

Disasters of Peace

You love life, we love death

— from Associated Press translation of videotaped statement in the name of 'Al-Qaeda', claiming authorship of the March 11 Madrid bombings.

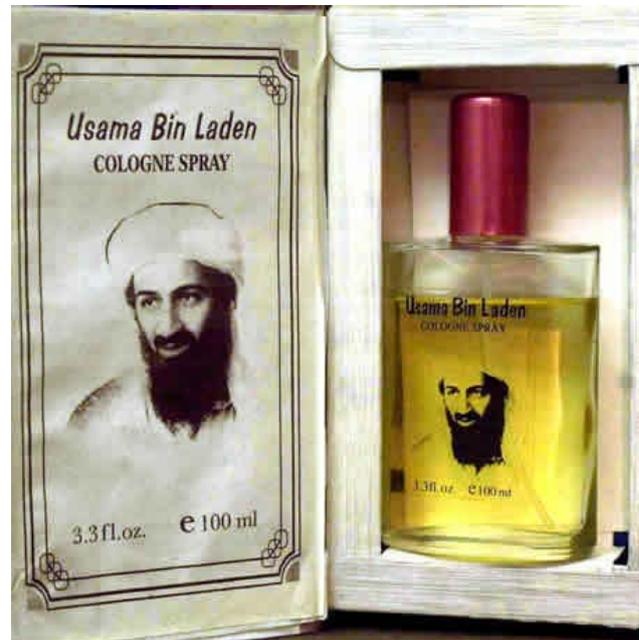
These words were seized on enthusiastically in Europe and America by Authorities (in both the active and the contemplative senses: 'leaders' and 'experts') who sought in the Atocha wreckage proof of the stubborn, atavistic anti-rationality of the Islamic mind. But this 'example of what the Prophet Mohammed said' can also be understood in almost exactly the reverse sense. Not as pre-modern cruelty howling theatrically against humanist values, but as an inhumanly rational description of bio-thanatopolitical reality in the contemporary material world.

(Any objection based on what's already known about the 'we' of the statement would barely merit a dismissive gesture here. But in order to pre-empt all confusion, some obvious principles may need to be spelled out once more. First, nothing whatsoever is known about the speaker's relation to the ephemeral subject 'Al-Qaeda', or about that subject's relation to the bombings. And even if speaker, bomber and 'Al-Qaeda' are presumed to be identical, the latter's (presumed) diffuse organizational form and its still more nebulous political constituency mean that who is and is not of the 'death-loving' party is a matter of idle speculation. But more importantly, the statement matters not for what it reveals about the speaker, but for its independent sense: for what it can be made to say about the *world*. As in the interpretation of any other text, there is no reason automatically to identify 'I' (or in this case, 'we') with the (presumed) author. Coherence, not biographical information, is what authorizes any reading.)

Some speakers using the 'Al-Qaeda' brand have claimed to be acting in the name of the Iraqi and Palestinian populations. The question of such unsolicited political representation's 'legitimacy' is meaningless, of course, where the questioner's approval is not being sought. Engaged intellectuals from neocon think tanks to liberal Muslim columnists have already squandered enough billions of words (or tonnes of 'general intellect') on 'critiques' of an absolute non-interlocutor. But because the concentrations of besieged life in Iraq and Palestine are also saturated with the televisual gaze, in spectacular perception they symbolize *all* the life capable of occupying the 'we' position in the 'Al-Qaeda' statement: the global 'class with nothing to lose and therefore nothing to defend'¹ in the most literal, urgent sense.

On these terms, the rationally inhuman paraphrase of 'you love life, we love death' would run:

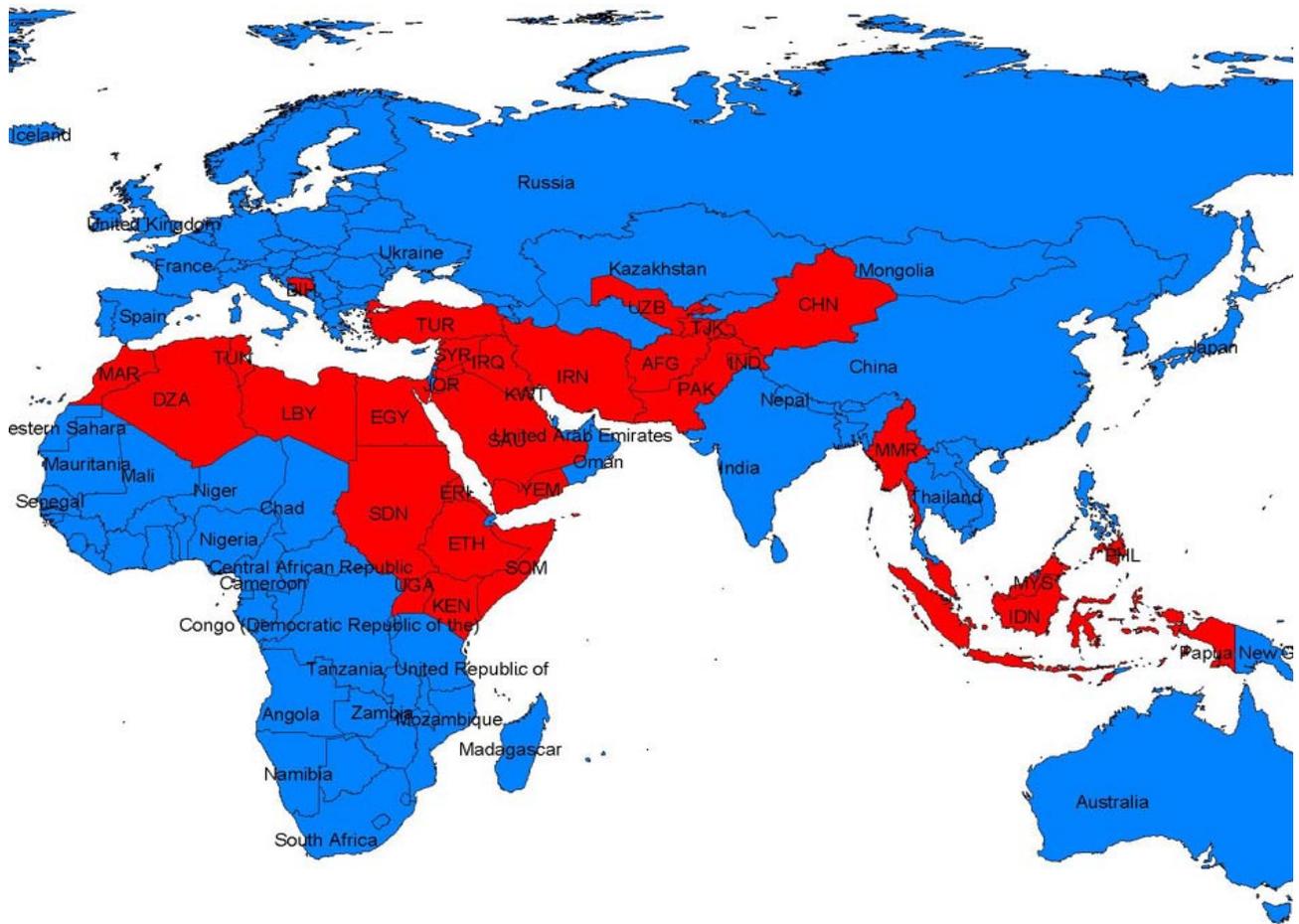
Exposure to death (our own and that of others) occupies our lived time (and living memory, and foreseeable



future), so fully that the distinction between 'life' and 'death' breaks down. Unlike you, we have no life separate from death to lose or defend: thus it only remains to become death-levellers, to redistribute our great surplus of death so it engulfs and becomes indistinct from your life.

The condition of this statement's truth is the self-evident fact that in this world, as it is now, the distribution of forced exposure to death (or the problem of survival) is violently unequal. This is no more a matter of natural tragedy or immoral actions than it is of divine visitation. To put it with appropriate crudeness, the present distribution of death reflects the division of labour in a world where capitalism is *universally indifferent* to the distinction between labour-power's 'life' and 'death', as long as its living and dying yields value. Dying is work when life is wholly consumed in producing value. A perfectly 'normal' phenomenon, inasmuch as millions of lifetimes are filled by waged and unwaged labour that eventually breaks or exhausts them. An 'extreme' case like the war and ensuing primitive accumulation in Iraq only demonstrates the same thing: by living and dying under multilateral siege, the newly proletarianized population *produces* the conditions for the security and reconstruction businesses, literally paying for the contractors' profits. The same logic underlies the transformation, noted by the SPK/PF(H), of 'biomatter man' – cells, genes, organs – into a productive, i.e. labouring, force. The universal equivalent transcends the life/death threshold: 'everyone is totally valuable, dead or alive'²

Capital's formal obliviousness to the difference between death and life almost seems to be parodied by the attitude of the class for whom existing social



relations have provided plenty to lose and defend. Continuous experience of shelter eventually breeds forgetfulness of the shelter itself, and of the reality of what it shelters from. This forgetting of death sometimes takes the form of an anomalous ignorance among 'educated' subjects, explicable only in terms of an inability to conceptualize and remember in the absence of direct exposure. Thus an editorialist in Italian left-moralist daily *L'Unità* ('founded by Antonio Gramsci', etc), cancelled 60 infernal years to call the Madrid bombs 'the worst barbarity in Europe since Nazi Germany'.

Affluent societies' officially-sponsored obsession with 'risk' and its management also depends on ignorance of death, or deep assurance of ultimate preservation. The tendency for the absence of any perceptible threat to appear primarily as sign of the threat's potential presence (as in 'anti-terrorism' vigilance) demands that the apparatus of 'security' fill every space indifferently. This wish bespeaks an enormous, ingenuous confidence in that apparatus, endowing it with the capacity to measure and pre-emptively control a risk as infinite as uncertainty itself³.

But the fact that so many life-lovers enjoy a subjective *experience* of shelter does not make their sense of security a true one. What they are really forgetful of is that capital's indifference to 'life' and 'death', which their own insouciance mimics playfully and which has left them living-space to play in, also guarantees that they themselves are never safe. The law of value is as unconcerned with their life as with others' death: the non-sensation of non-exposure is a contingent privilege, liable to be revoked devastatingly, sunk into

in the most abject 'bare life', at the remotest shift in global class cold-war. But one of the 'blessings' of their once-removed exposure, their brittle shelter, is forgetting that such special status is unusual and revocable. It remains to be seen whether another violent announcement that all privileges are cancelled, made 'on behalf of' the unsheltered, could disturb the oblivious, laying bare the minimum they hold in common with death-lovers: not 'humanity' but exposure, eligibility to be consumed by the apparatus that so far happens to have spared them.

Notes

1. See Amadeo Bordiga, 'Fundamental Theses of the Party': <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1951/fundamental-theses.htm>
2. SPK.PF(H), 'The Communist manifesto for the Third Millennium': <http://www.spkpfh.de/GENOZIEngl.html>
3. In this way the risk-management congregation attributes to preventive mechanisms precisely the same spurious capacity for metacalculation claimed by the systems of professional gambling. See 'Say Fear is a Man's Best Friend', *Datacide 9* & metamute: <http://www.metamute.com/look/article.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=1&NrIssue=24&NrSection=5&N>

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Matthew Hyland does not recall having been a dupe of not being a dupe.