

Book Reviews

Islamophobia and Racism in America

Erik Love

New York: New York University Press, 2017. 267 pages.

This sociological study combines an overview of U.S. Islamophobia in recent decades, an analysis of a potentially emergent “Middle Eastern American” identity, and a re-theorization of race that has implications for how effective political coalitions might be built to address various forms of discrimination faced by American Muslims and other religio-ethnic groups originating from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. While looking back further, Love’s central focus is on “anti-Islamophobia advocacy at the national level, from the late 1970s through the early 2010s” (p. 30). Making good use of seventy interviews conducted from 2005-15, this component represents the book’s greatest original research contribution. Although provocative, Love’s argument that we should theorize Islamophobia as racism and politically organize accordingly is potentially problematic.

Using as a jumping-off point the upsurge in hate crimes perpetrated against American Muslims and others presumed to be Muslim after the 9/11 attacks, the author asserts that the “co-constituted nature of American racism and Islamophobia” (p. 4) is traceable to the mistaken assumption that someone’s religious affiliation can be readily discerned by his/her appearance. Essentially, being perceived through a “racial lens” makes it possible for one to “look Muslim in America” (p. 2). Love notes that members of other groups are often among the victims of such violence, notably Sikhs – Balbir Singh’s 2001 murder being a particularly horrific example – but also Christian Arabs, Chaldeans, Sephardi Jews, and more.

Incorporating theories on the social construction of race, especially Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s concept of racial formation, Love emphasizes *ascribed* identity – that which is assigned by the white-dominated host society. Recognizing the “Middle East” as a historically problematic construct, he nevertheless favors “Middle Eastern” as a shorthand and catch-all term for the groups in question, finding alternatives like AMENSA (Arabs, Middle East-

erners, Muslims, and South Asians) and SWANA (Southwest Asians and North Africans) unwieldy.

A central interest throughout the book is the “centripetal” forces pulling these various ethno-religious groups together: stereotyping, bigoted rhetoric, hate crimes, structural racism, discriminatory policies, and microaggressions. Recalling a similar process in the emergence of “Asian American” group identity, Love speculates that “Middle Eastern” may eventually emerge as a sixth racial category to join White, Black, Asian, Latino/a (he uses the neologism Latin@), and Native American. As will be seen, however, by emphasizing *ascribed* identity over asserted identity – the latter being that which members of these groups claim for themselves – his expectations may be unrealistic.

As a historian, I was particularly dissatisfied with his loose historical framework, which enables such exaggerations as “Islamophobia has thrived in one form or another in the United States since at least the seventeenth century” (p. 4). Love wants to push the inquiry further back so that 9/11 does not appear as a watershed; however, his own analysis bolsters the conclusion that Islamophobia has indeed intensified and moved to the political center stage since the World Trade Center attacks, despite already being on the rise in the 1990s. He also does not distinguish between the United States and “The West” as he traces encounters with Islam since the Crusades. His equating of Orientalism with Islamophobia is simplistic; certainly this trope fostered stereotypes of the Middle East as decadent and backward, but the fascination it entailed also spurred inquiry as in Thomas Jefferson’s study of the Qur’an and conversion to Islam by a handful of prominent European and white American intellectuals during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The author could have provided far more detail about the history of Islam in America; a particularly egregious omission is his failure to mention that the very first American Muslims arrived as enslaved West Africans, whereas his rendition starts with late nineteenth-early twentieth century Syrian immigrants – most of whom were Christian (underlining his point that “Islamophobia” has also extended to non-Muslims of Middle Eastern origin). Love traces American stereotypes of violent Muslims to the Barbary Coast wars of the early nineteenth century, although this emphasis was eclipsed by the image of the oil sheikh by the mid-twentieth century, only for the “Muslim terrorist” to reemerge on the international scene in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, the 1965 Immigration Act reforms enabled unprecedented numbers of Muslims and other Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants to enter the country. By the 1980s, as Muslims were increasingly linked to violence in the American media and popular culture, “terrorist attacks” became

defined exclusively as those committed by Muslims, the arbitrariness of which Love rightly condemns. In fact, less than 1 percent of such violence on American soil has been committed by American Muslims, for the vast majority of such attacks have been launched by radical right-wing whites.

In moving from hate crimes to the structures of discrimination that constitute “Islamophobic racism,” Love identifies continuities with the country’s history of white supremacy. He briefly discusses employment discrimination against Middle Eastern Americans before surveying how Islamophobia has become a “prominent feature at all levels of mainstream American politics” (p. 92), in fact a “wedge issue” that factored heavily into Donald Trump’s ascendancy. He emphasizes the role played by a conservative propaganda network that has forced anti-Sharia laws and mosque opposition to the political forefront, as well as portrayed President Barack Obama as a “secret Muslim.”

While the phrase “war on terror” was coined by the Bush Administration in 2001, Love traces domestic surveillance to the FBI’s COINTELPRO program of the early 1970s, which targeted Arab Americans among others. Overall, his assessment of federal “counterterrorism” programs – including the Patriot Act, No-Fly List, immigrant roundups and deportations, and FBI entrapment cases – is quite bleak, and he sees little difference in approach between the Bush and Obama administrations. Love concludes that racism is the “only effective theoretical lens” through which one can analyze Islamophobia (p. 115). This returns us to the book’s major question, and one that Love struggles to answer: If Islamophobia is a variety of racism, then why have we seen so few examples of political mobilizations against it as such? Why have many American Muslims themselves proven uncomfortable or unwilling to confront in racial terms the discrimination directed against them, which Love considers so obvious?

Before returning to the matter of asserted (as opposed to ascribed) identity, it is worthwhile to recap Love’s discussion of the advocacy organizations fighting Islamophobia since the 1970s, easily the book’s strongest portion. He uses the *Encyclopedia of Associations* to track the explosive rise of such groups since 1980, as they grew from dozens with tens of thousands of members to hundreds with millions of members. Focusing on six in particular, he documents the shifts in strategy and alliances evolving in sync with the larger political currents of the time. “Arab American” initially served as an effective means of coalition building, despite controversies over American foreign policy and especially Palestine. Arab Christians dominated the earliest efforts and proved willing to join broader racial coalitions demanding civil rights, most

prominently the Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH coalition in the early 1980s. However, American Muslims began forming their own organizations and, at the same time, post-civil rights politics completed a conservative shift favoring a "colorblind" approach to the topic of race.

Without getting into the fine-grained organizational histories, rich with excerpts from Love's interviews with individual activists, it becomes clear that "transactional" coalitions (ad hoc, issue-oriented) have been the norm instead of "transformational" ones holding the potential for durable alliances with racially oppressed minority groups – despite the increasing centripetal pressures for Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans to come together in order to confront issues of common concern. Love clearly favors a race-based, transformational approach and hopes this might be in the process of emergence; he notes efforts by Linda Sarsour to mobilize Arab Americans as "people of color" in solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter movement and ends the book by discussing a 2015 panel sponsored by a Washington, DC, Muslim organization with a particularly inclusive, politically left vision for civil rights and social justice.

While many of the interviewees preferred to emphasize the ethnoracial diversity of American Muslims and couch the issue of Islamophobia as a freedom of religion issue in order to avoid controversy, his observation that many Middle Eastern Americans seek to "pass" as white (p. 202) deserves more scrutiny. Although he does recount how, in the early twentieth century, various groups (including Middle Easterners and South Asians) unsuccessfully sought official recognition as "white" before the courts, and acknowledges that Middle Easterners continue to occupy a racially "liminal" position (p. 205), Love does not explore nearly enough what racial identities they assert for themselves. Considering the stigma that Blackness has carried through much of American history, it is regrettable but not surprising that Middle Easterners, like the European immigrants before them, have generally not chosen to identify as (and ally with) people of color, even if they were not automatically accepted as "white." Furthermore, the socially conservative values and entrepreneurial orientation of many American Muslims had led them to vote Republican prior to 9/11, a dimension that Love completely overlooks. Although socially constructed, the past and present reality of race in America makes it unlikely that Islamophobia's "racial dilemma" will be resolved anytime soon.

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