to convict the West of subscribing to murderous double standards could justifiably use his work as evidence for the prosecution.

The apparently sincere commitment to help Iraqis vanished the moment Saddam invaded Kuwait in August 1990 and became America's enemy. At the time, I didn't think about where the Left was going. I could denounce the hypocrisy of a West which made excuses for Saddam one minute and called him a 'new Hitler' the next, but I didn't dwell on the equal and opposite hypocrisy of a Left which called Saddam a 'new Hitler' one minute and excused him the next. All liberals and leftists remained good people in my mind. Asking hard questions about any of them risked giving aid and comfort to the conservative enemy and disturbing my own certainties. I would have gone on anti-war demonstrations when the fighting began in 1991, but the sight of Arabs walking around London with badges saying 'Free Kuwait' stopped me. When they asked why it was right to allow Saddam to keep Kuwaitis as his subjects, a part of me conceded that they had a point.

I didn't do much with that thought, but carried on through the Nineties holding the standard left-wing beliefs of the day. By the time New Labour was preparing for power, I was a columnist on the *Observer*, and my writing was driven by disgust at the near-uniform good press Blair got in his early years. I felt the adulation unmerited and faintly sinister and became one of the few journalists to barter on about the dark side of the shiny happy people who had moved into Downing Street. My pet topic was the treatment of asylum seekers. I was infuriated by the sight of New Labour pretending Britain welcomed the victims of genuine persecution while all the time quietly rigging the system to stop genuine refugees reaching Britain. Once again, I ran into Saddam Hussein. I had to. It was inevitable because among asylum seekers fleeing genuine persecution were countless Iraqis the Baathists had driven to pack their bags and run for their lives.

I got to know members of the Iraqi opposition in London, particularly Iraqi Kurds whose compatriots were the targets of one of the last genocides of the twentieth century. They were democratic socialists whose liberal-mindedness extended to opposing the death penalty, even for Saddam Hussein. Obviously, they didn't represent the majority of Iraqi opinion. Equally obviously they shared the same beliefs as the overwhelming majority of the rich world's liberals and leftists and deserved our support as they struggled against fascism. Not the authoritarianism of a tinpot dictat

but real fascism: a messianic one-party state; a Great Leader, whose statue was in every town centre and picture on every news bulletin; armies that swept out in unprovoked wars of foreign aggrandizement; and secret policemen who organized the gassing of 'impure' races. The Iraqi leftists were our 'comrades', to use a word that was by then so out of fashion it was archaic.

When the second war against Saddam Hussein came in 2003, they told me there was no other way to remove him. Kanan Makiya was on their side. He was saying the same things about the crimes against humanity of the Baath Party he had said twenty years before, but although his arguments had barely changed, the political world around him was unrecognizable. American neo-conservatives were his champions now, while the Left that had once cheered him denounced him as a traitor.

Everyone I respected in public life was wildly anti-war, and I was struck by how their concern about Iraq didn't extend to the common courtesy of talking to Iraqis. They seemed to have airbrushed from their memories all they had once known about Iraq and every principle of mutual respect they had once upheld.

I supposed their furious indifference was reasonable at the time. They had many good arguments that I would have agreed with in other circumstances. I assumed that once the war was over they would back Iraqis trying to build a democracy while continuing to pursue George W. Bush and Tony Blair to their graves for what they had done. I waited for a majority on the liberal-left to offer qualified support for a new Iraq, and I kept on waiting because it never happened – not just in Britain but also in the United States, in Europe, in India, in South America, in South Africa ... in every part of the world where there was a recognizable liberal-left. They didn't think again when thousands of Iraqis were slaughtered by 'insurgents' from the Baath Party, which wanted to re-establish the dictatorship, and from al-Qaeda, which wanted a godly global empire to repress the rights of democrats, the independent-minded, women and homosexuals. They didn't think again when Iraqis defied the death threats and went to vote on new constitutions and governments. Eventually, I grew tired of waiting for a change that was never going to come and resolved to find out what had happened to a Left whose benevolence I had taken for granted.

All right, you might say, but the reaction to the second Iraq war is not a good enough reason to write a book. The American and British governments sold the invasion to their publics with a false bill of goods and its aftermath was a bloody catastrophe. It was Utopian to hope that leftists and liberals could oppose George W. Bush while his troops poured into Iraq – and killed their fair share of civilians – while at the same time standing up for the freedoms of others. There was too much emotional energy invested in opposing the war, too much justifiable horror at the chaos and too much justifiable anger that the talk of weapons of mass destruction turned out to be so much nonsense. Those politically committed are like football fans. They support their side come what may and refuse to see any good in the opposing team. The liberal-left bitterly opposed war, and their indifference afterwards was a natural consequence of the fury directed at Bush.

It is a fair argument, which I've heard many times, although I wince at the implied passivity. People don't just react to a crisis: they choose how they react. If a man walks down the street trying to pick a fight, you can judge those he confronts by how they respond. Do they hit back, run away or try to calm him down? The confrontation is not of their making, but they still have a choice, and what choice they make reveals their character and beliefs.

If you insist on treating the reaction to the second Iraq war as a one-off that doesn't reveal a deeper sickness, I'll change the subject. This book isn't all about Iraq or mainly about Iraq. It raises questions about morbid symptoms on the liberal-left which were there before George W. Bush and Tony Blair came to power and show every sign of flourishing long after they have gone.

Why is it that apologies for a militant Islam which stands for everything the liberal-left is against come from the liberal-left? Why will students hear a leftist post-modern theorist defend the exploitation of women in traditional cultures but not a crusty conservative don? After the American and British wars in Bosnia and Kosovo against Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansers, why were men and women of the Left denying the existence of Serb concentration camps? As important, why did the European Union that daily announces its commitment to the liberal principles of human rights and international law do nothing as crimes against humanity took place just over its borders? Why is Palestine a cause for the liberal-left, but not China, Sudan, Zimbabwe, the Congo or North Korea? Why, even in the case of Palestine, can't those who say they support the Palestinian cause tell you what type of Palestine they would like to see? After the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington why were you as likely to read that a sinister conspiracy of Jews controlled American or British foreign policy in a superior literary journal as in a neo-Nazi hate sheet? And why after the 7/7 attacks on London did leftist rather than right-wing newspapers run pieces excusing suicide bombers who were inspired by a psychopathic theology from the ultra-right?

In short, why is the world upside down? In the past conservatives made excuses for fascism because they mistakenly saw it as a continuation of their democratic right-wing ideas. Now overwhelmingly and everywhere, liberals and leftists are far more likely than conservatives to excuse fascistic governments and movements, with the exception of their native far-right parties. As long as local racists are white, they have no difficulty in opposing them in a manner that would have been recognizable to the traditional left. But give them a foreign far-right movement that is anti-Western and they treat it as at best a distraction and at worst an ally.

A part of the answer is that it isn't at all clear what it means to be on the Left at the moment. I doubt if anyone can tell you what a society significantly more left wing than ours would look like and how its economy and government would work. (Let alone whether a majority of their fellow citizens would want to live there.) Socialism, which provided the definition of what it meant to be on the Left from the 1880s to the 1980s, is gone. Disgraced by the communists' atrocities and floored by the success of market-based economies, it no longer exists as a coherent programme for government. Even the modest and humane social democratic systems of Europe are under strain and look dreadfully vulnerable.

It is not novel to say that socialism is dead. The argument of this book is that its failure has brought a dark liberation to people who consider themselves to be on the liberal-left. It has freed them to go along with any movement however far to the right it may be, as long as it is against the status quo in general and, specifically, America. I hate to repeat the over-used quote that 'when a man stops believing in God he doesn't then believe in nothing, he believes anything', but there is no escaping it. Because it is very hard to imagine a radical left-wing alternative, or even mildly radical alternative, intellectuals in particular are ready to excuse the movements of the far right as long as they are anti-Western.

It is not only the lost souls of the old far left who are scurrying rightwards, but mainstream liberal leftists, although for different reasons. The mainstream didn't only argue about economics but had a parallel programme from the Sixties on to promote equal rights for women, homosexuals and ethnic minorities. And on that, the liberal-left won spectacularly. Although prejudice with its attendant miseries continues in the rich world, the liberal-left achieved the political victory of securing equal legal rights in law for groups which had been despised and persecuted for millennia. But victory is a kind of death because it leaves you with no purpose once the old battles are over. Despite their talk of supporting equality, mainstream liberals found it uncomplicated to make excuses for anti-liber

movements because the triumph of their philosophy carried with it a poisonous and despairing legacy. If the dictatorial leaders of a foreign state or radical movement, or the usually unelected leaders of a 'community' or religious group said that their culture demanded the oppression of women and homosexuals, for example, twenty-first-century liberals were tripped over by the thought that it was racist to oppose them. They could be all for the emancipation of women in London, Paris and New York while indifferent to the misogynies of the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

The reverse side of the debased coinage of modern leftish thinking is a poignant spectacle. Democrats, feminists and socialists in the poor world, who are suffering at the hands of the extreme right, turn for support to the home of democracy, feminism and socialism in the West, only to find that the democrats, socialists and feminists of the rich world won't help them or acknowledge their existence.

For all the nihilism brought by the end of socialism and the exhaustion of the liberal agenda, you shouldn't underestimate the advantages the absence of a principled political programme for liberals and leftists brings. Their philosophy – or lack of a philosophy – suits modern consumerism. You don't have to commit to a vision of society and test it by standing for election. You don't have comrades you are obliged to stick by when times are hard. Like a shopper walking through a mall, you have no loyalties and no duties and can breeze into any store that takes your fancy. All you must be is against your own Western government and against America. As your own government is going to be foolish and unjust at times, and as America naturally attracts resentment and suspicion because it is the world's only superpower, and can also behave foolishly and unjustly at times, these are not high barriers for the consumer of politics to jump.

Conservative readers could complain that I cite the indulgence for ideas and movements of the far right as the worst sin of today's liberal-left. Why single out fascism when the far left is as bad as the far right? I accept that if you want to be an accountant about it and get your calculator out, left-wing dictators murdered many millions more than right-wing dictators did in the twentieth century. I also agree that what unites totalitarian movements is more important than what divides them. My case is simply that when liberal-minded people make excuses for a totalitarian right that they would once have considered taboo, a deep fever has taken hold.

What follows is a critical history of how the symptoms of the malaise began in obscure groups of Marxists and postmodern theorists; how the sickness manifested itself in the failure to confront genocide in the Middle East and Europe until it grew into the raging fever of our day. It is also an argument for recovering the best of the liberal-left's democratic and internationalist traditions that have been neglected for too long.

A note on terminology

I use *the Left* as a generalization. It is not an exact term because it is very hard to say what it means but you know the Left when you see it, and there were times when it felt like the right word. Overall, however, I try to be specific. The *far left* refers to the few remaining Leninists who still believe, or pretend to believe, that they can seize power and introduce a totalitarian state. If they stood alone, they wouldn't be worth bothering with, but they have merged into a much wider and more incoherent alliance which has little to offer beyond a rootless rage. Academics, students, readers of and writers for most leftish newspapers and all but the bravest Muslim and poor world intellectuals share this group's defining unwillingness to condemn crimes that can't be blamed on the West. Occasionally I call them *Chomskyans*, after Noam Chomsky, the American linguist whose flighty behaviour I look at in [Chapter 6](#). At other times, I call them *nihilists* because of their wilful refusal to put an agenda

before the public. Because they don't have a positive programme, it is difficult to think of a better label, although I accept that one is needed because they are the dominant left-wing force today.

A difference as large as the gulf between the democratic and totalitarian left is that between the working-class left, which generally fights for better pay and conditions, and the middle-class left, which tends to be more interested in social and sexual liberalism. I call the trade unions and their supporters in the labour and social democratic parties the *old left*. For all the condescension directed at them, they are often the people who behave best in a crisis, as we shall see in [Chapter 10](#). I call the middle-class left *the liberals*, not in the derogatory manner of American conservatives, but so I can talk about progressive middle-class opinion as a whole, and include Liberal Democrats in Britain, liberal-minded Christian Democrats and Gaullists in Europe and Democrats in the United States, as well as middle-class supporters of the labour and social democratic parties.

The one movement that I found very hard to classify is *New Labour*, which is probably why it won so many elections.

I use the *liberal-left* as a cover-all term for every shade of left opinion.

I accept that there are dozens of other tribes and traditions on the Left, but if I acknowledged them all I would lose you in a forest of footnotes. You can't write clearly without generalizations, and these are mine.

Morbid Symptoms

Yet it is a great mistake to suppose that the only writers who matter are those whom the educated in their saner moments can take seriously. There exists a subterranean world where pathological fantasies disguised as ideas are churned out by crooks and half-educated fanatics for the benefit of the ignorant and superstitious. There are times when this underworld emerges from the depths and suddenly fascinates, captures, and dominates multitudes of usually sane and responsible people, who thereupon take leave of sanity and responsibility.

Norman Cohn, 1996

An Iraqi Solzhenitsyn

When an opponent declares, 'I will not come over to your side,' I calmly say, 'Your child belongs to us already ... What are you? You will pass on. Your descendants, however, now stand in the new camp. In a short time they will know nothing else but this new community.'

Adolf Hitler, 1933

YOU'RE NOT meant to say it, but great men and women still matter. Even in the modern age when elitism is a sin and the media labour to show the famous are no better than they ought to be, people still need heroes and heroines.

The politically committed need them more than most. They are partisans whose passions can make them appear unhinged. The babble of the therapists and the daytime TV hosts about each of us being special in our own unique way cannot disguise the banal reality that, like everyone else, the political committed are not especially good or intelligent. Self-doubt creeps in. Why should others believe them when they say their plans for society won't end in the usual mess? Why should they believe themselves? Heroes make them feel comfortable. When they go to a meeting and hear a fine mind who knows more than they can ever know telling them that their cause is just, they are gladdened. When they turn on the television and see a brave woman abandoning her easy life to fight their battle, they know their battles are worth winning.

Until 2 August 1990, Kanan Makiya was a hero of the Left. We looked at him and felt good. It wasn't just that he was eloquent, courteous and intelligent, Kanan Makiya stood out because he did what the Left was meant to do. He exposed in horrendous detail the mechanics of a totalitarian state without a thought for the consequences. Complacent foreign ministers practising the debased art of 'realism' and the executives of companies growing fat on arms contracts didn't want to hear what he had to say. Public opinion knew little and cared less about his cause. He wasn't downhearted. His voice would be heard.

As befitted a Left that said it believed in universal principles, Kanan Makiya was born into a cosmopolitan family in 1949. His father, Mohamed Makiya, was a Shia Arab and one of the first Iraqis to qualify as an architect. Mohamed founded the University of Baghdad's school of architecture and taught his students to create a new style for the Arab world by combining the motifs of his beloved Islamic tradition with the techniques of modernism. While he was studying at Liverpool University in 1941, he met Margaret Crawford, a history student and the daughter of a strict Derbyshire headmaster. To the horror of her conventional parents, they fell in love. When they said she must choose between him and them, she made matters worse by marrying Mohamed and moving to Iraq. Her family renounced her, and Kanan grew up without knowing his English relatives. Margaret was as much a part of the Left of the Forties as Kanan was of the Left of the 1960s generation. (If you were a nice Derbyshire girl from a good family, you had to be very left wing sixty years ago to defy your parents and run off with an Arab.) While they were students, she would take Mohamed away from his town planning classes to hear Bertrand Russell talk on philosophy and the socialist intellectual Harold Laski lecture on the new world which was coming.

The Makiyas were members of what people at that time called the 'progressive middle class'.

the 'intelligentsia'. They brought fresh ideas with them when they settled in Baghdad. Mohamed and Margaret's fusion of old and new styles began to make him a leader of Arab architecture. Margaret organized the first modern art exhibition in Baghdad. They had the self-confidence of a young and bright couple who saw a future full of possibilities in front of them.

Kanan admired his parents and wanted a cosmopolitan education of his own. He won a place at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and arrived in America as the protests against the Vietnam war were swelling. Family tradition and his own radical temperament made joining them an easy choice. From Prague to Los Angeles, the Left was in revolt in 1968, against war, oppression, racism and the creaking religious taboos that repressed human sexuality.

The attempted Arab invasion of Israel in 1967 had proved to be a spectacular miscalculation when the Six Day War ended in a stunning Israeli victory and the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. For Kanan, as for so many other Arabs of his generation, the Israeli subjugation of a large Palestinian population was a great radicalizing moment. He had no time for nationalism – Palestinian, Arab or Israeli – and embraced a Trotskyist variant of Marxism, which promised to provide answers for all the peoples of the world regardless of colour or creed.

At a teach-in on the plight of the Palestinians, Kanan met his future wife Afsaneh Najmabadi, an Iranian physicist. '[He didn't look](#) like an Arab,' Najmabadi told Lawrence Weschler, Makiya's biographer. 'He had incredibly bushy brown hair in those days, like a halo, and I thought he must be an American Jew, and was struck by the progressive stands he was advancing. I went up to him and introduced myself, and told him where I was from. He gave his name – Kanan Makiya – and said he was an Iraqi. "But Shia," he immediately added to put me, an Iranian, at ease.'

Kanan was following the standard course for a leftist of his class and generation. His enemies were Iran and the other pro-American dictatorships of the Middle East, Israeli colonialism and, more broadly, 'capitalism'. We remember the movements of 1968 he joined as a failed revolution. The student protests in Paris did not bring a change of government; and it was far from clear that any conceivable French government however socialist or anarchic could have satisfied the confused demonstrators. Soviet tanks flattened the attempt by the gallant Czechs to break the grip of communism. America's war in Vietnam continued despite the protests, although to give the demonstrators their due they increased the pressure on Washington to pull out. Historians put the revolts of 1968 in the same box as the revolutions of 1848: failed uprisings that none the less had lasting and unintended consequences on culture and politics. The historians don't quite get it right however. One country had a successful revolution. Unfortunately, it was a fascist putsch.

In 1968 the Baath Party seized power in Iraq and forced Kanan Makiya to think about a subject very few leftist men and women of the time wanted to discuss: the possibility that fascism had not died in the Forties, but had lived on and flourished in the poor world.

Ominous forces were buffeting his father. The design dearest to his heart was a commission to build a university in the Shia city of Kufa. Shia businessmen had bought the land, while Mohamed and other Shia architects and builders had offered their services *pro bono*. Within months of the coup, the Baath Party nationalized the university. They did not intend to allow Shia students to have an independent education. Instead, the new development minister came up with a kitsch money-making scheme and ordered Mohamed to design a hideous resort on the site of ancient Babylon.

Mohamed told him, '[This is crazy](#). You are asking me to turn Babylon into a tourist trap with the Ziggurat hotel. This is a crime against history! The man was my worst enemy at the time – he was the one who had ordered Kufa shut down – but he listened, and I managed to convince him. Later, they killed him'.

Iraq became dangerous for the Makiyas. While her husband was abroad on business, Margaret received word that the Baath Party had his name on a list of subversives. His crime was to be member of a sinister conspiracy of Freemasons.

Er, Freemasons?

Her husband wasn't a Freemason. Even if he had been, the charge would have made no sense. What kind of ideology believes that men who roll up their trouser legs and greet each other with funny handshakes are plotting to overthrow the state? She was mystified.

Margaret had taught English at Baghdad University for twenty-seven years. Half the Iraqi elite were her former pupils, and it didn't take her long to find well-connected friends who knew what the new regime had against Mohamed. Their explanation was the strangest story she had heard. In the Fifties, a British colonel had served as a military adviser to the old Iraqi monarchy. He was a meticulous man who kept records of every trivial event in his life and stored them in his strong box. He fled when the army overthrew the monarchy in 1958, leaving his box behind. It sat in Baghdad for twelve years until the Baathists decided to look inside.

The commonplace has supernatural significance to the conspiratorial mind, and the Baathists found evidence of an abominable intrigue in the humdrum files of a middle-aged Englishman. The records showed that the colonel had been a Freemason. They also showed he had invited hundreds of Iraqis for drinks at his home over the years. Mohamed was a neighbour living in the old British quarter of Baghdad. He spoke excellent English and was a graduate of a British university. It should have surprised no one that the colonel had asked him to one of his many parties. The Baathists put two and two together and concluded that the box revealed a vast conspiracy of Freemasons and British imperialists against the Arab nation. Secret policemen were preparing to arrest Mohamed and 40 others named in the dusty files.

'Don't laugh, they're serious,' Margaret's ex-pupils told her. 'Get out *now*.'

The urgency in her informants' voices was authentic, and Margaret realized that her husband was in mortal danger. Fortunately, he was abroad working on a project in Bahrain. She told him to stay there and used her connections to ship her family and their belongings out of the country.

A Baath official requisitioned the Makiyas' home.

Later, they killed him.

The Makiyas found asylum in Britain and Mohamed set up the architectural practice of Makiya Associates in London. Kanan worked for his father's business while running campaigns to protect the Iraqi Kurds from Saddam Hussein's campaigns of racial persecution that were heading toward genocide. Mohamed was a good businessman as well as an excellent architect, and Makiya Associates won contracts from many Middle Eastern countries, with the obvious exception of Iraq.

In 1980, however, his pariah status changed. By then Saddam had total control of the Baath Party and with it Iraq. He wanted glory. He wanted to destroy Iran and make himself the undisputed master of the region. The Conference of Non-Aligned Nations was to meet in Baghdad in 1982, and he wanted the poor world's prime ministers and presidents to look on the works of his new city – and despair. Like many a totalitarian leader before him, he had a craving for triumphal architecture. Unfortunately, most of Iraq's architects were unavailable for work. After ludicrous show trials of alleged 'economic saboteurs', they were either dead or among the millions of refugees who had fled abroad.

Desperate to find alternative talent, Saddam's officials wrote to Makiya Associates to tempt Mohamed into reshaping Baghdad. Saddam was prepared to forget about his part in the global scheme of British Freemasons against the Arab nation, they told him, and shower him with lucrative commissions. Mohamed was wary, but few architects can resist the chance to follow Christoph

Wren and Baron Haussmann and stamp their mark on their capital. 'My mother was the one who was interested in politics,' Kanan told me. 'My father went along with her, but all that really mattered to him was architecture. He was an architect to his bones. He wanted to build.'

The Baathists could not have been more attentive when the exile returned. They waved away the customs officers at Baghdad airport and treated Mohamed as a VIP. A member of the Revolutionary Command Council gave an unctuous speech on how proud Iraqis were of Mohamed's achievements.

'He was a very nice man,' Mohamed recalled.

'Later, they killed him.'

Makiya Associates' willingness to build for Saddam provoked Kanan into a savage argument with his father. '[This is for history](#),' Mohamed snapped. 'It's not for the people there now. It's got nothing to do with them – they'll be gone. This is for the future.'

Kanan couldn't stand it. He hated the thought that by working for Makiya Associates he was helping Saddam create his city of the future. The Iranian Afsaneh Najmabadi, who was his wife before 1979, needed a break, too. Her world had stopped making sense.

The West's support for dictators convinced leftists of Kanan Makiya and Afsaneh Najmabadi's generation that its democracy was a laughable fraud. Nowhere was the contrast between idealistic rhetoric and sordid politics clearer than in Najmabadi's native Iran. At the bidding of Britain, America had overthrown Iran's popular government because it had threatened to nationalize the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The West installed Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as Shah of Iran and allowed him to reign as an autocrat whose love of grandiose uniforms and glittering medals would have been ridiculous had it not been combined with the cruel suppression of dissent.

To Kanan, Afsaneh and their friends it was natural to expect that an illegitimate monarch doing the bidding of the West would provoke a revolution. And in 1979 there was a revolution in Iran. It was as profound and shocking as the French and Russian revolutions. Its consequences were as far-reaching as you hear of them daily on the evening news. But it was a revolution of a kind the modern world had never seen. Instead of being led by workers demanding fair shares for all or middle-class radicals demanding human rights and democratic elections, Iran had an Islamist revolution led by priests determined to impose their god's law on men and women (especially women).

Iranian leftists went along with them, somewhat stupidly as events were to turn out. Although they didn't agree with the Ayatollah Khomeini's belief that everything the human race needed to know was revealed in a seventh-century holy book, they reasoned that any revolution was better than none. The mania for Islam would pass, they thought. Religious exuberance was just a craze that flared up every now and again, then disappeared. All serious people knew that religion was hardly worth thinking about. Once the priests had discredited themselves, the scales would fall from the eyes of the masses and they would turn to the true faith of socialism. Everything the Left thought it knew stopped it from understanding that their socialism was dying, while militant religion was taking its place. Kanan stayed in London and watched from afar, but Afsaneh Najmabadi went back to fight with her comrades for a new Iran. The leaders of the Iranian left assured them that they could safely ignore the black-clad fanatics who were fanning out across the country. '[We have criticised](#) Islamic fanaticism, we are against the non-progressive ideas of the conservative elements,' said Nouredin Kianouri, leader of the Marxist Tudeh Party, as he explained how he had weighted the options. 'But for us, the positive side of Ayatollah Khomeini is so important that the so-called negative side means nothing.'

Later they arrested him along with tens of thousands of his comrades, paralysed his arms, broke his fingers and made him confess on television to being a Soviet spy. The ayatollahs crushed the Left, the liberals and the feminists, and imposed a religious tyranny far more terrible and far harder for

women to endure than the Shah's persecutions.

Afsaneh Najmabadi had been far more sceptical about the wisdom of leftists going along with ho misogynists, and had the good sense to leave and get back to Kanan in London. The news from Ira got no better on her return. In 1980 Saddam Hussein took advantage of the revolutionary chaos and began an unprovoked war to grab what Iranian oil fields he could. It turned into the longest conventional war of the twentieth century. Across trenches reminiscent of Passchendaele, the Ayatollah Khomeini sent wave after wave of martyrs. Young men marched towards the Iraqi guns, apparently welcoming the chance of death and admission to paradise and all its gorgeous virgins. With tactics again reminiscent of Passchendaele, Saddam met them with poison gas.

The strains in the Makiya family were becoming intolerable. By working in his father's London office on the plans for Saddam's new capital, Kanan was by extension working for a fascistic dictator who had launched a war of imperial aggression. His wife was seeing her hopes for a socialist Iran destroyed by reactionary clerical forces, while being reminded every morning that her husband was going to work for the tyrant of Iraq whose armies were slaughtering her fellow Iranians.

Something had to give, and to her relief Kanan resigned from Makiya Associates and determined to piece together what had happened to Iraq by talking to refugees.

London is the place to find them. Constables from the Metropolitan Police hear slogans in strange tongues when they shepherd demonstrators through the streets. City bankers who think themselves men of the world would hear stories to make them shudder if they bothered to talk to the migrant women who clean their floors. The scruffy pedant, who insists on dragging out a wearisome meeting at the London School of Economics, becomes a new head of a new state. The preacher in the inner-city mosque with the fancy-dress beard and hook for a hand seems a post-modern parody until the police arrest him for inciting terrorism.

London is a city of exiles: pay attention and you will hear the woes of the world.

'The truth is that before 1980 Kanan hadn't been all that involved in Iraq,' Afsaneh Najmabadi told Weschler. 'Lebanon and Palestine and, later, Iran were far to the fore in what we were struggling over. But then it was as if the Baath came to him. If his father had not been invited back to Iraq, Kanan would probably never have written that book. It was him being involved, even tangentially, in designing the Baath Party headquarters that actually got him thinking, seriously thinking about the Baath ... There is a great irony here.'

Ms Najmabadi didn't know it, but 'ironic' wouldn't begin to cover the course of the next twenty-five years.

As an aperitif, the money Saddam Hussein was paying his father gave Kanan the time and space to ask very good and very simple questions: What do the Baathists believe? Where do they come from? Why do they kill so many people?

A private income aside, Kanan had one other advantage. He slowly grasped a truth about totalitarianism that Albert Camus, George Orwell, Hannah Arendt and Robert Conquest had grasped before him: the terror *isn't* a side effect of the system; the terror *is* the system. Once a political or religious totalitarian movement has momentum, it has an irrational life and logic of its own which can't be explained away. It kills because its ideology says it has to kill. The massacres will be worthwhile because when it exterminates the enemies of the proletariat or the master race or the orthodox true religion, all the conflicts of the human condition will be resolved in an earthly paradise.

Because he was a Marxist, Makiya might never have recognized the obvious, and no one apart from a handful of friends would have read him. The Marxist tradition has created many mad murderers, but it is hopeless at explaining them. It is not that Marxists have bad consciences about the

mounds of corpses – in my experience they rarely do; rather, Marxism assumes that rational economic interests and class conflicts move the world and cannot cope with the lusts for power, murder and martyrdom. A typical left-wing analysis of Iraq from the Eighties argued that ‘[a bureaucratic bourgeoisie](#)’ which depended on ‘the depletion of the state’s resources, whether by legal, quasi-legal or illegal means’ ruled the country. It was a parasitic class which increased its wealth by fostering ‘dependence on the multi-nationals’ and ‘the militarization of the economy’. The forgotten writer was not all wrong, Saddam Hussein, like all other totalitarian dictators, needed loot to reward his followers and equip his armies. Without it, he would never have survived. Yet you can only get so far in explaining Saddam Hussein or any of the other great criminals of the twentieth century by looking at the economies of their countries, their distribution of favours to clients and the national traumas and humiliations that allowed them to seize power. Once you have exhausted all comprehensible reasons for a great crime there remains a gap. The ‘root causes’ take you to its edge, but then wave goodbye and leave you peering into an unfathomable abyss. The famines Stalin, Mao and the Ethiopian colonels unleashed, Pol Pot’s extermination of anyone who could read or write, Hitler’s annihilation of the Jews, gypsies, gays and Slavs, Saddam’s regime of torture and genocide and the Islamist cult of death aren’t rationally explicable. You can cross over to the other side of the abyss only if you shrug off your reasonable liberal belief that every consequence has an understandable cause and accept the enthusiasm for the ideologies of absolute power isn’t always rationally explicable.

It took Makiya several years to realize he was looking through the wrong end of the telescope. He decided to call his exposure of Baathist Iraq *Republic of Fear*, and its first chapter was going to be on Iraq’s economy. As a good Marxist he believed that the ‘root causes’ of Saddam Hussein lay in the arrangement of classes and patterns of economic exploitation. The longer he researched, the lower down the book’s running order the chapter on economics fell. In the end, he binned it. His preconceptions were getting in the way.

Makiya also abandoned the pseudo-sophisticated journalist’s question, ‘Why is this lying bastard lying to me?’ He worked on the sensible assumption that despite ‘[the proclivity of](#) those in public office to propaganda, rhetoric, chicanery and lies, on the whole even they usually end up saying what they mean and meaning what they say’. He not only interviewed exiles, but also dug out the speeches of Saddam Hussein and the pamphlets of his supporters from obscure archives in London and New York and read them not as propaganda but as evidence of what his fellow Iraqis had to believe on pain of death.

He took on the Baath Party by paying it the compliment of taking what it said seriously.

A group of Arab nationalists founded the Baath (‘Renaissance’) Party in Damascus on 24 July 1945. Like the tightly organized totalitarian parties of inter-war Europe, it had a military structure which allowed it to operate as an underground army. It seized power in Syria in 1963, and remains in sole charge of the one-party state to this day. What happened to Syria was grim, but Makiya faced an organizational problem in describing the greater horror of what the Baath did to Iraq. To print all the available evidence of murder and bestiality would have turned *Republic of Fear* into an unmanageably large book that ran the risk of descending into the pornography of violence. With admirable restraint he confined the snuff-movie side of Baathism to one relatively dry account of one small bout of extermination by Baathist forces written by a historian working from official sources. It read:

The Nationalist Guard’s Bureau of Special Investigation had alone killed 104 persons, the bodies of 42 of whom were found in 1963–64 buried in al Jazirah and al-Hawash districts. In

the cellars of al-Nihayyah Palace, which the bureau used as its headquarters, were found all sorts of loathsome instruments of torture, including electric wires with pincers, pointed iron stakes on which prisoners were made to sit, and a machine which still bore traces of chopped-off fingers. Small heaps of bloodied clothes were scattered about, and there were pools on the floor and stains over the walls.

Those killings were in 1963, the year the Iraqi Baathists joined the Syrian Baathists in seizing power. The Iraqi army threw them out, but they returned in the successful putsch of 1968. By 1980 when Kanan's father flew back to Iraq, Saddam Hussein had become the undisputed master of both party and state. By the time Americans and their allies overthrew him in 2003, the Baathists had murdered around 400,000 Iraqis in internal persecutions, while Saddam's unprovoked wars against Iran and Kuwait led to the killing of a further one million or so. Baathists then joined with Islamists from al-Qaeda to form what delicate euphemists called the 'insurgency', and carried on murdering tens of thousands of Iraqis. The history of modern Iraq is of a systematic depredation and destruction of the human spirit that has lasted four decades. Future historians who decide to chart it are going to need strong stomachs.

The resemblances to European fascism and communism did not stop with the state-sponsored sadism of the all-powerful ruling party. The all-powerful party also had an all-encompassing totalitarian ideology. Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din, the Baath's chief ideologues, were pan-Arabists who wanted a single state for all the Arabs of the Middle East. Theirs seemed a benign ambition at first glance, but nationalists always have the seeds of tyranny in them. They are just as likely to want to tyrannize their own people as their people's enemies because their own people can let them down badly. The theory holds that the Arabs or the Germans or the Serbs are strong and brave, and ready by biological inheritance or cultural superiority to rule themselves and others. In practice, the people can be lazy and less than thrilled by the prospect of dying for the greater good of the nation. In the circumstances, their manifest destiny can be realized only if they obey orders.

Baathism allowed no room for malcontents who would contradict the party line. In a speech in 1977, Saddam Hussein told history teachers what the Baath expected of them:

Those researchers and historians who call themselves objective might very well be presenting different viewpoints and possibilities to explain one event ... leaving it to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions ... The Baathist must never deal with history and all other intellectual and social questions in this way ... They must take on the same specificity as our Baathist way; in other words, the writing of Arab history should be from our point of view with an emphasis on analysis and not realistic story telling.

The truth was what the Baathists said it was. Adults would have memories of different truths from before the Baathists took power, but the Baathists would be able to control their children and mould them into a new type of Arab, conditioned from infancy to obey. In Iraq's case, indoctrination began at primary school where textbooks presented Saddam Hussein as *Baba* – 'father' – Saddam, an alternative object of love and loyalty to their parents. Spies watched to see if pupils participated in Baathist rallies and kept files on the political reliability of their mothers, fathers, grandparents and on to cousins of the third degree.

The regime's aim was to dissolve family bonds so children would be ready to turn against their parents. The wise Iraqi learned not to talk politics in front of the little ones. After the fall of Baghdad

the argument that Hind Aziz had with her 9-year-old daughter, Dalia, was typical of arguments all over the country. The child wanted to know why she was only now learning that Saddam was a killer.

[‘Why didn’t you](#) tell me the truth?’

‘I had to explain to her that if I did, she might have told her friends, and then Mummy would have been executed, Daddy would have been executed, and Grandpa would have been executed, too,’ the mother explained.

Her father showed an Australian journalist how deep the indoctrination had gone.

‘Who is your father, Dalia?’ he asked.

‘Baba Saddam,’ she replied, robotically.

Saddam’s punishment of parents wasn’t a corruption of power, a late degeneracy after years of dictatorship. It was a natural consequence of the original Baathist programme. Aflaq explained that the Baathists expected the people to devote themselves to the party like lovers to an impulsive mistress. Laying down the law to Arab intellectuals in 1959, he said: ‘The nationalism we are calling for is love before anything else. He who loves does not ask for reasons.’ Blind faith was in the genes Aflaq believed, a natural part of the Arab Islamic culture.

As theology or history this may have been nonsense, but as a recipe for dictatorship Aflaq’s demand for unconditional love was bound to create a tyranny because Iraq was more diverse than any other Arab nation. If Iraq could function as a free society, it could do so only as a federal democracy. If the Baathists tried pan-Arab nationalism instead, they would have to answer the question, where are your Arabs? About one-fifth of Iraq’s population were not Arabs but Kurds and Turks. The majority of Iraq’s Arabs were Shia Muslims, estranged from the Sunni Arabs since the early days of Islam. Sunni Arabs were a mere 20 per cent of the population, so Sunni Arab nationalism would mean either an apartheid system, with the Sunnis as the ‘whites’, or a merciless dictatorship, which was what Iraq got for decades.

The contours of that dictatorship ought to have been familiar to European eyes. In his purges of the Baath Party Saddam modelled himself on Stalin. The Baath Party’s rhetoric was often a straight copy of communist propaganda, while the Soviet Union was Saddam’s largest supplier of arms. Yet Baathist ideology also took the complete conspiracy theory of the European counter-revolution. Like the clerical and aristocratic opponents of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco and the European fascists of the twentieth century, it held that democracy and human rights were a sham that hid the secret workings of sinister conspiracies, and not only those of the Freemasons. Makiya quoted Fadhil al-Barak, one of the regime’s apologists, who explained that because Jews had been living in what is now Israel since the seventh century BC, they had been in an anti-Arab conspiracy since then. The Persian Iranians weren’t far behind. They had been conspiring against Iraqi Arabs since 539 BC, which was a surprisingly early date to begin plotting given that the Arabs did not invade what is now Iraq until 637 AD, a thousand years or so later. Baathist historical works reeked of racism and included the charming *Three Whom God Should Never Have Created: Persians, Jews and Flies*. Al-Barak naturally took the tsarist forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to be a genuine exposé of a Jewish plot to control the world.

Despite all his good work in unmasking subversives, al-Barak was himself unmasked by his rival in the Baath Party. Under torture, he confessed to being a spy for the Soviet Union and East Germany.

Later, they killed him.

His death in no way diminished the appetite for conspiracy theory. One of the first acts of the Baath Party after 1968 was to turn on Iraq’s Jews. They accused them of helping Israel defeat the Arabs in the Six Day War of 1967 – a conflict in which Iraqi soldiers distinguished themselves by

their unwillingness to fight. To explain the humiliation and get popular prejudice on the side of the new dictatorship, Ahmad Hasan al-Bakr, the first Baathist president, revealed a Jewish conspiracy to a huge crowd in central Baghdad.

‘They aim to create malicious rumour and disturbances employing for this end killings, sabotage and undertaking operations behind the front line of our heroic army.

‘What do you want?’ he screamed.

‘Death to the spies!’ the mob screamed back.

The pogrom began. The Baath accused Iraq’s Jews of plotting with Israel, Britain, the Freemasons and the Iranians. The Kurds were Zionism’s bankers, who funnelled Israeli money to Iraqi Jews.

In 1968, seventeen Jewish ‘spies’ went on trial. The defendants got a taste of the Baath’s idea of due process when their own lawyer opened the case for the defence by apologizing to the prosecution. He wanted it on the record that he ‘would not like to see them go unpunished’. The press benched howled with laughter when the defendants pleaded ‘not guilty’. The protestations of innocence died when the authorities ‘persuaded’ them to confess.

Later, they killed them and strung up their corpses in Baghdad’s Liberation Square for the edification of hundreds of thousands of spectators who streamed in from across the country to see the sights of the big city.

Makiya despaired as he went through the records. In the Fifties, the optimistic artists and intellectuals of his parents’ generation had imagined a future Kurdish – Arab partnership in a common Iraqi homeland. The Baath had shown it was possible to blow away years of rubbing along in a few months. ‘Common sense was dying in Iraq,’ he wrote, ‘along with civil society.’ Although the early racist campaigns were undoubtedly popular, Iraq’s new masters were also teaching the population a lesson common to all varieties of totalitarianism: nothing is true and everything is permissible. Frenzies quickly turned to fear. People kept dying mysteriously and the Baath Party used their deaths to justify a police state. The newspapers reported that saboteurs were bombing Baghdad. Sometimes the state-controlled media were so on top of the story they reported the explosions before the bombs went off. The Baathists deployed the politics of race to persuade Iraqis to support them and the politics of fear to warn Iraqis of the dangers of defying them.

First they came for the Jews, then they came for the communists. The Soviet leadership wanted Iraq on its side in the Cold War. It ordered Iraqi communists to form an alliance with the Baath Party. In the early Seventies, a manoeuvre Saddam made the Iraqi communists regret when he welcomed their support, embraced them as allies, waited for a while and then arrested the entire politburo of the Iraqi Communist Party along with an uncounted number of militants. They, too, were tortured. A few brave men and women stayed strong, but most broke and appeared on television to confess their crimes.

Show trials, televised confessions and plots by Freemasons and Jews stretching back across the millennia ... these were the raging totalitarian frenzies of fascism and communism rolled into one and adapted to fit local conditions.

Makiya readily conceded that Saddam Hussein was an imitator of European totalitarianism, not an innovator. ‘Nevertheless, his legacy has already been assured by the consistency and determination with which he brought such trends to bear inside Iraq. Above all, his particular achievement was the placement of an inordinate emphasis on a revised conception of political crime, one that made it even more loose and all-inclusive’ so that ‘police work logically became the substitute for politics’.

Or as Saddam pithily explained, ‘The revolution chooses its enemies.’

God and the devil dwell together in the detail of great crimes. The more you know about monstrosities, the more likely you are to make a commitment to fight them. For it is one thing to hear the screaming paranoia in the speeches of a dictator and realize that life in his country must be grim, quite another to know the names of the camps and of the torturers and the details of what they do to the camp captives.

Totalitarian systems do not have freedom of information acts. At the time of writing, I guess the worst place in the world is North Korea. There are reports of millions dying in slave camps, gassing chambers, mass executions and famines. But it is impossible to be sure. The few who get out, escape to communist China. They have to keep their heads down and mouths shut for fear the Chinese will send them back. Journalists, diplomats and workers for human rights organizations cannot move freely and interview whom they please. North Korea hovers at the back of the public mind. People joke about the cult of the personality of Kim Jong-Il, 'the dear leader', and the 100 per cent turnout in uncontested elections; they worry about his drive to become a nuclear power; but they have few facts to detain them further.

'For every nugget of truth some wretch lies dead on the scrapheap,' said H. L. Mencken. In his extravagant way, he had it right. Getting uncomfortable facts on to the record is the toughest struggle for journalists in democracies. To prove that this minister took a bribe or that policeman beat a suspect requires time and money. Reporters can spend months trying to nail down what they know to be true only for secrecy, the law or the nervousness of their employers to defeat them.

Consider how much tougher it is to get to the truth in a dictatorship where the penalty for saying the wrong word out of turn is death. Asymmetries in access to information have the paradoxical effect of making it easier to expose the abuses of power in open societies than dictatorships. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a former US ambassador to the United Nations, came up with 'Moynihan's Law' to encapsulate this distorted vision that follows. It holds that the number of complaints about a nation's violation of human rights is in inverse proportion to its actual violation of them. To put it another way, you can find out what is happening in America's prison cells in Guantánamo Bay if you work very hard, but not in Kim Il-Sung's prison cells in Pyongyang.

In the Eighties, I picked up a copy of *Saddam's Iraq: Revolution or Reaction*, a collection of essays by Ann Clwyd, a Labour MP, and her fellow left-wing activists. On re-reading, what struck me was how little they knew. Clwyd was a good friend to the cause of Iraqi democracy, who never ran for cover when the going got rough. She and her colleagues did not intend to give Saddam Hussein an easy ride and correctly noted that he had built the cult of the personality of the classic totalitarian tyrant. But Moynihan's Law meant they had no guide to the terror to tell them who was torturing whom and where. Blank spaces were all over their map. They suspected that 'there be dragons' but couldn't identify the monsters and invite an insouciant world to face them.

Makiya's achievement was to fill the gaps on the map of the police state. He described how the Soviet Union helped the Baath create the *Amn*, or state internal security department, and supplied it with surveillance and interrogation equipment. He reported the crimes of the *Estikhbarat*, or military intelligence, which the Baath based in Iraqi embassies to arrange the intimidation and assassination of potential leaders of the opposition among the millions of Iraqi refugees. Above all, he detailed the power of the *Mukhabarat*, the political secret police, which combined domestic and foreign intelligence gathering and spied on any part of the bureaucracy that might provide cover for a potential challenger to Saddam, including its rival intelligence services.

The whole country was under surveillance. In 2003, Steve Boggan of the London *Evening Standard* went into Baghdad with the American forces. He and his interpreter scouted the ruins of a burnt-out

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