

8-1-2014

Not Post-Racial Era, New Racial Era

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The notion of a “post-racial era” not only assumes that the meaning of race has withered in the United States, it also rests on the false assumption that race is something objective and fixed. Speaking from the perspective of a sociologist, I can offer you tons of data that show continuing social and economic inequality in the United States due to race. For example, although it is true that specifically racial language has been removed from most U.S. laws, one can still demonstrate the racialized application of laws. And while it is true that the proportion of blacks in the middle class has increased, it is easy to show that black incomes are no match for white wealth, and that middle-class blacks are more economically vulnerable than middle-class whites. Indeed, more data can be brought forth to show the continuing harm caused by racialized thinking than can be assembled to show its demise.

While attitudes about racial differences have shown positive shifts over the past 30 years, measured by a significant decline in the proportion of Americans who believe that there are inherent differences between blacks and whites, the proportion of Americans who are racist has not declined. This is because of the subjectivity and fluidity of the concept of race. If the targets of racism have increased, then racism has increased. If the pool of negatively racialized groups has expanded, then racism has expanded. Here I point to the racialization of Arab Americans, a group once treated as marginal white but now facing high levels of prejudice and discrimination, both individual and structural. Driven by people who believe that personal traits can be tied to physical features and modes of dress, and that all who share certain visibilities also share certain personal traits, these attitudes and actions represent what we call race and racism.

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The history of Arab Americans is complex and varied, and a number of scholars have demonstrated that Arab Americans faced discrimination during their formative years in the U.S. [roughly 1900-1930]. Yet by my way of accounting, as a group, they had greater levels of freedom of movement, residential choice, access to education, participation in government and financial success than contemporaneous African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans and Native Americans. Similar to “white ethnics” — Southern and Eastern Europeans and Jews — their access to resources for social mobility was much higher than people of color, while at the same time, they faced exclusions and barriers imposed by established whites.

The most significant barriers Arabs faced in this era was challenges to their right to naturalize as U.S. citizens, and later, access to immigrant visas — both rights restricted to people “commonly understood” to be white. Naturalization decisions at the time were made on a case-by-case basis by local court clerks, who used their own sense of who was white to decide eligibility because the federal government had not clarified matters of race. Decisions to deny naturalization to Arab immigrants occurred in some cases and in some places, and not in others. When made, they were

justified by the idea that the geographic origins of Arabs meant that they were not “white” as commonly understood or intended by U.S. law, even if they were considered Caucasian. Judges ruled in varying ways between 1909 and 1913 in court challenges to these decisions. The most important case for Arab Americans at the time was a federal appellate court case in which the judge ruled that George Dow, a “Syrian” was eligible for naturalization because “generally received opinion” supported the idea that people from the part of Asia that included Syria were white persons.” [Dow v US, 1915]

These challenges to Arab rights to naturalize occurred during a time of anti-immigrant hysteria in the U.S., characterized by calls for barring Asians from migrating, resulting in the 1917 Immigration Act, also known as the Asiatic Barred Zone Act. Claims — broadly accepted by established whites — of the racial inferiority of Southern and Eastern Europeans led to the imposition of quotas limiting the immigration of them as well as Arabs (called Syrians then). When we set the naturalization challenges faced by Arabs in their larger context, it is clear that these actions were part of a national effort to solidify white privilege and exclusivity at a time when who was white was defined more narrowly than it is now.

Interestingly, in 1941, the Bureau of Immigration Appeals (BIA) decided in favor of Majid Ramsay Sharif, an Arab who had been denied an immigrant visa on the basis that he was not white, using government testimony submitted in a 1923 Supreme Court case concerning the denial of naturalization to an Asian man [US v Thind]. The BIA declared that Arabs were white because “so much of the Near East has contributed to, and was assimilable with, the development of Western Civilization of Greece and Rome” and “that it was not intended, either in 1790 ... or certainly in 1940 ... that Arabians be excluded from the group of ‘white persons’.” Thus, as Immigration and Naturalization Service historian Marian Smith (2003) pointed out, based on historical and civilizational arguments, the BIA argued that “whiteness” was associated with Western civilization, and that Western civilization included the Arab world. It is interesting to consider whether ruling differently might have contested Jesus’ customary portrayal in white American culture as a white man. A similar point was made in a letter to the Secretary of Commerce and Labor in 1909 from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, complaining about the denial of naturalization to Turks, Syrians, Armenians, Palestinians and Jews. It argued that if these decisions were upheld, “David and Isaih [sic] and even Jesus of Nazareth himself” would be prevented from becoming U.S. citizens.

Constructing the Arab Other

This very idea — that the Arab World and the West share a common civilization and history — is no longer commonly held in American culture (although it is factually correct). Indeed, quite the opposite is true and this outcome is due to concerted, politically motivated efforts to define Arabs as a people who are inherently different from and inferior to white Americans. While most of the white ethnics who had earlier experienced discrimination and limiting immigration quotas were eventually absorbed into “whiteness,” Arab Americans were symbolically moved in the opposite direction by racialized portrayals aimed at defining the way Americans saw them. These social constructions of Arabs and the Arab World became dominant in American culture beginning in the late 1960s. They were tied to the foreign policy objectives of a rising U.S. global power and to efforts to build broad American popular support for the actions of the State

of Israel, accomplished by likening Israelis to Americans and Arabs to a lesser civilization. Thus, the 1967 Israeli occupation of the rest of Palestine, as well as parts of Egypt and Lebanon, was hailed in the American media as a victory of the civilized over the barbaric, of “us” over “them.” Coupled with media coverage of the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympics, the 1973 Arab oil embargo, Abscam and a continuing flow of anti-Arab films and talk shows, the U.S. social climate became so hostile to Arabs that Arab Americans founded several major organizations during this time to combat the growing racism. In 1977, prominent sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset declared that public opinion polls showed that American attitudes toward Arabs were “close to racist.” The renowned Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said was driven in part to write his 1978 masterpiece *Orientalism* by wanting an explanation for how it was that depictions of Arabs he saw in the U.S. bore no relationship to the Arab World he knew. In sum, if whiteness is determined not only by phenotype (skin color, facial structure, hair type) but also by notions of a shared culture, history and values, then Arabs became unambiguously non-white when the narrative was rewritten to sever historical ties between white America and “them.”

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By the 1980s, Arab Americans had clearly been transformed into a cultural “other.” In addition to being represented negatively in films and on American television, talk shows and news programs, they were described in dehumanizing ways in classrooms and textbooks, in encyclopedias and thesauruses, and were degraded in other venues of culture such as Halloween costumes and video games. To provide a flavor of the time, I quote from an essay published in the popular science *Omni* magazine entitled “The Importance of Hugging” by Howard Bloom (1989). In it, Bloom offered a cultural explanation for “Arab brutality” (or is it Muslim?) and called Arabs a “walking time bomb.”

Could the denial of warmth lie behind Arab brutality? Could these keepers of Islamic flame be suffering from a lack of hugging? ... In much of Arab society the cold and even brutal approach to children has still not stopped. Public warmth between men and women is considered a sin. And the Arab adult, stripped of intimacy and thrust into a life of cold isolation, has become a walking time bomb. An entire people may have turned barbaric for the simple lack of a hug.

All of these efforts were intended to convey a simple message: Arabs were a people who held different values from everyone else, but most significantly, from “us.” They were from a barbaric, backward civilization that shared no history with the civilized West: They did not respect human life, women or even children. And most importantly, they were all the same, whether rich, poor, Christian, Muslim, educated, illiterate, Palestinian, Egyptian, Iraqi, Saudi, male, female, young or old. (See Jack Shaheen’s body of work for detailed media analysis.)

A wide body of literature demonstrates the increasing social and political exclusion of Arab Americans that flowed from these depictions, as well as from the actions of persons who wanted their voices of protest to be silenced. Candidates for political office frequently returned Arab-American campaign contributions on the premise that they tainted their candidacy. Federal government agencies, sometimes with local police cooperation, spied on Arab-American activists and student organizers were often labeled as (and sometime charged with being)

supporters of terrorism. Except for some progressive left circles, Arab Americans were usually not invited to “sit at the table” of coalitions of activists and policymakers because their presence was thought to “poison” a group’s credibility. Arab-American women scholars were shouted down by feminists at scholarly meetings, unable to present their papers while being accused of supporting misogyny. For my part, as a budding scholar of Arab Americans, some faculty told me that I was studying terrorists while my mentor, Professor Janet Abu-Lughod, told me that I would never be able to get a university job. All of these actions rendered Arab-American activists, scholars, history and experiences “invisible.” When you are invisible, no one cares about what is happening to you. This principle applied equally to Arab Americans and to Arabs overseas, and that was the point.

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This institutional exclusion had its parallel in social relations, as Arab Americans experienced many forms of institutional and individual prejudice, discrimination, harassment and periodic hate crimes. It was said during these times that Arabs were the only group that could be portrayed as barbaric, caricatured as animals, publicly slandered in the mainstream media and ridiculed at work and school without negative reprisal. Since Arabs were not officially a minority group, they had limited access to the primary civil rights institutional venues for reporting incidents, launching complaints, demanding redress and collective protest. They were uncountable and silenced in yet another way. The same was true for Muslims; after the 1979 Iranian revolution, they were increasingly characterized by the very same stereotypes and often conflated with Arabs, a pattern that intensified in the 1990s. Bloom’s quote above is only one of many such examples of conflation. Here again we see the relationship between stereotypes and political interests/foreign policy: As challenges to Western hegemony in the Arab World and beyond came increasingly from Islamist activists and decreasingly from nationalists, the stereotypes were nearly seamlessly shifted from one collectivity to the other, or applied to both at the same time. Muslims were also portrayed as a group that potentially threatened the American culture itself, in particular its core values of democracy and personal liberty, a characterization that went beyond those of Arabs. Despite organized protests and attempts to counter these representations, both Arab Americans and Muslim Americans lacked the power to have much impact. After all, being negatively racialized and being powerless are highly correlated. (For an explanation of why Arab Americans and Muslim Americans show relatively high levels of education and income despite this racialization, see my article “The Social Construction of Difference and the Arab American Experience.”)

The Post 9/11 period

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Immediately on September 11, 2001, all of this prior stigmatization and disempowerment crystallized into a multi-pronged attack on Arab and Muslim Americans, as they were collectively held responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon by agencies of the U.S. government and much of the American public. After all, pre-existing social constructions had configured them as people who would readily conduct and/or approve of this type of attack. Absent this framework for interpreting 9/11, it is unlikely that the millions in

these communities would have been held accountable for the actions of 19 people they had never met. We did not witness this type of public and government reaction to other recent mass murders in the U.S., such as the Oklahoma City bombings, or the Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, Aurora, and Oak Creek Sikh Temple shootings, or Fort Hood 1 and 2, or the Boston Marathon bombing, although even in these cases, when a Muslim was involved, the narrative was different. Surely the massive number of people killed on 9/11, the destruction of major American symbols and the fact that the perpetrators were not from the U.S. are very significant to the higher level of reaction, but the type of reaction, the collective blaming, was a specific outcome of framing of Arabs and Muslims as a monolithic group that was inherently violent.

With this point, I announce my dissent from a trend I find among many scholars these days, which is to mark 9/11 as some kind of starting point for anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia. Not only is this not the case, as the literature amply demonstrates, when we examine what this assumption means, I think many will agree that the error is significant. First of all, we must understand that racism causes all members of a group to be held responsible for something. The “something” does not happen first. What happens first is an understanding that all people of a certain category can be viewed as the same, that there are no variations in values, beliefs or points of view. The bombing of Pearl Harbor and subsequent internment of Japanese Americans in camps did not cause anti-Japanese racism, rather racism against Japanese Americans provided support for the idea that all Japanese people posed a threat to the U.S. and allowed the internments to take place with government and popular support.

This sequencing, that anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia *preceded* the collective attacks on Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 is important to recognize and is one of the major points of my book *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11*, which is based on sociological research I conducted after 9/11. When people assert that it all changed for Arab and Muslim Americans after 9/11, this means that it was the event itself that caused this change. It means that the attack by 19 people who happened to be Arabs and Muslims caused the collective reprisals against millions of Arab and Muslim Americans. This simply is not and cannot be the case because that is not how social life works. If it did work like this, then all whites would be vulnerable to attack after each violent mass killing by a white male. Social research has consistently shown that human reactions to events (and to people) are based on the meaning associated with the event, the framework in which it is understood. In the U.S., white crime is portrayed as an individual act, not a reflection of what any other white person would do. Individual responsibility is a positive trait associated with whiteness, a fact not unrelated to whites being the dominant group in the U.S. Similarly, the meaning of 9/11 was, for so many Americans, established long before the event ever happened.

There is no doubt that it all got worse for Arab Americans and Muslim Americans in the years that followed the 9/11 attacks. This historical period cannot be summarized; the assaults on freedom of movement, personal safety and human dignity were so many and came from so many places. Readers can consult my writings as well as those of other scholars about this period because it has been amply documented. What we can say is that today, 13 years after these events, there is clearly greater unanimity among Arab Americans that they have been racialized. Mobilizations of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans and their allies are opening places at

the table that have been long denied. This agency has many forms, from advocacy for a Census category (right now Arabs are counted as whites and cannot be easily distinguished in local and national statistics) to waging unapologetic campaigns for Palestine, and everything in between. These struggles cleverly balance themes of similarity and difference that look nothing like the ones that were used to racialize them. Arab Americans and Muslim Americans and their allies were doing all of these things prior to 9/11, yet they could be easily ignored or discredited. Right now, despite the concerted efforts of what has become primarily an anti-Muslim movement (which drags Arabs into it by association), led by a core group of activists with easy access to certain media outlets, it seems to me that more people are listening. The massive and unjust reactions to the 9/11 attacks brought Arab and Muslim Americans out of invisibility, and efforts to silence them, while ongoing, are less effective than they used to be.

In the U.S., race is not simply a black-white dichotomy; race is a lived reality, a position on a continuum that correlates with how one is socially perceived, how one experiences government, dominant social institutions, freedom of speech and movement, personal safety and human dignity. Although still technically “white,” Arab-American history reveals a racialization tied to the rise of the U.S. as a global power that has produced social experiences similar to other people of color. Not post-racial, this is new racial.