

ISLAMOPHOBIA, CULTURE AND RACE IN THE AGE OF EMPIRE

This paper offers a genealogical sketch of the figure of the Muslim Other as it is figured in the post-Cold War popular and political imaginary. It explores why 'culture' has acquired a putative explanatory power in the post-Cold War (geo)politics. In addressing differentialist racism, it posits Islamophobia as an ideological response that conflates histories, politics, societies and cultures of the Middle East into a single unified and negative conception of an essentialized Islam, which is then deemed incompatible with Euro-Americaness. In this context, the category of brown, once the signifier of an exotic Other, is undergoing a transformation in conjunction with the deepening of Islamophobia, a formation that posits brown, as a strategy of identification, as alterity to the Euro-Americaness, and as terror and threat.

Keywords Islamophobia; race; culture; brown; difference; differentialist racism; Muslim identity; terrorism

Introduction: 'Security-Other'

In November 2006, six Muslim imams were removed from a flight from Minneapolis to Phoenix because passengers and the flight crew had become 'spooked' by 'suspicious behavior' on the part of the imams (Saunders 2007). According to an *Associate Press* report, the police listed the episode as 'Security-Other,' although some saw it as a case of 'flying while Muslim' (Freed 2006). When the removed passengers later declared they would file a lawsuit against the airline and 'John Doe passengers' for discrimination, an amendment was promptly introduced in the Congress to shield passengers from lawsuits because such lawsuits 'chill the flying public's willingness to report suspicious behavior' (Saunders 2007). The talk of filing lawsuit prompted a Minneapolis lawyer to point out, 'When you drive up the road towards the airport, there's a big road sign that says, "Report suspicious behavior,"' adding that 'There's no disclaimer that adds, "But beware if you do that, you might get sued"' (Condon 2007).

The 'flying imams' episode, as it was dubbed by some clever journalists (Turner 2007), captures several issues of interest to my argument. The

characterization of the flying public as 'spooked' upon seeing visible signs of a Muslim Other is an apt one. As the etymology of the word suggests, spookiness has to do with ghostliness: the 'public' is haunted by the ghost of the Muslim Other. Being spooked suggests both the fear of the irrational and the irrational fear. It invokes the presence of a general 'ambient fear' engendered through securitization of everyday life and a governmentality devoid of politics. The locus of that fear is the 'brown' men of the Middle East, or the Muslim Other. 'Flying while brown,' to use Grewal's (2006, p. 214) phrase, ushers in a process of racialization and a redefinition of brown from an exotic Other to a signifier of potential terror. The Muslim Other haunts our society, 'our international community.'

In this paper, I argue that brown, once the signifier of an exoticism, has come to embody the menacing Other in the today's geopolitical imagination, in a context where 9/11 provided the horizon within which to recast (global) socio-political antagonisms in 'cultural' terms. In the new political order called Empire (Hardt & Negri 2000), the racist imagination does not appeal to 'race' to posit the inferiority of an Other based on biology but to 'cultural differences' and their insurmountability. In this framework, this paper offers a genealogical sketch of the figure of the Muslim Other as it is figured in the post-Cold War popular and political imaginary. It argues that 'culture' has acquired a putative explanatory power in addressing (global) socio-political antagonisms because it accommodates the evasion of the politics of the emergence of the Muslim Other. I argue that the appeal to the category of culture to explain the Muslim Other takes two forms. In the first, the Muslim Other is seen as the embodiment of inferior civilizations and cultures. In the second, the attempt is made to embrace difference by trying to 'understand' the culture and religion of the Other. In either case, what is conveniently left out is the politics that has given rise to the category of the Muslim Other. Drawing on the work of Omi and Winant (1994) on racial formation and racial projects, I explore the formation of a generic 'Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim' Other. The notion of Islamophobia is viewed as an ideological response that not only empties politics from (international) politics by attributing to Islam the ills of (global) society but also by conflating politics, histories, societies and cultures of the Middle East into a unified and negative conception of an essentialized Islam as ideology, which is then deemed incompatible with Euro-Americaness. I argue that the irreducibility of this absolute Otherness of Muslim Other is a projection of an inherent antagonism at the heart of our global 'impossible society.'

In the post-9/11 context, it is important that we address the cultural politics of 'brown' as a far-reaching racial formation in so far as it has become a site where various issues and security discourses are being conflated and inflected with right-wing agendas: brown and security threat (Middle Eastern men and terror); brown and immigration ('border security,' where

anti-immigration rhetoric is inflected with ‘terror’); brown and economy (work visas to non-Europeans jeopardize our security). The category of brown in this formation is undergoing a transformation in conjunction with the deepening of Islamophobia, a formation that posits alterity to the Euro-American identity as terror and threat. ‘Flying while brown’ widens the pathologies of racism to mark more and more ‘undesirables.’ The generic category of ‘Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim’ operates in a general opacity that ‘brown’ occupies. The logic that informs Islamophobia, as I will try to show in this paper, has allowed the security state to utilize this opacity to its advantage in its deployment of brown as an ‘identificatory strategy.’¹ In order to construct my argument, I will first provide a genealogical sketch of the emergence of the figure of the Muslim Other.

A genealogical sketch of the emergence of the Muslim Other

Today’s imagery, narratives, and ideas about Muslims, the Middle East, and ‘Islam’ have their roots in Orientalist visions and narratives that the ‘West’ has produced for centuries (Said 1978, 1993). Said’s (1978) work posits Orientalism as a discursive and textual operation through which the Occident renders the Orient knowable. Said’s contention is that the knowing of the Orient has accommodated Western imperialist projects. Foucault’s influence on Said’s thinking in his formulation of Orientalism lies in the idea of discourse as a materialization of power/knowledge. After the publication of *Orientalism* (1978), Said picked up the topic of representation of Islam more specifically in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981).² As the title (covering and covering up) and the subtitle suggest, Said thinks today’s media narratives are still involved in the reproduction of the Orient as knowledge at the service of power. In the three decades since Said published the first edition of *Covering Islam*, the ‘Muslim world’ has become a more pressing issue for the ‘international community.’

I shall not review here Said’s list of (mis)representations of Islam or his objections. Suffice it to say that his contention is that Islam is not one thing; over a billion people from diverse societies with diverse traditions and cultures across the world practice ‘it’ in diverse ways with various degrees of commitment and passion. Just as there is not one Christianity, we should not speak of one Islam. Moreover, ‘Islam’ as a doctrine and a faith must be treated separately from the discourse of Islam, as Said has argued since the publication of *Orientalism*. My objective here is to step back and retrace those geopolitical developments to which those discourses of the Middle East were responses and from which they drew.

Although today’s major geopolitical concern is security/terrorism, other developments have contributed to the contemporary rise of the profile of

'Islam' in the West. The 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the 1970s Arab oil embargo, and the ensuing oil crisis were among these developments. The 'vulnerability' of the United States to Arab manipulation of 'oil as weapon' solidified the caricature of Muslim Middle East as oil suppliers in the political and popular narratives. The next major development was the Iranian revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini that culminated in the overthrow of American-backed monarchy in Iran. The leader of the Iranian revolution was steadfast in his criticism of the United States for its support of the Iranian dictator. In this context, another caricature of Muslims, mobs of chanting fanatics, was added to the list of negative images that shape the discourse of Islam (Said 1981, p. 7). The next incident was the taking of American embassy employees as hostage by radical students in Tehran. The episode, which lasted for 444 days, was an emotionally charged issue for American audiences. The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* in 1988, and the fatwa issued by Ayatollah Khomeini against him, stirred passion and created violent controversies throughout the world. The involvement by the United States in the Gulf War in 1990 to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait put the Middle East on the front pages once more. The first World Trade Center bombing in 1993 was yet another development in this context. One of the striking elements of the reaction to the bombing in 1993 was the degree to which Muslims in America were viewed as a potential 'network of sympathizers.'³ The Oklahoma City bombing raised the profile of Muslims in America in the initial media coverage of the bombing. Countless terrorism 'experts' testified about 'the sizable community of Islamic fundamentalists in Oklahoma City,' about the 'earmarks of Islamic car-bombers of the Middle East,' and about the parallels that have 'roots in the Middle East.' Before the real perpetrators were caught, brown 'men of Middle Eastern descent' were being sought by media and authorities.⁴ Finally, the events of September 11, 2001, brought issues of 'Islam,' 'Muslims,' and the Middle East to the fore on a scale not seen previously.

Today's discourse of Islam and Muslims is inextricably bound with the issue of terrorism, which tends to frame all other issues concerning the Middle East. The present day notion of terrorism, however, has a relatively short history. The origin of today's terrorism discourse is located in the 1980s American foreign policy during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. This era has been characterized as the era of aggressive militarism and a ruthless foreign policy as a response to the perceived erosion of American power and standing in the international political arena. The preceding presidency of Jimmy Carter had entailed events and policies that contributed to a real and perceived decline in America's credibility as a superpower. Those policies and events include the 'loss' of Nicaragua and Iran to revolutions with no sympathies towards America's interests in their respective regions, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, a protracted hostage crisis in Iran and the failure to release those hostages militarily, and President Carter's emphasis on human rights.

These policies and events, viewed as symptoms of a weakened America, led to a call for a renewal of the projection of American power around the globe. A central theme of the Reagan presidency and its approach to foreign policy was 'resurgent America' (Prince 1993). The call for projecting American power in this era required aggressive intervention policies around the globe. To project American power around the globe the United States became involved in the invasion of Grenada, the sponsorship of the Contra's war in Nicaragua, the bombing of Libya, and a host of other CIA's secret wars and covert actions around the world.⁵ This aggressive militarism, which culminated in the military operation in the Persian Gulf in 1991, was part of a renewed Cold War by the Reagan administration to reassert American leadership after a period of perceived decline. The major thrust of foreign policy in the 1980s was formulated in response to (perceived) Soviet Union aggression. Accordingly, conflicts around the world were constructed ideologically as a struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union (i.e. the free world versus the evil empire). The ideological struggle in this context, however, could not be won with the red scare of the 1950s, for anxieties about colossal communist takeover did not have the political resonance they had had in the 1950s. In its place, 'terrorism' emerged as one of the most potent ideological signifiers of the era. In Prince's (1992) view, 'terrorism' became 'a term which functioned essentially as a synonym for communism but was sufficiently new and vivid that it could carry a great deal of political freight, unlike the somewhat discredited anti-communism' of an earlier period (p. 31). The threat of terrorism, as 'Russia's secret weapon,' thus became a major theme in the new Cold War, as reflected in various mainstream media discourses of the period (Prince 1993).

A cursory look at the popular narratives during this decade reveals the ways in which the prevailing ideology of the era was worked into the popular films and was embodied in the heroic gestures of the celluloid heroes. Films such as *Red Dawn* (1984), *Invasion USA* (1985), *Rambo: First Blood – Part 2* (1985), *Rocky IV* (1985), *Rambo III* (1986), and *Top Gun* (1986) responded to, and embodied, the theme of resurgent America. They celebrated militarism, patriotism, and superior American military technology and power. As Kellner (1995) argues, the Hollywood films of the 1980s 'nurtured this militarist mindset and thus provided cultural representations that mobilized support' for an aggressive foreign policy (p. 75). Hollywood's response to America's 'aggressive international posture,' in Prince's (1993) argument, was to produce a 'cycle of invasion-and-rescue films that collectively argued for the need to project strong American military power overseas' (p. 240). Drawing from the Cold War imagery, films such as *Top Gun* (1986) and *Rambo II* (1985) 'dramatized heroic ideals of empire' and depicted heroes that 'functioned as personification of a national will and warrior spirit encoded by the foreign policy rhetoric of the Reagan period' (p. 240). This new Cold War in the

context of a crumbling (and later disintegrated) Soviet Union ushered in a new evil enemy. Thus, enters the evil 'Arab' enemy. Films such as *Delta Force* (1986), *Iron Eagle* (1986), and *Iron Eagle II* (1988) presented Arab 'superenemy' which eventually found its incarnation in Saddam Hussein and Iraq' (Kellner 1995, p. 83).⁶ The same Orientalist cultural worldview that produced such films provided the interpretive framework to render intelligible the historical-political conflict that was the Persian Gulf War. That worldview depicted Arabs as backward, as savages (in the eternal struggle with our forces of civilization), and as incompetent (Prince 1993).⁷ The Otherness of the Muslim Other is sharpened beyond abstract foreign policy frameworks and fictional world of Hollywood blockbuster fare with the events of 9/11.⁸ These popular narratives provided the initial framework for the media and state discourses that followed the events of 9/11 to facilitate the construction and intensification of the generic category of 'Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim' Other.

(Politicized) culture and the escape from politics

The category of 'culture' and the notion of 'cultural difference' have acquired a great deal of currency in the post-Cold War geopolitical thinking. The notion of 'clash of civilizations,' for example, has found a particular currency. Not surprisingly, this notion, popularized by Samuel Huntington in a 1993 article, was first used in an article by Bernard Lewis (1990) titled, 'The roots of Muslim rage.'⁹ Much of the thinking in international relations, security and strategic studies had been invested in the bipolar paradigm of the Cold War era. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the clash of civilizations has become the paradigm that allegedly explains the geopolitical conflicts around the world. The 'quality media' in the United States (e.g. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*) overwhelmingly framed the events of September 11, 2001, within the context of culture, Islam, and civilizations.¹⁰ Although the 'clash of civilizations' paradigm had been forcefully rejected by experts as amateurish history and fanciful political science,¹¹ it has become the paradigm to reach for when explaining all kinds of phenomena in the Middle East. Social problems, economic failures, political stalemates, corruption, to name a few, are routinely explained by attributing these phenomena to 'Islam.'

Consider the reactions to the atrocities that took place on September 11, 2001. The official response to the burning question, 'why do they hate us?', came in the words of President Bush: they hate us because 'we're the brightest beacon for freedom.'¹² The pundits did not dare deviate from such a line of response. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, in those rare moments when someone did question such a line of thinking, they were attacked vehemently. On October 3, 2001, Susan Sontag appeared on *Nightline*, a late night

television public affairs program, to defend a brief three-paragraph piece she had written for *The New Yorker* as her reaction to 9/11. The writing in question had appeared in the magazine on September 24, 2001. The brief piece had caused a stern reaction by commentators. What had particularly aroused the ire of many politicians and commentators in the media was this question posed by Sontag (2001, p. 32): ‘Where is the acknowledgement that this was not a “cowardly” attack on “civilization” or “liberty” or “humanity” or ‘the free world’ but an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions?’ For all the attacks on Sontag for expressing a dissenting opinion, the *Nightline* episode was billed as a reflection on free speech in a time of crisis and not on the substance of her assertions. Even the major ‘newspapers of record’ (e.g. *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*) did not seek any potential explanation for the terrorist attacks in terms of American Middle East foreign policy. Among the insults and accusations directed at Sontag was that she was ‘part of the blame America first crowd.’ This accusation, which was leveled against her by Mr Todd Gauziano of the Heritage Foundation, is the standard line by the political class and the pundits. According to this view, there is no explanation for what happened on September 11, 2001 other than the pathologies of the Muslim Other.

In contrast to this approach to the religious identity of the individuals responsible for the atrocities on September 11, 2001, another one attempted to understand the religion of the Other. In an episode titled ‘Islam 101,’ *The Oprah Winfrey Show* aired on October 5, 2001, with the stated objective to ‘broaden our understanding of Islam’ in a context where 9/11 has ‘focused’ our attention on Islam and the Middle East.¹³ The show included maps, statistics, and other items intended as educational tools (e.g. teaching the pillars of Islam). Ms Winfrey started the show by saying, ‘We’ve been told by our leaders and thinking people around the world that now more than ever it is important for us to understand and be tolerant of other cultures and religions.’ Issues of prejudice and tolerance have an experiential dimension for her: ‘Well, as an African-American, I have witnessed over the years how difficult it is for some people to tolerate others if they do not really understand.’ The guests in the episode included Professor Akbar Ahmed, the Chair of Islamic Studies at American University who had once served as the High Commissioner of Pakistan to Great Britain. Professor Ahmed was invited to explain Islam. As Ms Winfrey put it, ‘His book, *Islam Today: A Short Introduction to the Muslim World*, is on back order just about everywhere.’ The other main guests were Queen Rania of Jordan and Dr Maleeha Lodhi, Pakistan’s ambassador to the United States, who ‘has been called the moderate face of Islam that Pakistan wants Americans to see.’ Both of these women were repeatedly pointed out as examples of ‘modern’ or ‘moderate’ Muslims.

In these two examples (the reaction to Sontag’s question, and ‘Islam 101’) we find our choices, in the official and popular reactions to 9/11, for thinking

about the politics of terrorism. On the one hand, the officials, the punditry class, and right-wing religious groups entertain no such thoughts, believe it to be blasphemy, and in the process see terrorism as the pathology of an inferior culture, civilization, and religion. On the other hand, in an American version of 'multicultural' sensibility, the response is to try to understand the religion and culture of the 'Other' and rescue 'Islam' from those who give it a bad name.¹⁴ As Žižek (2002) has argued, this is a 'gesture of ideological mystification *par excellence*.' That is to say, 'probing into cultural traditions is precisely not the way to grasp the political dynamics which led to the September 11 attacks' (p. 34).

In his analysis of the news media and the discourse of the conflict of civilizations as a paradigm for explaining 9/11, Abrahamian (2003), a historian of the Middle East, offers three explanations. First, in viewing the world in civilizational blocks America seeks to 'preserve hegemony over Europe.' Second, Huntington's paradigm is far easier to comprehend for journalists and their readers than complicated explanations of the Middle East politics, especially as it 'purports to explain politics all the way from Morocco to Indonesia' (Abrahamian 2003, p. 534). Pesky empirical details that pose problems for Huntington's paradigm are easily ignored: religion does not explain why Iran aligns itself with Russia instead of Chechnya, Armenia instead of Azerbaijan, and India instead of Pakistan. The third explanation, which Abrahamian views as the main reason for Huntington's 'triumph,' is 'his ability to analyse international politics without discussing real politics, especially the Arab-Israeli conflict.' That linkage, argues Abrahamian (2003), 'is seen as transgressing a taboo line' (p. 535). This taboo line exists in most popular narratives involving international politics and the politics of the Middle East. It is for the same reason that 'culture' has acquired this currency. In short, today there is a shift from politics to culture. As a historian, Abrahamian is mindful of similar evasion of politics in explaining the rest of the world by Westerners in a bygone era. He points out that years ago, Ivan Hannaford, the author of the classic *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, had argued that the concept of 'race' was the lens through which the West saw the rest of the world by the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, Abrahamian believes, the concept of culture has eclipsed politics.¹⁵ Here the absence of politics has found different expressions: absence of a political world order after the Cold War (Bauman 2002), social managerialism replacing politics (Žižek 2002), and the war on terrorism as war on politics itself (Hesse & Sayyid 2001).¹⁶ In Badiou's (2006, pp. 114–115) philosophical reflection on the 'war on terror,' we find a succinct formulation:

when a predicate is attributed to a *formal* substance (as is the case with any derivation of a substantive from a formal adjective) it has no other consistency than that of giving an ostensible content to that form. In

'Islamic terrorism,' the predicate 'Islamic' has no other function except that of supplying an apparent content to the word 'terrorism' which is itself devoid of all content (in this instance, political).

The question arises: what becomes of race and racism in this context?

Islamophobia, culture, and differentialist racism in the age of Empire

It is so weird. Before 9/11, I am just a white guy, living a typical white guy's life. All my friends had names like Monica, Chandler, Joey and Ross . . . I go to bed September 10th white, wake up September 11th, I am an Arab. (Dean Obeidallah, Arab-American comedian, 'Axis of Evil Comedy Tour')

The comedian's observation on the racial order in the United States after 9/11 exposes several issues. The changing 'racial' status overnight, as simplified as it is, points out that not only is race not 'definable' in biological terms (i.e. it is a social construction), its construction is a product of history (see Wade 2002, Frankenberg 1993). Omi and Winant's (1994) concepts of racial formation and racial projects are particularly helpful here. Racial formation, the sociohistorical process through which racial categories are created and transformed, is 'a process of historically situated *projects*' (p. 55, original emphasis). For them, a racial project is 'simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines'. 'Racial projects,' they maintain, 'connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized, based upon that meaning' (p. 56).

That our Arab-American comedian is officially classified, by the US Census Bureau and other governmental agencies, as 'white' or 'Caucasian' will not lessen his anxieties about being treated as an alien 'Other' or 'non-white.' Although the population of Arab Americans is highly diverse in terms of national origins and ancestry, religious background, and phenotypes (even if Hollywood has reinforced the 'brown' skin type), a monolithic image of Arab Americans in the popular imagination persists. The diversity is even richer for Muslim Americans: although two-thirds are foreign-born, their national origins represent eighty different countries, from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, with 77 percent of them holding US citizenship. Among them are white and African-American converts, native-born Muslims, and a wide range of ethnic

backgrounds (only 25 percent originate from 'Arab' countries). As for other indicators, Muslim Americans are better educated and better off than the nation as a whole.¹⁷ Again, despite such diversity, the monolithic image of Muslim Other persists in the popular and political discourses.

In this context, addressing racial formation in terms of racial projects at the macro level of social processes, we may point to judicial, legislative, and administrative initiatives by the state. The infamous words of President Bush in 2001, 'Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists,' which neatly recuperates the bipolar structure of the Cold War, (re)constitutes the us/ them structure. The executive and legislative measures that have followed these initiatives 'have included mass arrests, secret and indefinite detentions, prolonged detention of "material witnesses," closed hearings and use of secret evidence, government eavesdropping on attorney-client conversations, FBI home and work visits, wiretapping, seizures of property, removals of aliens with technical visa violations, and mandatory special registration.' As a result, as of 2004, 'at least 100,000 Arabs and Muslims living in the United States have personally experienced one of these measures.'¹⁸ At the micro-social level, to follow the racial formation argument, we might say that the state of being 'spooked' and the ability to 'see' suspicious brown men (in this or similar cases) who 'look' a particular way is a way of experiencing racialization. In Omi and Winant's (1994) language, 'our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on the preconceived notions of a racialized social structure' (p. 59). The color-coded terrorism threat advisory scale by the Homeland Security Advisory System, and its politicized deployment by the Bush administration, is where the social structure and the individual psychic meet. Here these projects, against the backdrop of relentless cultural representations of Muslim Other, entail the construction and intensification of the generic category of 'Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim' Other (see Naber 2006, Volpp 2003). In this hyphenated space we find the work of racialization of the Other through racializing religion, national origins, ethnicity, phenotypes ('brown' skin) and their intersections. As Naber (2006) has argued, 'within the post-9/11 moment of crisis, the racialization of an "Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim" Other has been constituted by a dual process of cultural racism and the racialization of national origin' (p. 236). Cultural racism builds on a conceptualization of 'race as culture,' which in Goldberg's (1993) analysis includes religion, language, and dress among others.

Is there a shift in the forms and strategies of racism that corresponds to this shift from race as biology to race as culture? The passage from imperialism to Empire is reflected in the shifting configurations of racism (Hardt & Negri 2000). There is a shift in the dominant theoretical form of racism. Racist theory based on biology (modern racism) is replaced by one based on culture (imperial racism). Imperialist racist theory agrees with the thrust of modern anti-racism in that 'race' is a social construction, that individual behavior or

aptitude cannot be attributed to biological origins. Instead, they are the product of different cultures. Up to this point, Hardt and Negri (2000) argue, imperial racism and modern anti-racism are taking the same position (p. 192). Here they draw from Balibar (1991) and his discussion of 'neo-racism.' Balibar argues that the 'new' racism is 'racism without races.' The neo-racist takes into account the failure of the classical racism, which viewed the Other inferior according to 'race' based on biological differences. In the 'neo-racist' logic, the Other/self dichotomy is no longer explained in an inferior/superior framework. Instead, the Other is believed to be 'different.' This is the racism of 'the era of "decolonization," of the reversal of the population movements between the old colonies and the old metropolises, and the division of the humanities within a single political space' (p. 21). Here culture functions 'like a nature, and it can in particular function as a way of locking individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin' (p. 22). The dominant theme for this racism 'is the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups or peoples in relation to others but "only" the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the incompatibility of life-styles and traditions' (p. 21). Here Balibar characterizes neo-racism as 'culturalist' or 'differentialist' racism.¹⁹

It is not surprising that prominent individuals have characterized many of the current geopolitical conflicts as religious/cultural/civilizational. Influential religious leaders (e.g. Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Franklin Graham), active military personnel (e.g. General Boykin), Congressmen (e.g. Tom Delay, Peter King, Conrad Burns), and media personalities with megaphones (e.g. Glenn Beck, Bill O'Riley, Ann Coulter, Michael Savage) are among them.²⁰ President George W. Bush's 'offhand' remarks in September of 2001 that 'the war on terror' was a 'crusade,' a remark that made 'Europe cringe,'²¹ was among the first to signal such a view. This conceptualization of 'difference,' of 'other' cultures as immutable, fixed, frozen and static essences, is as essentialist as the biological one. The hateful diatribe and slurs against Muslims (e.g. 'ragheads,' 'diaperheads,' 'sand niggers,' 'hajis') and the more respectful version of 'they are different' and 'we can't mix' amount to the same difference. Although culture is used as a substitute for race, paradoxically, its function is to preserve 'racial difference' and to strengthen the extant racial hegemonies.

The right-wing diatribe against 'towel-heads' and the multicultural sensibility that mystifies international politics and political violence by attributing them to differences in culture, tradition, and religion are both informed by the logic of differentialist racism. Thus, Islamophobia should be understood in these terms. Islamophobia is a cultural-ideological outlook that seeks to explain ills of the (global) social order by attributing them to Islam. It is a way of thinking that conflates histories, politics, societies and cultures of

the Middle East into a single unified and negative conception of Islam. It is an ideology in which the 'backwardness' of the Other is established through an essentialized Islam. It is, as a form of racism, an essentialist view of peoples whose culture it deems 'different' in an eternal, fixed, and immutable fashion. It is a way of conceptualizing (international) politics that explains political acts and political violence not in terms of geopolitical calculations, motives, and actors, but in terms of religion. Islamophobia posits 'Islam' as a conception of the world that is incompatible with modernity, with civilization, and, more important, with Euro-Americanness. Islamophobia, on the one hand, creates difference (the 'Other') and, on the other hand, erases difference (all of 'them' are the 'same').

Here I should clarify that I do not wish to suggest that the various forms of Islamophobia are the same or those forms are responses to uniform socio-politico-historical developments. Islamophobia in various European societies, for example, needs to be differentiated in terms of the debates and the discourses to which it is a response. As Fekete (2004) has argued, the shift from 'diversity' and 'multiculturalism' policies to 'assimilation' and 'integration' in each European society takes specific forms: 'Each nation moves towards the assimilationist model in a way that is consonant with the myths upon which that nation has been built': 'standards and values' in the Netherlands; 'cultural barriers to inclusion' in Sweden and Norway; *laïcité* (secular state) in France; *Leitkultur* (leading culture) in Germany; 'intolerant culture' of the immigrant communities in Denmark; 'community cohesion' in the UK; and 'public safety' in Spain (p. 18). Although these responses are different variations in specific debates on national identities in each context, they do represent, as Fekete (2004) argues, a move 'to roll back multiculturalism and promote monocultural homogeneity through assimilation' (p. 3) in the context of 'war on terror' and the expansion of the European security state. In each case, not only are the diversity of Muslim identities, practices, and forms of belonging reduced into a few reactionary cultural practices; the failure to 'assimilate' is attributed to the 'backward' nature of 'Islam.' Muslims, in sum, are viewed as 'foreigners' and Islam as a threat to Europeanness. In Marranci's (2004) formulation, Europe demands its Muslims to be 'Muslims of Europe,' implying the formation of a Judeo-Christian-Muslim Europe. However, Europe treats its Muslims as 'Muslims in Europe,' as aliens in a 'Christocentric' Europe.²² Antagonisms old and new are recast as 'cultural' in an act of magic that not only rearticulates the social as devoid of division prior to the 'arrival' of Muslim Other in an otherwise imaginary homogenous nation, but also permits the global order to avoid the politics that fuels its own antagonisms.

There is a dark side to this essentializing of Islam or 'Muslim culture.' As Mottahedeh (1995) pointed out in his critique of Huntington's original article on clash of civilizations, the 'tendency to assume that a group has uniformities

of attitude that originate in its religious identity, changed only with the greatest difficulty, has an earlier and dark chapter in Western Christian assessments of the Jews' (p. 12). The parallel here is that the anti-Semitic imagination does much the same thing in that it reduces 'the Jew' to a 'cultural tradition' (see Balibar 1991, p. 24). We should follow up and ask, what is the function of the 'Jew' in the racist anti-Semitic imagination? In a reformulation of a Lacanian maxim, and drawing from Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) analysis of hegemony, Žižek (1998) argues that "'society doesn't exist," and the Jew is its symptom' (p. 125). The social-ideological fantasy, however, offers a 'vision of society which *does* exist, a society which is not split by an antagonistic division' (p. 126). In other words, 'Society is not prevented from achieving its full identity because of Jews: it is prevented by its own antagonistic nature, by its own immanent blockage, and it "projects" this internal negativity into the figure of the "Jew."' Žižek adds, 'Far from being the positive cause of social negativity, *the "Jew" is a point at which social negativity as such assumes positive existence*' (p. 126, original emphases).

Is not the figure of the Muslim Other (e.g. 'Islamic' terrorist, 'brown men of Middle Eastern descent,' or even 'rogue nation') a projection by the (global) social order of its own internal negativity? Is not the figure of the Muslim Other the point at which negativity of the social order assumes positive existence? If Empire has no outside (Hardt & Negri 2000), if our international 'community' is 'an impossible society' (Laclau 1990), is not the figure of the Muslim Other the experience of the limits of constituting the international community as an intelligible totality? Here Laclau's (1990) notion of the 'impossibility of society' becomes an apt answer to the hollow rhetoric of 'the international community.' One could argue that the atrocities committed on September 11, 2001 are nothing but the West fighting its own demons (Žižek 2004), or globalization fighting globalization (Baudrillard 2002). In either case, the figure of the Muslim Other is a projected fantasy that conceals the very 'impossibility of society,' of 'our' international 'community.'

The xeno-racist warning by commentators about immanent taking over of Europe and America by Muslims is intelligible only in this context. When Michel Scheuer, a former CIA employee working on counterterrorism and a guest on the *Glenn Beck* show, a conservative voice on CNN Headline News during primetime, said to Beck, 'I think Europe is a dying demographic, demographically speaking is a dying continent. It will be an Islamic continent by 2050,' we see the same logic of Islamophobia at work.²³ Speaking about immigration on the *Glenn Beck* show, Alan Dershowitz, a prominent lawyer and Harvard University law professor, told Beck: Muslims are 'trying to take us over, change us, convert us, and make us like them. That's going on in Europe today. It's going on in Britain today. It's going on in France today, and that is unacceptable.'²⁴ When Keith Ellison, the first Muslim to be elected to the United State Congress, announced he would use the Quran to take the

oath of office, a controversy ensued. This is when Virgil Goode, a United States Congressman, made an objection and cried foul about immigration. He claimed that 'diversity visas,' which allow people 'not from European countries' into the United States, should be restricted. David Asman, the guest host for the Fox News Channel program *Your World with Neil Cavuto*, introduced him as a congressman who warns of a 'Muslim invasion' of the United States if 'we don't tighten our immigration system.'²⁵

The consensus about lack of radicalized groups within the Muslim communities in the United States is that 'they' are better integrated into the American society because they have had more opportunities to thrive economically, or because, as immigrants, they come from affluent backgrounds.²⁶ Although the American context is not identical to that of European states, a similar logic informs state and popular media discourses about 'Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim' Other in the United States. When Glenn Beck hosted Keith Ellison, this is how he opened the interview: 'I have been nervous about this interview with you, because what I feel like saying is, Sir, prove to me that you are not working with our enemies.'²⁷ He is viewed, in a familiar echo, as an 'enemy within.' Reading this episode symptomatically, although Mr Ellison is an African-American and a convert to Islam, the opacity of the 'Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim' Other category allows his brownness to elide his Otherness as a black man. September 11, 2001 has provided a 'cultural' framework to recast antagonisms, wherein such a symbolic violence is made possible through the opacity of brown.

In telling ghost stories and getting spooked by its own stories, the West is (re)living a past with a different ghost that refuses to go away: a specter is haunting the West. Indeed, it is.

Conclusion

In the concluding remarks at the end of *Orientalism*, Said (1978) asks the following questions: 'How does one *represent* other cultures? What is *another* culture? Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one, or does it always get involved either in self-congratulations (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the "other")?' (p. 325). These questions reveal, for the purposes of my arguments, two assumptions that are important to point out in the context of discussing 'brown' and the cultural politics of Other-ing. First, they reveal Said's embrace of radical post-structuralist commitments, as he had said earlier in the text that there can be no 'true' representation (e.g. of Islam) because 'a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with great many other things besides the "truth," which is itself a representation' (p. 272). Second, they also reveal Said's misgivings about an identity politics

that leads to fetishization of difference or to claims of authenticity. 'Nativism' turns out to be another essentialism that evades politics and history. 'To accept nativism,' Said (1993) argues, 'is to accept the consequences of imperialism, the racial, religious, and political divisions imposed by imperialism itself' (p. 228). This is why Said's project is not simply another theory of difference predicated on negativity. His is involved in delineating, as Grossberg (1996) puts it, 'the articulation of difference on top of otherness that becomes the material site of discursive power' (p. 96).²⁸ Said's point about representation is not that there is an essence of Islam that can be recuperated outside representation. Rather, it is to suggest that representations operate for specific purposes. I have tried to utilize Said's insights in this paper to demonstrate what these purposes are in today's discourses of Islam, terrorism, and the clash of civilizations.

My concern with representation is not distortion or negative imagery, which one has to counter, but the politics of representation.

In the history of the Muslims in America, 'While "slave Islam" was too brittle, the "prairie Muslims" too isolated, and black Islam too focused on race, the Muslims of contemporary America have finally managed to carve out their own identity, one that will shape the landscape in new and challenging ways for the foreseeable future' (Abdo 2006, p. 86). One of the immediate perils of Islamophobia is that it could lead to the marginalization of those youths who might see themselves rejected by the society to which they belong. The constant drumbeat, by selfish and opportunistic politicians, lazy journalists, and uninformed pundits, about 'Islamic terror' or Muslim Other is a dangerous component of identity politics. Embracing one's religious identity here is, for many, an affirmation of the difference in order to be the same: 'they' are 'Americans.' The fear mongers and those who are willing to exploit the ugly politics of terrorism must comprehend this identity politics and its limits.

Notes

- 1 See Silva's introduction to this issue.
- 2 That the second edition of this book was published in 1997 (with a new introduction) is already an indication that the central problems it raised remained unresolved, if not exacerbated, 16 years later.
- 3 See Bernstein (1993).
- 4 See Naureckas (1995) for a compilation of statements by the press and the experts that attributed the Oklahoma City bombing to the Middle East. See Semati (1997) for an analysis of racialized imagination, terrorism, and the discourse of the Middle East and Islam in the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing. For a comparison of the press coverage of two 'religious extremists' (Muhammad Salameh and David Koresh), see Haynie (1994).

- 5 On CIA's covert actions see Woodward (1987).
- 6 Moreover, it was through the Persian Gulf War that, as President Bush Sr. famously exulted, 'By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.'
- 7 For a catalog of representations of Arabs see the extensive research by Jack Shaheen, especially Shaheen (2001).
- 8 Comparing the 1980s to the 1990s Hollywood narratives, Semati (2001) has argued that the popular films in the 1990s continued the Orientalist vision of the 1980s films, albeit in a 'kindler, gentler' disguise.
- 9 The title of Huntington's (1993) article, 'The clash of civilizations', included a question mark at the end. This article was worked into a book by 1996, titled *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. The popularity of the paradigm meant there was no room for that question mark in the new title.
- 10 See Abrahamian (1993) for a detailed analysis of American print media's response to 9/11, which, unlike many of their European counterparts, used the 'clash of civilizations' paradigm to frame the terrorist attacks.
- 11 For a response from a professional historian, see Ray Mottahedeh (1996), who is a Harvard professor in Islamic history. Abrahamian (1993) neatly summarizes the shortcomings of the clash of civilizations paradigm. See Said (2003) and Trumbour (2003) for other perspectives on Huntington's paradigm.
- 12 See the statement by President Bush, posted on the White House website: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010911-16.html>
- 13 See the transcript of *Oprah* for October 5, 2001, titled, 'Islam 101; guests discuss Islam and common misconceptions about the religion.' The transcripts and the press reports were obtained through LexisNexis data base. The pagination, where given, reflects LexisNexis's listing of section and page numbers.
- 14 Here I am excluding the academic voices from the left, which I view to be fairly marginal in relations to the official and popular discourses of Islam and terrorism in the United States.
- 15 For a discussion of 'culture talk' in this context, see Mamdani (2004).
- 16 I have not been able to locate in the (mainstream) American media any single discussion of the list of demands by Osama bin Laden or even by Muhammad Atta. For more on these, see Abrahamian (2003).
- 17 See Abdo (2006). For more information on the Arab Americans and Muslim Americans see also Naber (2000).
- 18 For a complete report on these, see Cainkar's (2004) report for Global Security Cooperation.
- 19 Hardt and Negri (2000) attribute the notion of 'differentialist' racism to Balibar. However, it should be pointed out that Balibar (1991, p. 21) borrows this term from Taguieff (2001), who has written on immigration complex in France. For a collection of his writings in English, see his book, *Force of prejudice* (Taguieff 2001).

- 20 See the following: Shalal-Esa (2004); Herbert (2006); 'Gifts from Washington' (2002); Elmasry's (2003); 'Robertson says some Muslims "satanic"' (2006); Human Rights Watch report on hateful comments directed at Islam and Muslims at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/usahate/usa1102-05.htm>
- 21 See Ford's (2001) report for *Christian Science Monitor*, titled, 'Europe cringes at Bush "crusade" against terrorists.'
- 22 For more discussions of Islamophobia in Europe and Australia see Halliday (1999); Marranci (2004); Modood and Ahmad (2007); MacMaster (2003); Cigar (2003); Sells (2003); Bunzl (2007); Taguieff (2001); Modood, Triandafyllidou, and Zapate-Barrero (2006); Poynting and Mason (2007).
- 23 See transcript # 032901cb.h02 for *Glenn Beck* show for March 29, 2007.
- 24 See transcript # 042601cb.h02 for *Glenn Beck* show for April 26, 2007.
- 25 See transcript # 122102cb.140 for *Your World with Neil Cavuto* for December 21, 2006.
- 26 See MacFarquhar's (2006) *New York Times* report for an example of this view.
- 27 See transcript # 111401cb.h02s for the *Glenn Beck* show for November 14, 2006.
- 28 The larger context of Grossberg's (1996) remarks about Said's work is the problematic of identity and identity politics in cultural studies, 'the subsumption of identity into a particular set of modernist logics,' and their implications for political struggle (p. 88).

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