



## Book reviews

Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar and Jack Collins

*Bin Laden in the Suburbs: Criminalising the Arab Other*

Sydney: Institute of Criminology, 2004. ISBN 0975196707

■ Reviewed by Dima Dabbous-Sensenig, *Lebanese American University*

*Bin Laden in the Suburbs* is about the rising fear of the Arab/Muslim Other in Australia over the last decade. It illustrates how otherwise peaceful and law-abiding communities of Middle Eastern origin are uniformly vilified by both the sensationalist media and opportunist politicians, because of a handful of crimes committed by some of their younger members. Though the guilt of the perpetrators is nowhere contested by the authors, they loudly denounce the guilt of right-wing politicians and newspapers who have racialized and pathologized these crimes, and who have imputed the guilt for these crimes to entire communities merely because they happen to be Arab and/or Muslim.

The authors passionately argue that we are witnessing, in contemporary Australia, the emergence of the 'Arab Other' as the pre-eminent 'folk devil' of our time. As they explain, this image 'has little to do with the lived experience of those of Arab or Middle Eastern origin, and everything to do with a host of social anxieties which overlap and feed upon each other in a series of moral panics' (p. 3). Herein lies the book's basic weakness. This study neither convincingly illustrates the former nor substantiates the latter. The strengths of this study, in comparison, lie in its theoretical foundation and its anti-racist commitment, being written in the best tradition of Australian multiculturalism.

The considerable time span covered by the study (from approximately 1998 to 2003) and the authors' previous work on the same topic (Collins et al., 2000) allow them to draw attention to the fact that anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism is not a consequence of the September 11 attacks, as one might naively believe. Indeed, as they write, the attack on the World Trade Center only exacerbated existing tendencies within Australian society.

To conduct their analysis, the authors draw on a wide range of relevant theories from various fields in the social sciences: media studies (for issues of representation and media analysis), cultural studies (Said's critique on Orientalism), sociology (for studies on moral panics, crime and deviance, and race, ethnicity and crime), and political science (Althusser's notion of interpellation and Gramsci's concept of hegemony). In this respect, the study surpasses most, if not all, similar studies about the representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western media.

From a theoretical perspective, not only do the authors apply existing concepts useful for the study of racism in the media, but their work at times adds to, if not challenges, what has been said on the topic in some of the most established and authoritative studies. This is especially relevant in relation to the authors' nuanced analysis of media representation of the police handling of ethnic crime. While Van Dijk, whose seminal *Racism and the Press* (1991) is acknowledged in this study, shows how the media basically mitigate police acts and police brutality when dealing with immigrants and ethnic minorities in the UK, the Australian study points to a more 'ambivalent relationship with the police; sometimes supportive, sometimes critical' (p. 69). The authors draw attention to the existence of a 'space in between' accepted by Australians and often reproduced in the media, where 'ordinary' citizens prefer to locate themselves, at equidistance from both those corrupt or incompetent institutions meant to protect them and from the 'ethnic' Arab and Muslim Other (p. 72).

As far as the main objective of the book is involved, the authors convincingly prove how the construction of the evil Arab/Muslim Other has little to do with the statistical data pertaining to Arab/Muslim communities, and everything to do with xenophobia and political expediency. They expose the gap between the media frenzy and political condemnation regarding crimes committed by these communities on the one hand, and actual police and court reports on the other. They argue how fear was exploited by some politicians and eventually translated into a rise in electoral support for conservative parties and candidates.

Considering, however, that the authors promise an in-depth study of the Australian media construction of the 'Arab and Muslim Other', and what this construction tells us about Australian society, the authors adopt neither of the two existing methods normally used when analysing media texts: that is, quantitative content analysis or qualitative textual or discourse analysis. Though the authors set out to explain 'the methods for gathering, recording, and analyzing' this data

early on in their introduction (p. 5), nowhere throughout the study is it clear how this is done. The only reference to their research methods is found in a paragraph on page 5, where the authors describe their data as: 'media extracts, garnered from an exhausting but not exhaustive monitoring of the major print media . . . in Sydney concentrating around November 1998 to early 2000, and August 2001 to September 2003' (p. 5).

Moreover, throughout the book, the authors often back their analysis and conclusions with statements referring to the data or the sources studied as being a 'tirade of letters to editors', or a 'plethora of press articles both tabloid and broadsheet' (p. 158). Because the authors anchor their research findings indiscriminately in actual news reports, editorials, letters to the editors, and the like (they do not distinguish, methodologically or conceptually, between these very distinct formats of writing for newspapers and the different ideological role they play in constructing reality), and because they never offer any quantitative assessment about the dominance of the racist comments and views they find in the different newspapers, the reader is left wondering whether there exist any significant counter-hegemonic constructions of Arabs and Muslims in the newspapers studied, whether these alternative constructions vary from one newspaper to the other, and finally whether these constructions are more visible in some formats than in others.

Unfortunately, such a methodological approach or weakness ultimately forces the reader to wonder whether he or she was not selectively and exclusively exposed to those 'extracts' that fit the thesis of the authors of the book, and to ultimately doubt the research findings themselves because the 'representativeness' of the samples studied, on which the thrust of the thesis is founded, is simply overlooked.

Another weakness of the book lies in its total neglect of the specificity and agency of Arab/Muslim communities themselves in inducing or nurturing public anxiety in Australia. Indeed, one is led to believe that we may safely substitute the Arab and Muslim communities studied with Greeks or Italians without affecting the results of the study. Furthermore, the authors ignore inter-ethnic differences, studying a sample of Lebanese male youth without reflecting on the role of religion and class in shaping their identity. As such, the study fails to take into account the paradigm shifts of the last 15 years in the sociology and historiography of immigration and ethnicity, which stress the need to address those ethnic differences in order to fully understand the complex phenomenon of migration.

This omission allows the authors to conclude, quite confidently,

that the construction of the Arab/Muslim Other is purely a mass fantasy spurred by historical, economic and political changes and insecurities (namely globalization), not by what Arabs or Muslims inside and outside Australia think or do. In their zeal to expose the racism of Australian society and (justifiably) to defend Arab/Muslim immigrant communities, they sidestep serious issues plaguing both Arabic cultures and Islam, especially in the area of gender. Such 'defence' remains unconvincing and flies in the face of the plethora of Arab and Muslim feminist studies that have extensively documented the sexism and misogyny of Arab/Muslim cultures and their patriarchal interpretation of Islamic Scriptures, and the influence of such interpretation on legislation as well as on the lives of millions of Arab/Muslim women.

Unless the authors are willing to acknowledge this aspect of Arab and Muslim life, their denunciation of the racism found in white Australian statements about the misogyny of Muslim and Arab cultures amounts to little more than a well intentioned act of 'political correctness'.

### References

- Collins, J., Noble, G., Poynting, S. and Tabar, P. (2000) *Kebabs, Kids, Cops, and Crime: Youth, Ethnicity and Crime*. Sydney: Pluto Press.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1991) *Racism and the Press: Critical Studies in Racism and Migration*. London: Routledge.

Sandra Braman (ed.)

#### *The Emergent Global Information Policy Regime*

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. ISBN 1403903697

■ Reviewed by Dwayne Winseck, Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada

In this very intelligent and thoughtful collection, Sandra Braman offers a fine example of what edited collections should be like and brings her formidable intellect to bear on the development of global information policy. Over the course of the last decade or so, Braman has made several seminal contributions to how we think about the peculiar qualities of information as well as the formation of information and communication policy, both narrowly conceived and broadly constituted to encompass not only the fields of telecommunications and the media but also those of biotechnology and genetic information.

In this new book of 10 collected chapters, Braman brings together