

Fred Halliday

Political Journeys

(London: Saqi, 2011, 288pp.)

Fred Halliday taught International Relations for many years at the London School of Economics and ended his career before his early death at the Barcelona Institute of International Studies. These short but often deep essays were written for a website; www.openDemocracy.net and reflect many of his more academic works especially on Iran, the Middle East and revolutionary movements. The essays start with an account of his formative years living in the Republic of Ireland with an English father on the frontier with Northern Ireland in a town used by the Northern Irish insurgency, the IRA as a “safe haven” and end with his evocation of his new “hometown” of Barcelona. They include word portraits of scholars whose work had moved him: Susan Strange, Isaac Deutscher, Karl Polanyi and Maxime Rodinson. It brought back memories of lunch in an outdoor restaurant in Geneva with Rodinson as we discussed currents of Islamic thought while holding on to his “unceasing belief in universal values”.

Halliday was a member of the May 1968 generation, at 22 caught up in the efforts for radical social change in France, Germany, Czechoslovakia and the USA. Looking back from 2008, he says “It is clear in retrospect that 1968 did not bury European capitalist democracy or American imperialism. It did, however, set in train the death and burial of the Russian and Chinese revolutions and of Communism in Western Europe: a fine example indeed of the cunning of history.” As he writes “The first time I visited Cuba was in 1968 with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, when I helped organize a one-month, not very strenuous working visit by a few dozen British radicals to a coffee plantation in Pinar del Rio province. The project included a tour of the island and the experience of witnessing two characteristically marathon speeches by Fidel.” Since then he has heard a lot of radical speeches, especially as his research focused on the Middle East and Iran with two overarching themes of imperialism and revolution

As Stephen Howe (of openDemocracy) underlines in his introduction “Anti-imperialism had classically involved a set of shared, universalist, goals including democracy, economic development, equality of men and women, and secularism and a belief in a potential historical alternative. Today, all this had seemingly been replaced in many quarters, around the globe, by movements of religious fundamentalism, ethnic chauvinism, romantic anti-modernism and other irrational ideologies. This historic regression, as Halliday saw it, was the most disturbing and depressing of all contemporary global developments. Militant political Islam was just one of its manifestations through the one to which in his later writings he devoted most attention.”

As Halliday noted “Islamists learnt and borrowed much from their secular rivals: styles of anti-imperialist rhetoric: systems of social reform and the organisation of the centralised party, a striking example of which is Hizbullah in Lebanon, a Shi’a copy of the Vietnamese Communist Party in nationalist, organisational and military form. This process has continued in the modern critique of globalisation and ‘cultural imperialism’”

The 1948-1990 Cold War was the background for Halliday’s thinking even if he had a broad historical grasp and critical analysis. E.H. Carr’s analysis of the 1919-1939 period *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* was an important part of his teaching in order to understand the relations between states and peoples. The Cold War years were the repositories of conflict and myth

which provided the framework of his analysis of world politics. As he notes in his analysis of terrorism “ Al-Qa’ida and its ilk did not arise suddenly in 2001, or from the subconscious of the Islamic or Arab minds, but from the Cold War, in particular the financing, training and arming of tens of thousands of jihadi militants by the USA, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan for the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. That war was to the early twenty-first century what the Spanish civil war of 1936-39 was to the mid-twentieth: the devil’s kitchen in which the ailments and criminal practices that would be unleashed on the world was first brewed...The other legacy of the Cold War on the Western side is both simple and all-pervasive: the mental attitude accompanying the exercise of power over other peoples, and the discussion of it by Washington; one predominantly of arrogance, ignorance and instinctive resort to force.”

Halliday’s writings provided historical perspective, political astuteness and a defence of those standards in the name of which his fight was being conducted. This collection of essays is both an introduction to his more academic writings listed at the end and to his many concerns with understanding world politics.

Rene Wadlow

