



MY Passport, MYself

by Moustafa
Bayoumi

In the aftermath of the World Trade Centre bombing, Bayoumi writes about his reception by airport customs officers... and the implications of immigration, movement and displacement.

I fear flying. The reason is simple, and it has nothing to do with a fear of the air or of being airborne. In a sense I was myself air born, my parents both coming from Egypt, and me being born in Switzerland, then transplanted to Canada, now studying in the United States. My fear remains on the ground, neither sacred nor sublime. It rests on those points of departure, within those little private cities that spot the globe, on the outskirts of major centers.

If you are suspected long enough of something, you

will eventually believe yourself guilty of it. In a Western airport—those are the airports I know best—I am the itinerant terrorist. I do not know exactly when this metamorphosis takes place, whether it occurs somewhere on the way, in the train or the taxi, or with my first step into the airport (often through wall-less doors of metal-detecting equipment). Or perhaps it occurred sometime earlier, during the 1970s, entering my body like a dormant and undetected virus, only to bloom with my facial hair. Regardless, it has arrived (and continues to arrive) at unscheduled times and with all the extra baggage that such an arrival portends.

What then does it matter, say, what passport I have? Identities are even easier to counterfeit than passports. My passport marks me nationally (I am what they call a *naturalized* citizen), but those sly security folk at airports know that names reveal a far deeper nature than passports ever will. And if the name falls blandly flat (they too can be naturalized and neutralized), take a good look at the face. I must admit, I don't often remember *their* faces, the whiteness usually only reflecting the garish airport lighting, and I can only speculate what they remember of mine. Their expressions, though, remain. It is a little drama that is played out every time, with varying degrees of melodrama (different countries, after all, produce different schools of acting), but repeated so often as to produce and reproduce its own absurd theater of cruelty. The movement to suspicion is something I've so often seen now that if I don't fall victim to it, I become suspicious.

February 26, 1993. An explosion tears into the concrete fabric of lower Manhattan. Unforeseen, unprecedented, this event in the social fabric of corporate America threatens the media machine's ability to produce information and to monopolize the production of meaning. The event is itself charged with too much meaning, too little information. Anyone could have done it, for too many reasons. Within minutes multiple meanings are thrown into circulation—Serbians, Palestinians, Bosnians—but the lack of one singular mean-

tem. A year later in L.A., when the verdicts were handed down, the system desperately tried to regain its ability to pass judgment, instead of being the object upon which judgment is passed. The state expects a rebellion with the new verdict. But the state once again merely shows its own inability to comprehend the power of rebellion. Once the state can expect something, it is back in control. But for the moment—before the analysis—a bomb explodes. Communities rebel. Too many causes for their effects. Six people die tragic deaths. Other minority communities suffer. In the meantime, all the King's horses and all the King's men will do all they can to put the production of meaning in their hands again.

Who are the victims of the WTC bombing? Certainly the most immediate victims belong to the class of new immigrants, some of the fatalities belonging directly to this class; new immigrants as hotel-workers, drawn to the imperial metropole for their livelihood. But even after the event new immigrants suffer. The surreptitious nature of an event like this virtually authorizes the state in all its royal machinery to create its own enemies at will. We were not let down. The industry of manufacturing the enemy (a highly lucrative field in this country) was able to produce an astonishing narrative of suspicion, whose players lurked in shadowy corners of storefront *masjids*, conferenced in lower-class apartment blocks, and hid nests of hate in unassimilated facial hair.

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ing means no meaning is being produced at all. For the moment.

For Jean Baudrillard, information has destroyed meaning. Information has become that which masks and stands in for the profound loss of meaning in our communication. But if

Baudrillard subverts the information-produces-meaning tautology, then an event such as the WTC bombing reverses even Baudrillard. The radical quality of the event is evident at the time of its happening, before it becomes history, when it is still in a kind of pre-mediated, unnarrativized state. Here, too much information does not destroy meaning; rather, there are too many cracks in the shell, pressure points giving way to the lies our state tells us. Their profound disruption comes not so much from their violence as from their element of surprise. The producers of meaning are surprised and are caught with their pants down. The system will have to work overtime, producing meaning (narratives, characters, histories) out of an event in order to compensate for their lack of prescience and power.

It happened almost a year before, in L.A., when a spark erupted into a fire that burned away all the fat around the lies and deception of one of our systems of social control—the justice sys-

Armies, which at one time seemed almost obsolete with long-range nuclear missile technology, have become today's travelers.

Like rats, everything about this cast of characters was dark, hidden, and, like the bomb explosion site, underground. At least since the Gulf War, we know that this underground quality marks it as separate from the royal machinery. This has little to do with firepower and even less to do with morality, but it has everything to do with perspective. The royal machinery looks from top down, like the hundreds of thousands of sorties flown over Iraq during the War, and this perspective becomes valorized. A way of viewing the world. For others, perspective is limited to those things beside oneself, in greater and greater circles but with no vanishing point. To look from top down or from bottom around—these are the options. To be a helicopter or a taxi cab. To be a hawk or a mole.

This is not just about movement, not even about the speed of movement, but about the place of movement. Both immigrants and imperial states are masters at manipulating the machinery of movement, yet their paths rarely cross as they fly at different altitudes.

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people are much concerned with all kinds of pleasures They are accustomed to luxury and success in worldly occupations and to indulgence in worldly desires Therefore their souls are colored with all kinds of blameworthy and evil qualities The more of them they possess the more remote do the ways and means of goodness become to them Eventually they lose all sense of restraint Many of them are found to use improper language in their gatherings as well as in the presence of their superiors and womenfolk They are not deterred by any sense of restraint because the bad custom of behaving openly in an improper manner in both words and deeds has taken hold of them Bedouins may be as concerned with worldly affairs as sedentary people are However such concern would touch only the

necessities of life and not luxuries or anything causing or calling for desires and pleasures The customs they follow in their mutual dealings are therefore appropriate As compared with those of sedentary people their evil ways and blameworthy qualities are much less numerous They are closer to the first natural state and more remote from the evil habits that have been impressed upon the souls of sedentary people through numerous and ugly blameworthy customs Thus they can more easily be cured than sedentary people This is obvious & will later on become clear that sedentary life constitutes the last stage of civilization and the point where it begins to decay & also constitutes the last stage of evil and of remoteness from goodness Clearly the Bedouins are closer to being good than sedentary people

The Bedouins on the other hand live apart from the community They are alone in the country and remote from militias They have no walls or gates Therefore they provide their own defence and do not entrust it to or rely upon others for it They always carry weapons They watch carefully all sides of the road They take hurried naps only when they are together in company or when they are in the saddle They pay attention to the most distant barking or noise They go alone into the desert guided by their fortitude putting their trust in themselves Fortitude has become a character quality of theirs and courage their nature They use it whenever they are called upon or roused by an alarm When sedentary people mix with them in the desert or associate with them on a journey they depend on them They cannot do anything for themselves without them This is an observed fact Their dependence extends even to knowledge of the country the directions watering places and crossroads Man is a child of the customs and the things he has become used to He is not the product of his natural disposition and temperament The conditions to which he has become accustomed until they have become for him a quality of character and matters of habit and custom have replaced his natural disposition If one studies this in human beings one will find much of it and it will be found to be a correct observation

Text from *Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* by Ibn Khaldun, translated and edited by Franz Rosenthal, abridged by N.J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 94-95. Graphic by Moustafa Bayoumi.

Who would have understood this but Ibn Khaldun, the fourteenth-century Arab Muslim scholar of social formations and philosopher of history. Social organization exists in many stages for Ibn Khaldun, with the Bedouin or nomadic being opposite of the sedentary lifestyle. His marvelous and secular mind is able to process so many events of social organization into an understanding of the codes of civilization—with neither prejudice nor sentimentality (though with a guiding sense of morality).

The sedentary propensity for luxury attracts with it the desire for scholars and their various jewels—like Ibn Khaldun himself (very aware of the conditions which gave him the opportunity to write), like the opportunity for my more tarnished musings here—in order that they may give some legitimacy to the royal machinery.

In the sedentary world, movement has become something almost purely symbolic or purely terrifying: politicians travel for no real purpose, tourists travel in memory of colonialism and in hopes of placing themselves on postcards. Armies, which at one time seemed almost obsolete with long-range nuclear missile technology, have become today's travelers.

Opposite these movements are the movements of immigrants, refugees, exiles. No wonder they drive you round and around the city. They know how to move a life.

I am looking at a picture of my mother, dated June 23, 1956. A significant date. Significant not only because it was exactly one month before Gamal Abdul-Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. (War would come later, and my mother told me how she and all her classmates in the school of pharmacology wanted to do something to help and worked as voluntary nurses in the hospitals around Cairo—working for the new nation, caring for the wounded.)

In this picture, my mother is a scant twenty years old. Younger than I am now.

There is another woman in the photograph, behind my mother, waiting her turn, shrouded in widow's black. My mother, at the table, in dark glasses and rolled up sleeves, is writing on a piece of paper. She tells me, "This small photo documents the first time women had the vote in Egypt." My mother, in Upper Egypt, voting on a forgotten referendum in the constitution. Eight men, some of them in suits and ties, most wearing the more traditional *gellabaya*, are watching the two women vote.

Egypt in the fifties. A popular coup d'état looking for legitimization in the ballot box. The men in the suits are most likely outsiders to the region, government officials overseeing the election. Everything is coded in this picture. A coexistence between traditional ways and Western ways. Some observers may want to see the juxtaposition between my mother and the widow as that between the West and Islam; just take a look at the clothes. Yet each of these women is doing nothing but adapting herself to all the codes around, both new and old. A society in transition, everything in Egypt at this moment is being contested. But this is hardly unique to new nations. All societies are in a constant state of flux, the contestations between codes and values a daily phenomenon.

Structures of authority exist in order to lay order, to produce the codes by which things make sense. The state, organized religions, as well as university seminars all rationalize their orthodoxy. I can well believe that a certain kind of Islam can produce, as can all orthodoxies, a rational code in order to produce what is in effect an irrational event. And after the fact? More rationally, refining of codes and definitions. What a refusal of living!

Don't bother looking for me after you have read this. You won't find me. I will be spying on those dangerous imams with the brilliant sight of an eagle; I will be growling with the voice of a lion at the border guards; I will be licking injuries of the wounded with my rough and salty tongue. I will be prowling against your codes, and will jump without any warning.

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LIKE RATS, EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS CAST OF CHARACTERS WAS DARK, HIDDEN, AND, LIKE

THE BOMB EXPLOSION SITE, UNDERGROUND.

But their growing desire for luxuries and false legitimation will ultimately spell their decline. Dynasties, royal machineries, state formations all come and go; yet all operate under a set of codes which are continually expanding in order to underwrite the existence of a social formation that is being *undermined* by its very growth and arrogance.

New immigrants watch carefully all sides of the road. They take hurried naps only when they are together in company or when they are in the saddle. That is, when they don't have a fare. Low to the ground, in constant movement, almost all New York City cab drivers are from the new immigrant class (though let's not fall into a position of liberal guilt, where all new immigrants become cab drivers). Our cast of characters has its own share of cab drivers, something which perhaps strikes fear into many. My cab driver, a terrorist? But immigrants, refugees, exiles understand movement differently than do the sedentary peoples. For the sedentary, movement is walking with a mobile phone, movement is the walkman, movement is only a fax of a movement. Within days of the WTC bombing, AT&T announced that temporary offices and special phone lines were established in order not to incapacitate the silent machinations of electronic capital (not in so many words). The idea of the twin towers has now become a total farce, their closure barely affecting any change in the flows of capital. At one point they indicated the end of competition; now, in addition, they're virtually just a nostalgic reminder to those days of movement; movement of capital, movement of people. Architecture as the site of congregating has become *passé*.