

## Chapter One

# GETTING ORIENTED

We live in a sea-change period of world history. As ancient values crumble, time-honored institutions of social living disintegrate, without new ones ready to take their place. Some social inequalities begin to disappear, only to give place to new, equally undesirable ones. As power shifts from one group to another, old categories and classifications for understanding the social process quickly become obsolete. Reality baffles us, and scholars disagree on the basics of what is happening, in physics as in biology, in sociology as in economics, in politics as in international relations.

Before the Gulf War of January–February 1991, most people would have agreed in their analysis of the power configuration system in the world. I offer below what I wrote in early 1990 in an attempt to capture what I then saw as the world political reality; I will follow this up with my present post-Gulf War version of how I see that same reality.

### Pre-Gulf War

As I write, we are into the last decade of the second millennium of the Christian era. We can all observe three major systems of political economy vying with each other to gain dominance:

1. Temporarily triumphant worldwide Western liberal democracy with its creaking market-economy capitalism, already in the initial stages of a daunting recession
2. Defeated Marxist-Leninist socialism desperately striving to survive by making every possible compromise with its erstwhile sworn enemy, Capitalist Imperialism

3. Renascent Pan-Islamism, though now disunited, yet strong-willed and determined to bring about a worldwide Islamic commonwealth governed by Shariah, the Quranic law

In terms of sheer vitality and inner determination, the third now turns out to be a more powerful rival to the first and the second than these two to each other. Alas, Islam remains the one major world religion least understood, and even less sympathized with, by others. The West thinks it can be handled by military and economic power; the Marxists think that it is obscurantist and that "history" will dispose of it neatly. Meanwhile, Islamic fundamentalism continues on the warpath and regards both western liberalism and Marxist socialism as ungodly systems destined to disappear, sooner or later, before the "Sword of Islam."

#### Post-Gulf War (April 1991)

It is one of the great ironies of history that Soviet President Gorbachev's globalist "New Thinking" has ultimately resulted in consequences disastrously contrary to what he had intended. There is less security in the world than before; there is a new sense of helplessness on the part of the powerless; the prospect of a world without war has receded further; the victims of injustice no longer have a strong champion of their cause; the world has become more miserable than ever before since the Second World War. The Gulf War, alas, is as much a consequence of Soviet New Thinking as of anything else.

This asymmetric, short-duration, super-high-tech war has achieved more than the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi aggression and occupation. It seems to have been even more effective in achieving six or seven of the covert goals of the US and the Western Alliance, as well as their temporary allies in the Middle East.

1. Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Kuwait, and Syria all wanted the rising power of Iraq to be curbed; this was also in the Allied interest, but it would have been counterproductive (because of the likely strong Arab reaction) if Israel had been allowed to do the job on her own as she wanted to. Now it has been done with minimum cost to Israel and with maximum winning over of the Arabs into the Allied camp. If the US and Iraq had really negotiated, such a war would have been impossible, because the Americans knew that Saddam Hussein was willing to withdraw his troops from Kuwait if he had been treated with the dignity due to the head of a people, offered some significant promises on settling the Palestinian question, and granted a financial contribution from Kuwait. Without a war, Iraq

could not have been crushed so brutally; but a negotiated settlement would have stood in the way of achieving the real purpose, namely, crushing a country that had dared to defy the power and supremacy of the western alliance in the world of today.

2. Ever since the collapse of the "Soviet threat" in 1988, there had been no justification for stationing American troops in Western Europe. The Gulf War gave the Allies a pretext for a new military outpost in the Middle East, so essential to Allied imperialist interests.

3. The US and its allies had been looking for an opportunity to field-test and demonstrate the prowess of their new post-SDI high-tech weapons; a successful sales pitch has been made for Western armaments, and the Soviet Union and others can no longer compete in the arms market without updating their technology. The important thing is that the human cost of the field test was borne by the people of Iraq and Kuwait.

4. The UN has been a major force resisting Allied hegemony in the world. It has now been captured and domesticated. The voice of the Second and Third World in that august body has at least been temporarily muted.

5. A real boost has been given to the waning Western rate of economic growth, and to the arms industry on which the market economy's health is now based. The big corporations, the "dealers in death," have now been rewarded enough so that they can continue to contribute quite liberally to the political process that sustains the market economy.

6. The US has been enabled to assert its uncontested global leadership, to test friends, and to severely warn any would-be challengers to that global authority.

7. The cost of the operation has been largely paid by Japan, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and others, and the new contracts for the reconstruction of Kuwait and possibly of Iraq, along with a few mammoth arms sales already effected, will more than compensate for the rest of the expenditure. Economically, the war has been a "good deal" for the West.

The short Gulf War has radically altered the power configuration in the world; categories of yesterday no longer fit. It is not profitable to keep on talking about superpowers in the plural or about a unipolar versus a multipolar or bipolar world. What we now have is a global market economy that includes almost all countries in the world, including the USSR, China, and Vietnam, and the US has emerged as the general manager of the New Global Order, assisted by her white allies and perhaps Japan as assistant managers. The latter do not always agree with everything the general manager does; but to dis-

agree with him openly may have rather catastrophic consequences; so they can only go along, hoping some day the manager will make a major *faux pas*, at which point they can oust him from power and take his place.

For the powerless, especially for many Second and Third World countries, the question arises: Where would one look for some countervailing force to offset the power of the US? Economically, the two most powerful assistant managers are Germany (or the European Community, if you like, and if you believe in it) and Japan, but they have to play the general manager's game, at least for the time being, for their very survival. And there is a private power game played between the general manager and the two most powerful assistant managers. The general manager knows these two are rivals who have to be "fixed" before they manage to overthrow him and take his place. But he also knows that he has to keep them as allies until he later has strength enough to crush them.

The collapse of the Soviet economy and its policy of the defense of socialism has also led to the collapse of the effectiveness of any kind of nonaligned policy. Without Soviet military power willing to confront Western Allied power, can a powerless nation in the Two Third World sustain a foreign policy based on principles of international morality?

The other bastion of a principled global policy was the United Nations. It was, until the Gulf War a force to be reckoned with. It could in the past stand up to the high-handed actions of the US and its allies on many occasions (Vietnam, for example). But now the US has shown remarkable skill and finesse in capturing and castrating the UN. The UN Resolution gave *carte blanche* to member nations to "use all necessary means" to get Iraq out of Kuwait, while Israel was still occupying Arab lands for decades, Syria was occupying part of Lebanon, and Turkey part of Cyprus. This was a blatant betrayal of all that the UN stood for; it was a rape and violation of its own charter. The UN should have used a peacekeeping force under the UN flag and command, to implement its resolutions. Inviting the world's nations for a "free-for-all" is not in the UN Charter. It is common knowledge now that the UN Resolution was bought by bribe and cajolment. It is an unconstitutional resolution, fully *ultra vires*. But it has served the purposes of the Western Alliance.

Now it seems the US is interested in solving the Middle East problem under its own aegis, again bringing in the UN insofar as it suits American policy aims. It will take a lot of doing to bring back a semblance of real power to the UN. The UN system will also come under the control of the general manager, unless someone sees the

danger and does something drastic about it, like breaking the power of the five permanent members of the Security Council by amending the charter itself.

Two-third World countries as well as the less powerful among the European powers may soon wake up, and see the new global power configuration picture with fresh eyes. Not much will be gained by hanging on to old and obsolete structures like the nonaligned movement or to largely ineffective instruments like the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation or South-South Cooperation. The Two-Third World is far from united, and the general manager is interested in keeping it that way. It is unrealistic to suppose that even an India-China alliance could bring the Two-third World together on a common platform, but China is an important player in the new power game, and could some day, in cooperation with others, develop some kind of countervailing power.

The Two-third World will need to win or earn the friendship and support of all progressive elements both in the West as well as in the ex-socialist countries. A New International for Global Justice will need to be conceived and a platform formulated to counter the new power structure and to seek dignity, freedom, justice, peace, and a life-sustaining environment for all humanity.

It seems beyond doubt that the countervailing power we need is not military, but economic and social-cultural; the power of the people, the power of more than 4 billion dispossessed and marginalized people, but organized and mobilized. The sense of outrage at the presence and arrogant manifestation of nonresponsible technological-military power seems widespread, but still remains faltering in expression. To give unmistakable expression to that sense of deep moral outrage, and to demand a more responsible, more democratic, control of global power, seems a high priority for the people of the world today.

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Cutting across these struggles and conflicts, there are scores of other contentions and power battles. The feminist struggle is prominent in the industrialised Western societies, but the male mullah leadership in Islam regards feminism itself as somehow satanic, merely another aspect of Western and Marxist decadence. Too many Muslim women agree, though among them many inwardly identify themselves with an overthrown but still assertive modern Muslim woman like Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan. Generally speaking, however, feminism or any kind of gender conflict remains a taboo subject for Islamic fundamentalism.

At least five other power struggles accompany these foreboding struggles between the male and the female of the species, a struggle yet to reach its full maturity, now confined to some regions and classes. These other five seem to have little to do with the class struggle:

1. The conflict between ethnic identity and national loyalty, not only in the Soviet Union, but also in many other countries such as Yugoslavia (Croats, Serbians, Slovenians, Macedonians), China (Hans, Central Asian Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists), India (Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs), Czechoslovakia (Czechs and Slovaks), Romania (Romanians, Transylvanians, Hungarians), Belgium (French and Walloons), Canada (Anglophones, Quebecois, other minorities), the US (whites, blacks, hispanics, Native Americans, Asians), in many African countries with more than one tribe, and so on
2. The tension among nationalism, regionalism, and internationalism, as peoples and nations recognize their growing economic and social interdependence; as the transnational corporations develop their empires; as bodies for regional economic and scientific-technological cooperation (Organization of African Unity, Organization of American States, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) begin to develop
3. Conflict among the three contenders for leadership within the world market economy, namely Japan, US, and Europe
4. Tensions that arise from the resistance of particular local cultures to the road roller of a technological civilization that claims to be universal
5. Tensions between those who want to make a fast pile and others who want to conserve a healthy environment for life on this planet.

All these conflicts are interconnected. There are two other pervasive major conflicts that cut across these and which we can ignore only at grave peril.

First, there is the ominous conflict between the growing international middle class that has incorporated into itself some forty percent of the global population, and the remaining sixty percent who seem to be divided between those who want to climb into the middle class and be co-opted, and others who see global revolution as the only way to justice for all within and among nations. We can call the two

positions *reformist* and *revolutionary*, respectively. There is little love lost between these two subgroups of the latter group, though sometimes they manage to cooperate on a particular issue of social change. Some in the middle classes also seek to identify themselves with one or the other of these two subgroups, though in general the reformist position is definitely less threatening to their own perceived interests. The dispossessed sixty per cent seem to have lost a stalwart champion of their cause with the capitulation of the Marxists to the market economy's allurements, and their consequent near abandonment of the international class struggle in the interests of survival and affluence.

A second major conflict seems as yet inchoate and undefined. Simply put, it is the conflict between the secular and the religious worldviews. The inchoateness comes from the fact that there are many people who do not even acknowledge such a conflict, though it is in their own experience and consciousness. A deeply religious person may also be a successful practicing scientist, and may not be fully aware that he or she subscribes to conflicting worldviews. Part of the lack of clarity results from misconceptions about what secularity and religion signify.

While science seldom states its worldview, modern science stands on the assumption that God or the Transcendent is an "unnecessary hypothesis" for science. It is a matter of faith for scientists that the universe can be explained and understood in terms of causality (strict or only statistical or operational) without reference to any reality that transcends the universe itself. Modern science is based on a qualified commonsense, on a naive realism that believes either that things are what they appear to be or that their true nature can be revealed by science. In quantum physics this view has come under question, with the experimental realization that the observer with his or her time-space measuring equipment is an integral part of reality as he or she observes it. Knowledgeable physicists tell us that we have no access to reality as it exists independent of our observation; what we know is not necessarily objective reality, but only our subjective perception of it. The only objectivity available is agreement among the observers in accordance with criteria mutually agreed upon in the scientific community.

Religious worldviews, on the other hand, are incredibly diverse and incompatible with each other. There is no interreligious global community that can lay down criteria for agreement among all religions. They agree mostly in rejecting the naive realism of a science that confuses reality with phenomena. Where science openly admits that scientific knowledge is only operational and that it has no access

to the ultimate nature of reality, coexistence between religion and science can be peaceful, and sometimes even productive.

We are living, however, in a civilization where science has taken over from religion the seat of authority in society. The science establishment today occupies a place analogous to that occupied by the Roman Catholic clergy in medieval Europe. Many people still think that modern science has the last word on everything. Good scientists may not think so. Good philosophers and theologians should also recognize that their own pronouncements have no ultimate validity either. That applies to what is said in this book as well. Fortunately, the philosopher and the theologian have much less authority than the scientist in our society. When religious leaders do gain such authority, as for example in the case of Christian fundamentalism in the Moral Majority of the Reagan era, they wreak a lot of havoc.

The dialogue between science and religion has barely begun in our time. There are few religious thinkers whom scientists find worth listening to, mainly because neither side has developed the philosophical competence necessary for dialogue at a sufficiently profound level. So the tension between science and religion continues, despite much new thinking that seeks to bridge the gap and relax the tension. Modern science presupposes the secular framework, which religions cannot accept. True dialogue between them is not possible if its precondition is that the religions accept the secular frame of thought and understanding.

The point here is simply that there is a conflict between the secular and the religious that constitutes a major obstacle on our way to finding reliable foundations for a new civilization. The secular assumption remains the hallmark of post-Enlightenment European civilization, and to the origins of this assumption we should devote considerable space in this work. The secular assumption underlies both Western liberal ideology and Marxist ideology; religious fundamentalism avoids such an assumption, but that does not make the latter any more adequate a foundation for a new civilization.

The rise of the concept *secular* in its modern sense is itself an interesting story. Since this concept is so central to our problematic, we will need to turn briefly to that story. Before we do so, we must also have a quick look at transformations that have taken place historically in the meaning of the word *religion* in our societies.