Britain: Matthew Parris and the tsunami disaster

"Revelling" as the death toll mounts

Robert Stevens
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Even within the context of the British establishment's callous indifference to the tsunami disaster, one article stood out for actually revelling in the vast scale of death and suffering. The article, "Imagine there were no cataclysms—what a dull world it would be," was authored by Matthew Parris and published on January 1 in the *Times*, Britain's oldest national newspaper, now owned by Rupert Murdoch.

Politically, Parris is known as a "liberal" Tory and urbane commentator, not someone who would be expected to pen such a crude response. A Cambridge law graduate, he became a member of parliament in 1979 and served for seven years in the administration of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. He worked at the Foreign Office and then left parliament to embark on a career as a journalist and broadcaster.

Parris begins his article by posing the question as to whether anyone would really wish to end natural disasters. He argues that people do not really want this in their heart of hearts as such disasters provide a "thrill" to those watching, but not directly involved.

Parris continues, "So why the thrill?"

"I have hesitated before using that word 'thrill.' It is easily misunderstood. It might seem to make light of the blackest few days ever experienced in the lives of millions. But all the reciting in the world of the scale of these miseries, all the acknowledgement we can make of the sympathy which they evoke, cannot hide a small, uncomfortable thought which (I am pretty confident) has occurred to you as it has occurred to me. The thought is expressed in the word (and the punctuation) 'Wow!'"

Parris is unable to conceal his morbid fascination with the scale of the tsunami and the vast numbers of dead and suffering:

"A small, insistent voice in the back of my head says: 'Isn't this amazing!' A minor but insuppressible part of me has almost relished—yes, relished—those huge numbers. As the newspaper headlines spoke greedily of the numbers of dead "approaching" twenty, then fifty, then eighty, then a hundred thousand, something undeniable twitched in the back of my brain. It was a sort of excitement as the figures mounted; as though some great auctioneer of calamity were taking bids from the media floor, and I was willing the bidding to carry on upwards. When will it reach a hundred thousand? Could it reach a quarter of a million? Was this a record? How did it stand in the history of these disasters? That high! Wow!"

Parris derives a quasi-religious satisfaction from the supposed powerlessness of man before the forces of nature:

"I watched the TV pictures of the surge of ocean coming ashore, saw the buildings in its path, and had to stifle an inward 'Yes! Sweep them away! Show us how small is Man! Show us how easily this Universe can make matchwood of our dreams!' And no, you do not need to remind me that they were somebody else's dreams, not mine. 'Show us', I thought, 'how lives and livelihoods can be snuffed out in the twinkling of an eye.'"

When Parris tries to justify his fascination with destruction and death, he frames this as a response to the lyrics of "Imagine", the song by the late John Lennon. Lennon's song is a socialist vision of a better world in which mankind lives in cooperation, peace and harmony on a planet without countries.

This is anathema to Parris who writes, "John Lennon

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wrote: Imagine there's no heaven/ It's easy if you try/ No hell below us/ Above us only sky ... But do I thrill to the realisation as Lennon asks me to? No. The thought that the sky above us might fall in, or the hell below us shudder and inundate millions as it just has, enriches as it horrifies."

He quotes the lyrics, "Imagine all the people/ Living for today/ Nothing to kill or die for," and then asks his reader, "Then why live, if we are not to live in a sense of our own good luck? There is something bland and flat about the world that Lennon evokes in that song, and I cannot have been alone in my 1970s generation in shuddering at such safety."

His defence of chaos and suffering as the supposed way that life is meant to be lived is at root a desperate defence of the existing social order. His views are rooted in an outlook deeply hostile to the perspective of socialism, which embodies not only the striving to end class oppression but to finally realise humanity's historic effort to establish mastery over nature.

Parris's article is directed against critical, rational thought. As he penned his words, it was becoming clear to millions of people the world over that this disaster was not merely natural. Rather, it raised disturbing questions that were not being addressed—questions that centred on why the impact of this human catastrophe had been worsened by the desperate poverty and lack of development in the regions affected. Why did the Indian Ocean not have a basic tsunami warning system? Why was the initial response of the ruling powers to the disaster so indifferent and minimal in terms of aiding the victims? What role did poor housing conditions, etc., play?

At its heart, the tsunami had raised the most fundamental questions of the development of a global society and of the necessity for social and economic planning in order to overcome the vast social and economic inequalities and poverty that underlay the massive death toll.

Parris politically opposes any notion of social solidarity and a planned, coordinated global response to such events. Such a perspective calls into question the nature of the capitalist system that he defends, a system that perpetuates such massive inequalities and suffering witnessed in the aftermath of the tsunami. Any expression of a common struggle of humanity is anathema and is viewed as a threat. His article is a rationale for the continuation of the profit system. He argues that any thought of challenging the existing scheme of things is futile and contrary to "nature" itself. In short, he is telling his readers that we live under capitalism and these disasters are inevitable, so just get used to it. Most importantly don't think too deeply and certainly don't try to change anything!

He concludes his article with the declaration, "As we banish disease, seed the clouds for rain, and learn even to clone ourselves, scientific progress only deepens this discomfort, this inchoate shrinking back from mastery. We yearn for a sign from the cosmos of our fragility. We have just received such a sign. Thus—and I am sorry to say it and mean no cruelty or offence—the thrill."

This blatant assault on science, rational thought and social progress says much about the degeneration and backwardness of modern day capitalism. The use of phrases such as "sweep them away", "snuff them out" and the "thrill" at "those huge numbers" of dead is the language of a social layer that has nothing but contempt and indifference for the billions of people on earth who live in abject poverty and who face the brunt of such catastrophes.

The Asian tsunami disaster underscores the necessity for a socialist society based on the principles of global planning, cooperation and the application of natural science and technology for the benefit of mankind. It demonstrates that the struggle for the world that John Lennon "Imagined" is posed as a concrete and urgent task that must be realised by the world's people.

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