

Scared of Our Own Shadow? The Burka as A Metaphorical Mirror for Imperious Culture*

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Abstract

This paper explores the recent focus on the challenge to French cultural identity by women there wearing the full-body burka (burkha, burqa).i. a garment obscuring any view of the face in public. The question is complicated by issues including the right to personal choice in clothing, differing understandings of public decency and the possible effects on identification for security purposes.

As a case study, the response to the burka provides an excellent example of applying binary logic to a multidimensional complex of psychosocial issues related to deeper understandings of identity. The case is noteworthy both for collapsing distinctions significant to such understanding and for its responsiveness to the extremes of passing fashion, but in the name of values acclaimed as fundamental. As such it embodies the extremism it abhors. This relies on exploiting the confusion of terms and thinking associated with the face and the facile in relation to the challenge of necessary diversity in a global society threatened by various forms of imperialism. The burka is also explored as a metaphor mirroring several problematic features of western society.

Introduction

Societies are increasingly challenged by the incapacity of governance processes to address fundamental differences more creatively. Does the active focus on dress codes constitute a focus on the superficial in order to indicate the capacity of government to act decisively on matters of fundamental significance to the population? The President of France declared in 2009

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which is itself an annex of Judge, A. (2009) Facism as Superficial Intercultural Extremism: burkha, toplessness, sunglasses, beards, and flu masks <http://www.laetusinpraesens.org/docs00s/burkha.php>

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The problem of the burka is not a religious problem, it's a problem of liberty and women's dignity. It's not a religious symbol, but a sign of subservience and debasement. I want to say solemnly, the burka is not welcome in France. In our country, we can't accept women prisoners behind a screen, cut off from all social life, deprived of all identity. That's not our idea of freedom (Chrisafis, 2009, np).

From a psychological perspective might not the antipathy in the West to the burka signal that this derives in some measure from its function as a mirror for a particular western mindset? Is the West really challenged by what it sees in that mirror, its own unintegrated shadow in psychoanalytical terms? What might the burka mirror in western society, rightly to be considered unacceptable and a challenge to liberty and dignity? Is contemporary society in some way avoiding the extent to which it has been debased and become subservient in what might be usefully understood as the "shadow of humanity"? Such a "shadow" would be the collective equivalent of the unintegrated understandings of the individual to which the Jungian psychoanalytical tradition attributes much significance.

Such mirrorings can usefully be seen within a context of relative lack of understanding of how the burka comes to be worn, in comparison with the relatively simplistic assumptions made about it. This might be contrasted with western tolerance of other unusual practices and behaviours and failure to question the extent to which they were voluntarily assumed rather than a consequence of community constraint, such as Catholic self-flagellation, use of a hair-shirt, or sado-masochism (domination and submission). Heinze (2009) offers a more sensitive insight from a gay perspective, given the sartorial challenges and misunderstandings experienced by that community. As he says, "My right to express myself, by speaking or merely by exposing my face, is no right at all unless it includes my right to refrain from doing those things".

With respect to veiling Eli Sanders (2001) notes that – the following are separate points from the piece, which I put in with bullets, but otherwise need breaking dots between paras if run as a single quote:

... the origin of veiling is unknown, but scholars agree it existed long before Islam. Some 4,000 years ago, in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, women wore veils. More than two millennia later, when Islam arose, that religion absorbed local veiling practices into its culture... It is impossible to say exactly what the veil means. Its many forms and styles are as diverse as the myriad peoples and cultures that have adopted Islam (or other religions that use the veil). And its significance has never been static or monolithic. The veil and its meanings are constantly evolving and changing, often the subject of intense debate and political agendas, and always buffeted by the tides of history and individual preference... The anger directed at its wearers has left them feeling saddened and misunderstood. They are being defined, they feel, by a piece of clothing they proudly wear but whose meaning to others they cannot control – whose meaning, in fact, they don't even agree on among themselves.

It is curious that the opposition by the Christian and secular worlds to such clothing styles should be so intimately related to the iconic dress celebrated as characteristic of the birth of western civilization. Christian women may imitate the veil suppos-

edly worn by Mary (Catholic Planet, np) while the most wanted person on the planet, blamed for Al-Qaida, is regularly presented in the media in a form of dress indistinguishable from representations of Jesus in churches around the world. Do these indicate a profound confusion of values? In the case of the burka, Ellen McLarney (2009) notes that in the months leading up to 9/11 and in its immediate aftermath, the media demonized the burka as "Afghanistan's veil of terror," a tool of extremists and the epitome of political and sexual repression. However, around the time of Afghanistan's presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005, she charts noticeable shifts in apprehensions of the burka in the western media. In Fall (Autumn) 2006, burka images even appeared on the Paris catwalks and in *Vogue* fashion spreads. She notes an evolution of the burka from "shock to chic" with a process of commodification in the Western media, specifically through its appropriation as haute couture. The latter corresponds to its original status amongst the elite long before Islam.

The following exploration of the possible metaphorical significance of the burka for western culture is partly inspired by its use as a leading example in a radically new approach to generating and using metaphor, with the burka as its leading example. Tony Veale and Yanfen Hao (2008) argue:

For instance, one might describe makeup as "the Western burqa", to communicate not just the idea that each involves a covering of the female form, but that each reflects a society-imposed expectation on the public presentation of women. Each of these roles is a manifestation of the same underlying mechanism for combining concepts, for understanding how they interact... and for determining how they are connected..., even if those connections are tenuous, hidden or not always obvious.

The following sections discuss some insights that might be drawn from metaphorical mirroring of the burka.

Mirroring Facelessness of Citizens in Governance of Democratic Societies

Although there is widespread concern at the increasing facelessness of society and of people in any community, its implications are easy to deny because the condition is typically not effectively embodied in any visible way. Everybody has a face and is increasingly required to have one for purposes of identification. The wearers of the burka therefore offer a striking visible embodiment of a condition of facelessness which pervades society. Whereas a visible face at least implies the possibility of engagement with it, however superficial, a veiled face emphasizes that such a relation is precluded. The merit of the burka is that it draws attention to the extent to which people in modern society are effectively veiled with respect to any meaningful communication, even if their faces are visible. As a mirror of the condition of contemporary society, representation of this condition is most unwelcome.

The European Community has been explored in fiction as the *European Union of Facelessness* (Self, 1998). Facelessness, even in the case of social networking sites like FaceBook, is the subject of commentary with respect to online communities (Crawford et al. 2002). This has been the focus of a study in a French context (Hanna,

2004). The challenge for citizens of a faceless bureaucracy and faceless bureaucrats has long been recognized. Far more critical are explorations of the condition of facelessness in relation to major social issues (Barker, 1999; Beng, 2003; Greenberg, 2009). It might well be asked whether society is collectively entering a modality analogous to that of prosopagnosia, namely the inability to recognize familiar faces (Gawrylewski, 2007). It is particularly appropriate to juxtapose the arguments of Griffin (2008) with those of French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (Waldenfels, 2002) given Levinas' experiences in fascist concentration camps. As a metaphorical mirror, the burka therefore offers an admirable reminder both of facelessness and of the inability of individuals and society to face up to the challenges of the times. The burka is effectively a memorial to a current condition of society which should concern us all.

Mirroring Covert Strategies, Cover-up and Denial

There is widespread recognition of the extent to which collective initiatives now make extensive use of covert strategies, continuing the long tradition of "cloak and dagger" governance. This pattern is widely cited with respect to multinational corporations and their "dirty tricks" and questionable "commissions", readily framed as a necessary feature of increasingly savage competition. Strategies may even be primarily "covert", however any illegality is denied and covered up, made subject to a code of professional *omerta*, namely complicity in failure to denounce any lack of transparency. The need is of course recognized in various forms of camouflage and the development of secret stealth technology for aircraft and ships. Metaphorically such disguise is evident in the ability of some agencies to operate "under the radar" of any public oversight.

Covert strategies are of course most evident in the initiatives of governments, assisted by electronic and other forms of surveillance, possibly excused as economic espionage to ensure competitive advantage, as I discussed elsewhere (Judge, 2007). The use of covert strategies in the furtherance of French governmental agendas was exemplified in 1985 by the scandal of the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior, a boat used by Greenpeace in anti-nuclear testing campaigns. It is appropriate to note the appointment in 2009 of General Stanley McChrystal to command the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and the U.S. Forces Afghanistan (USFOR-A). He is distinguished by having previously commanded the highly secretive Joint Special Operations Command specializing in covert operations. There is much current debate regarding the covert initiatives associated with extraordinary rendition and the covert complicity of European governments, extending to forms of "enhanced interrogation", vainly denied to be "torture" (Ghafoor, 2009).

The existence of "undercover" agents of stealth can of course only be inferred, being necessarily denied as a matter of national security, in appropriate defence of the highest values of civilization. Curiously the justification is only offered via numerous media dramatizations of their heroic actions behind the scenes, indicating the anguishing decisions they are obliged to make in targetted assassinations of those undermining those values. The actions of those invisible agents are intertwined with the rich

culture of conspiracy theories with which an array of secretive and secret societies are purportedly associated, the "inner circles" supposedly constituting the real leadership of the world. One merit of the burka is therefore as a visible reminder of the extent to which undercover activity is effectively upheld as vital to civilization, even though its existence is formally denied. Given the numbers of undercover agents engaged in covert activity and its cover-up, presumably far exceeding the number of people wearing a burka, the burka is a useful visible reminder of the dark side of any society that purports to celebrate genuine openness and freedom. It offers an indication of the omnipresence of the "unsaid" (Judge, 2003)

Mirroring Constraints on Choice in a Consumer Society

The case is widely made that the development of global society is associated above all with the development of freedom of choice, hence the concern that the burka may signify an involuntary inhibition of such choice. There is of course a degree of irony to the fact that it is the supposed lack freedom of choice of those wearing the burka that is considered so problematic when the possible lack of choice of those living homeless in the streets is not. There is little question of legislative measures to alleviate that condition. However, whilst appealing to principle in an area where the quality of proof is questionable, freedom of choice is increasingly problematic in a consumer society as noted by Neal Lawson (2009).

As you read this, take a look around and at yourself. You are decked in and surrounded by symbols of consumer society. It's not just your clothes that give it away, but your watch, jewellery, mobile, MP3 player, bag; the furniture and the fittings; all are brands designed to speak for you. We consume to sustain life, but over the last 30 years we have become turbo consumers. Many people recoil at being told that, like me, they live their life like glorified soldier ants in an army whose purpose is to reproduce a social system over which they have no say. They genuinely feel they follow no fashion and live a free life. We consume to buy identity, gain respect and recognition, and secure status. Shopping is the predominant way in which we know ourselves and each other, and it is at the point of ruling out other ways of being, knowing and living.

Totalitarianism, a society where alternatives are ruled out, was meant to arrive in the jackboots of the communist left or the fascist right. It now arrives with a smile on its face as it seduces us into yet another purchase. The jackboots are in this season's colour and style. We are watched, recorded and ordered not by our political beliefs but by our shopping desires. The gulag is replaced by Gucci. Are we at the point of no return? Is the space for other ways of being human so marginalised that an alternative post-consumer society becomes impossible?

In such a context, how to compare the pressures to wear the burka against the pressures to adopt any other style of clothing? Stuart Jeffries (2009) argues that President Sarkozy has failed to distinguish between the abstract and concrete forms of freedom (as articulated by Hegel).

The former means the freedom to do whatever you want, which, as you know, is the basis of western civilisation and why you can choose between twenty three different kinds of coffee in your local cafe, or thirty two different kinds of four-inch wedge heeled shoes the glossies tell you look sexy this summer but in none of which you can walk comfortably. Such is the freedom of late capitalism, which seems to systematically strive to deprive us of an identity that we might construct ourselves. For Hegel this isn't real freedom, because our wants and desires are determined by society. By those lights, a western fashion victim is as much a sartorial prisoner as a woman in a burka.

The presence in society of people wearing the burka is therefore a highly valuable reminder of the extent to which the freedom of choice, assumed to be characteristic of freedom-loving society, may be highly constrained for many consumers - without full awareness of the fact. There is a problematic sense, explored by George Orwell in *Animal Farm*, (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-four*, (1949), in which the acclaimed freedom of individuals in a consumer society bears increasing resemblance to the discrete choices open to animals within the sustaining processes of intensive farming with a manufactured consent (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

Mirroring Full-body Cognitive Imprisonment

A particular problem that a western-dominated global society currently faces arises from silo-thinking. An information silo is a management system incapable of reciprocal operation with other, related management systems. The silo effect is characterized by a lack of communication or common goals between departments in an organization. Information silo is then a pejorative expression used to describe the absence of operational reciprocity. Derived variants are "silo vision" and "silo mentality". Whilst wearing the burka is challenged and condemned in the West as exemplifying an inappropriately constrained engagement with the world, is it that sense of constraint that is captured by silo-thinking? In which case, is the burka a challenging metaphor for such thinking? Is silo-thinking indeed to be understood as a form of "full-body" cognitive imprisonment, supposedly exemplified by the burka (in western eyes, or at least in France)?

In addition to the case in organizations, concern has been expressed at the constraint under which disciplines consider it appropriate to operate, a constraint which severely inhibits the effective emergence of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary thinking required by the challenges of the times. At the same time each discipline is inspired by the integrity of its own framework and the approach it embodies - as with the experiential justification made by wearers of the burka. A potentially more intriguing insight from such a metaphor is the fact that it is women, as the archetypal other, who wear the burka and are purportedly constrained to wear it by men. For the latter, the burka is a protection of what is most valued against the improprieties of the world. Does this suggest how disciplines operate in their silo-thinking mode? Is it what they most value that they consider appropriate to close off from full-body engagement with the world?

There are various forms of burka, some of which expose the eyes. The full Afghan *chadri* (also common over the border in Pakistan) covers the wearer's entire face except for a small area about the eyes. This area is covered by a concealing net or grille. Such a grille recalls, especially in French, the analytical importance in many disciplines of a "*grille de lecture*" (Moingeon, 1994) Translated as grid or analytical matrix, it is a generic term for the methodological tool for analysis of information, namely a set of relevant criteria or dimensions by which to recognize a pattern therein, notably to develop a synthesis of its significance or to enable comparison with other sets of information. It might also be understood more generally as a disciplined way of apprehending or knowing. As a metaphor for the conventional thinking of a discipline, as typically embodied in an organization, the burka then suggests that the most valued aspects of that discipline only expose themselves to the complexities of the world through a finely developed matrix. The dimensional constraints of such thinking have been discussed separately (Judge, 2009). The argument in fact mirrors that made in the widely debated study by Richard Dawkins (2006). A final chapter, entitled *The Mother of All Burkas* uses burka as a metaphor. In that regard, Tim Bourke (2007) quotes Dawkins:

One of the unhappiest spectacles to be seen on our streets today is the image of a woman swathed in shapeless black from head to toe, peering out at the world through a tiny slit. ... I want to use the narrow slit in the veil [the burka] as a symbol...

Bourke argues that here Dawkins opens up and shows us where his sense of wonder is, what he values in life... for he wants us to see the burka as a symbol of the human being's world view *without science*. Science, in Dawkins' opinion, can free us from this "mother of all burkas":

What science does for us is widen the window. It opens up so wide that the imprisoning black garment drops away almost completely, exposing our senses to airy and exhilarating freedom.

In Bourke's view, Dawkins uses the burka as a representation of the possible limitations of our thinking because of our position in a universe, a "multiverse" or "spectrum of possible universes" in which things can be known more truly. Through science, according to Dawkins (2007, p.374):

We are liberated by calculation and reason to visit regions of possibility that once seemed out of bounds or inhabited by dragons... Could we, by training and practice, emancipate ourselves..., tear off our black burka, and achieve some sort of intuitive – as well as just mathematical – understanding of the very small, the very large, and the very fast? I genuinely don't know the answer, but I am thrilled to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding. Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits.

Again for Bourke, this is a perspective that reaffirms the position of the human being in the cosmos and expresses faith in our ability to understand, "... though perhaps here I can hear a little voice in my head whispering: 'Richard, haven't you ever

wondered whether there might be more in heaven and earth for human beings to understand than just *'the very small, the very large and the very fast?'*"

However, if the burka is indeed a mirror of our cognitive imprisonment as argued here, Dawkins helps to clarify the extent to which his understanding of the cognitive role of science may indeed be just such a burka. Will the future recognize no limitations to current manifestations of such understanding? If human knowledge is to evolve, for which he argues, will it not be precisely through recognition of the limitations associated with specific modes of knowing such as science, if only as it is understood today? (Judge, 2008). Is it not worth considering the degree of truth in the possibility that it is indeed science that is currently The Mother of All Burkas, especially the burkas of all the various scientific disciplines it supposedly integrates? Is it not precisely the assumption that the sciences are without such limitations that is fundamental to their nature as "mini-burkas"?

The tragedy of the times is that each current mode of knowing may be usefully seen as a form of burka, a constraint on wider understanding. That some in society should visibly wear a burka offers a valuable reminder of the extent to which all wear some form of cognitive burka.

As Bourke himself concludes:

Perhaps one day we will all be able to throw off our burkas and recognise that we were all, atheists and creationists, scientists and priests, philosophers and poets, striving by different paths for knowledge of the one reality. Perhaps one day.

Visibly wearing the burka is a living reminder of the pathetic incapacity of all modes of knowing, under their respective (hidden) burkas, to use their insights to respond more effectively to the global condition, other than by righteously asserting that their perspective will prove to be correct for all eternity. A related challenge is the sense in which the burka, as a cognitive mirror, provides a complete protective covering of that which is most threatening as a source of disruptive change to the conventional world, namely any form of alternative. It offers a way of thinking about how the western mainstream effectively "covers" and occludes strategic alternatives in public discourse. In terms of cognitive linguistics, the theme has been explored by George Lakoff (1987).

Mirroring Uncertainty, the Unknown and the Unconscious

The former US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld continues to be cited for his prescience in strategic and security circles due to his succinct articulation of the challenge of what may be known with any confidence in a world of increasing uncertainty. His formulation took the form of a notorious "poem", on The Unknown, presented during a Department of Defense news briefing on 12 February 2002. The insight has been most recently used in the analysis by Nathan Freier (2008). Such a poem is a reminder of the extent to which knowledge of the future is effectively "veiled", as exemplified in some myths, notably with respect to "fate", despite facile assumptions to the contrary, notably with respect to present global challenges. It has been argued that there is a necessity for many to see knowledge of the future as veiled,

whether because of the difficulty in understanding deeper truths in their entirety or because their terrifying nature could not be tolerated.

Hence the merit of exploring, to the extent possible, the nature of incomprehensibility in what has been characterized as an unconscious civilization (Judge, 2008; Saul, 1995). Recent studies have addressed the appropriate attitude in anticipation of the unexpected and the unknown, and its potentially surprising nature, including Cerulo, (2006); Diamond, (2005); Handy, (1990); Homer-Dixon, (2006); Michael, (1997); Ormerod, (2005) and Taleb, (2007). Whereas the unknown and unexpected are necessarily invisible and cannot be effectively represented, the burka again offers a visible reminder of their presence, however much it would be convenient to ignore it in daily life. Ironically, given the central metaphor of Taleb's Black Swan, those wearing the black burka might be seen as vital reminders of the Black Swan effect of which he warns. This refers to the existence and occurrence of high-impact, hard-to-predict, and rare events that are beyond the realm of normal expectations and have a dominant role in history.

Mirroring the Threat of Confrontation with Death

The range of taboos associated with death in western civilization has been repeatedly remarked upon. Society might be said to be organized to avoid confrontation with its reality and meaning -whilst at the same time investing to an historically unprecedented degree in ensuring the death of those in other distant societies. Any depictions of death, of the Grim Reaper, are traditionally veiled in black. Such depictions offer a strange degree of resemblance to the veiled image at the centre of the Abu Ghraib scandal. Veiling in black under a burka, recalling funerary garb, necessarily triggers a fearful response in local communities ("*cela me fait peur*"), a prime motivation for the French banning initiative. Few societies cultivate a proactive relationship with death. A striking exception is that of some Latin American cultures in which there are regular celebrations of *Santa Muerte*, (Saint Death) involving all members of society, eliciting numerous creative representations of death, veiled, masked or not (Judge, 2004).

Curiously the proportion of people in France wearing the burka may be less than those suffering severely from terminal illnesses and desiring death. This situation invites comparison with the legislative debate in the UK (at the time of writing) regarding the rights of those seeking assisted suicide. These have been decisively influenced by Baroness Campbell of Surbiton who has long suffered from degenerative spinal atrophy. Claiming to speak on behalf of all disabled, notably those suffering from terminal disability, her speech was credited with quashing an amendment which would have granted immunity to those accompanying people to countries where assisted suicide was legal. She sought to ensure that the government would support her continued life and its value, and that of others like her, at a time when all governments are much challenged to provide social safety nets and care for the needy. Speaking from the House of Lords, she naively ignored the current suffering and desires of those needy commoners to whom such care could not, or would not, be immediately supplied (Martin, 2009).

The burka therefore offers a much needed mirror to ordered conventional western society of the disruptive threat and imminence of death, thereby encouraging a more healthy response to it.

Mirroring Capacity of Future Response to Extraterrestrials and Otherness

Ironically, wearing a burka offers an excellent suggestive image of how any extraterrestrial visitor might be clothed in an alien environment, as with the masked space suits worn by human astronauts. In fictional depiction, wearers of the burka might even be compared to the Daleks of early science fiction. They might even be framed by western cultures as UFOs in their own right, given the degree to which they are held to be unidentified. Given the probabilities repeatedly rehearsed regarding such alien visitors, it would be regrettable to lose the possibility of educating populations regarding the challenge in reality of such encounters.. Whatever form "alien" might take, the challenge of modern societies is to elicit more creative capacities to respond to unusual behaviours and anomalies of every kind, especially given the extent to which the behaviourally challenged are institutionalized and rendered invisible. It is increasingly clear the extent to which modern society is effectively engendering aliens, out of behavioural conformity with simplistic conventional social norms (Judge, 2000). France itself is extremely challenged by behaviours in urban high-rise communities. Banning does not engender learning.

Europe as a whole is challenged by the otherness of the increasing numbers of immigrants. Is it realistic to expect to be able to "normalize" and "harmonize" their behavior by legislative proscriptions regarding clothing? It is in this sense that the burka both mirrors the existing challenge of the encounter with otherness and offers the opportunity of learning from such encounters. Other images of various face masks are available for comparison¹ (See Figure 1)



Figure 1. Selection of face masks.

Comment

These different forms of cognitive mirroring that the burka offers to imperious western society, provide a healthy insight into the shadow of conventional culture whose recognition it is so comfortable to avoid. The burka offers a stark contrast to a candy floss image of the world in which "bad things" happen elsewhere beyond immediate ken. They can be "designed out" to safeguard a cognitive cocoon. The degree of intimate involvement in such bad things, epitomized by the striking iconography of Abu Ghraib, can be conveniently made the responsibility of others - as with torture, collateral damage, thermobaric weapons, white phosphorus, and the arms trade (from which so many permanent members of the UN Security Council profit so directly)².

It is appropriate to note that the measures envisaged to prohibit wearing of the burka in western societies are strikingly reminiscent of the predictions made with regard to "face police" in the dystopian novel by George Orwell (*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 1949).

Curiously, in the period when the relevant legislation was being debated in France, the French media reported that a full face transplant had been carried out by a team of French doctors for the first time. How such face replacement relates to the issues of facial identity raised by the burka will no doubt be a matter for the future – as such cosmetic surgery becomes more common and a matter of choice.

In this well-shaded environment, avoidance of facing up to challenging issues is cultivated; notably any that are a challenge to current patterns of behaviour, for example the institutionalized shunning of overpopulation challenge as another inconvenient truth (Judge, 2008). The superficial arguments with respect to the burka readily invite a large and facile consensus. The conditions for which the burka offers a mirror are quite another matter, as indicated above. It is in this sense that the visible embodiment of these conditions in the burka as a mirror offers a healthy reminder at this time. The future may judge the maturity of societies by their capacity to remind themselves of these shadowy conditions rather than having been terrified of their own shadow.

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Notes

1. Retrieved November 3, 2010, from <http://images.google.be/images?hl=en&client=firefox-a&rls=org.mozilla:en-GB:official&um=1&q=flu+masks&sa=N&start=140&ndsp=20>
2. Retrieved November 3, 2010, from World's largest arms exporters, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arms_trade#World.27s_largest_arms_exporters

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