

# Racism and Islamophobia in America

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*Three books recently published by the American radical publisher Clarity Press reflect different aspects of racism in the US, which even under a black president is unfortunately alive and well, promoted in US policy at home and abroad — if not officially.*

Devon Mihesua, *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities*

Stephen Sheehi, *Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims*

Francis Boyle, *The Palestinian Right of Return Under International Law*

Top on the list of course is the continued second-class status of African-Americans, who make up an outsized proportion of prisoners, the unemployed and those living in poverty. One's colour is enough to keep the black-and-white status quo intact, despite the cosmetic boost that Barack Obama's election gave to the nation's blacks.

But the endemic racism that Native Americans have experienced despite more or less blending in with the increasingly Hispanic and Asian mix of today's America (most Native Americans are of mixed race) is a sad legacy that is equally endemic.

The irony is that Native American culture is revered around the world and by many Americans, especially by the young, as it appeals to the sense of unity of man and nature, recognises and respects the mystery of life: the fact that humans are one small part of a vast and beautiful world which is full of magic. It is only as people "grow up" that they lose this sense of mystery and accommodate themselves to a hierarchical, anthropocentric reality with no use for the romantic animism that allowed the natives to live in harmony with nature for thousands of years.

Devon Mihesua, a Choctaw from Oklahoma, sets out the many distortions of the image of Native Americans perpetrated by the mainstream media and demolishes them one by one in *American Indians: Stereotypes and Realities*, already a classic, first published in 1996 and newly republished this year by Clarity.

One of the many images that stand out to someone who grew up in North America and which Mihesua corrects is "Cowboys and Indians", which should be "US Army and Indians" since "cowboys and Indians rarely fought each other. Besides, the first cowboys were Mexican Indians." The English language itself reinforces the worst stereotypes, such as "Indian givers" (read: "US government givers") and Columbus "discovering" America. Indeed, 1492 marks not a step forward in mankind's history, but rather the beginning of the first and most horrific genocide in mankind's history, with the premeditated killing of at least 10 million in North America alone.

The history of Native Americans is full of ironies. War Department officials maintained that if

the entire US population had enlisted in the same proportion as Native Americans in WWII, the response would have rendered Selective Service unnecessary. As soldiers, they were respected as disciplined and brave. Comanche soldiers were given the vital task of encoding secret messages in the Pacific based on their native language. The code they developed, although cryptologically very simple, was never cracked by the Japanese; but they never received any special recognition from the government after the war.

Mihesua's book is intended for the general public but also as a school text, and though it deals with grim material, it is full of fascinating details of native life. Living in earth lodges (wigwams), longhouses, grass houses or thatched-roof homes much like Europeans, most Indians never saw a tipi, for example. Indians were "conquered" largely via biological warfare, as they lacked immunity to European diseases. The European claim that they were "heathen" was a mere tactic to condone their decimation. It was the Dutch who introduced "scalping" to North America (to save transport costs for bounty hunters paid per Indian scalp): a revered tradition dating back to ancient Greece.

More than 60 per cent of the food consumed around the world today comes from the Indians, including corn, tomatoes, potatoes, many varieties of beans, chili peppers, squash, pumpkins, avocados, cacao, raspberries and strawberries. The main staple of the plains Indians, the 60 million buffalo that grazed the open plains, were wiped out by Europeans eager to steal the Indians' land.

The Indians were just as "civilised" as the Europeans, in terms of technology and culture, though no North Americans had a writing system before the European invasion. Their societies were egalitarian, with division of labour according to sex, where the sexes were considered equal and each had their decision-making traditions. In fact the Iroquois Confederacy was used as a prototype by the American revolutionaries in writing the American Constitution.

The book has many illustrations. It includes oral histories, discourses on religion, anthropology, politics and economics of Indian societies. The author used the term Indian in the first edition, and writes that she now uses Indigenous, since Native Americans or First Nation are equally European in derivation. There are a mere 2.1 million Indians today, and they refer to themselves by their tribal name (the Navajos are Dinees, for example) — over 700 tribes are still extant. Mihesua's aim is to encourage teachers to demand history books that truly reflect the country's heritage, not just "feel-good" books which "tell more about the persons writing them than about the Indians".

In Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims, Stephen Sheehi, director of the Arabic Program at the University of South Carolina and author of Foundations of Modern Arab Identity, deals with the most recent manifestation of this social plague, which reached a crisis point following 9/11. The victimisation of Muslim Americans can only be called racism, since the overwhelming majority of American Muslims are nonwhite, and the few white Muslims are automatically considered even more suspect as potential "terrorists".

The Muslim experience brings the black and Native American experiences together, though few Native Americans are Muslim. The structure of Islam and native religions seems radically different on the surface — the former strictly monotheistic, the latter polytheistic; however, the transcendence of spirit and the underlying unity of man and nature are very much central tenets of Islam, as they are for Native Americans. Muslims, like the Native Americans, live their spirituality and find it inseparable from their daily lives and interactions

with others and nature, something that threatens the very foundation of secular capitalism.

The mouthpieces of Islamophobia — fear and hatred of Islam — in the US today include both academics like Bernard Lewis, Fareed Zakaria, Thomas Friedman, David Horowitz, and many politicians, with John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in the vanguard. Their theories and opinions operate on the assumption that Muslims, particularly Arab Muslims, suffer from particular cultural lacuna that prevent their cultures from progress, democracy and human rights. It is no surprise that such ex-Muslims as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali feminist-turned-Islamophobe, and revisionist Muslims such as Indian-Canadian feminist Irshad Manji are feted by Western media, as their antics reinforce the Islamophobes' arguments.

While Islamophobia is not new, Sheehi demonstrates that it was refurbished as a viable explanation for Muslim resistance to economic and cultural globalisation during the Clinton era. Moreover, the "theory" was made the basis for an interventionist foreign policy and propaganda campaign during the Bush regime and continues to underlie Barack Obama's new internationalism.

Following 9/11, the ceiling of acceptable hate-speech against Muslims, particularly Arabs, was blown off. "We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity," wrote Ann Coulter two days after 9/11. "We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That's war. And this is war." Since 9/11, Muslims, Arabs, Iranians and Islam itself have been the objects of derision and hatred in public, on TV and radio, and in print.

Sheehi demonstrates how such bigotry was translated into a sustained domestic policy of racial profiling and Muslim-baiting by agencies such as Homeland Security and the Department of Justice. It condoned widespread surveillance by the government, profiling in the street, at airports, in mosques and universities. Muslims have their movements tracked, their associations, finances and charitable giving monitored. They are systematically spied on, coerced and persecuted.

And not only Muslims. Once it's ok to do this to Muslims, it becomes ok to suspend basic civil liberties of all suspected "terrorists". Peaceniks and ecological activists are given the same treatment more and more. Pastor Martin Niemöller's reflection on the descent into fascism in Germany — "First they came for the communists ... Then they came for the Jews ... Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me" — is as true as it was in 1946.

Islamophobia has institutionalised US government violations of international law, such as freezing habeas corpus, torture, renditions, extrajudicial kidnappings and assassination, even total war against and occupation of sovereign countries. They are all justified using Islamophobic stereotypes, paradigms and analyses as well as foils such as Hirsi Ali and Manji.

Sheehi examines the collusion between non-governmental agencies and lobbies and local, state and federal agencies in suppressing political speech on US campuses critical of racial profiling, US foreign policy in the Middle East and Israel. While much of the direct violence against Muslims on American streets, shops and campuses has subsided, Islamophobia runs throughout the Obama administration, serving an ideological function in the age of economic, cultural and political globalisation.

Liberals such as Democratic leader Howard Dean argue that it would be “a real affront to people who lost their lives” on 9/11 to build an Islamic Center two blocks away from the World Trade Center. “I think it is great to have Mosques in American cities; there is a growing number of American Muslims.” But Dean says they should “become just like every other American, Americans who happen to be Muslims... I hope they will have an influence on Islam.” Translation: co-opt and assimilate Muslims into American culture, so as not to pose a threat to US hegemony, and work within Muslim communities globally to bring them into the American fold à la the Christian missionaries of old, willing handmaidens in the imperial project, what black Americans referred to derisively as “Uncle Toms”.

The rampant Islamophobia of the past decade and the liberal answer of assimilation makes clear that Islam is the remaining enemy after the defeat of Communism. It too must be conquered to ensure US world hegemony, with revisionist American Muslims in the front lines. “Fight fire with fire,” so to speak.

There are voices in the West that try to fight back. Tariq Ali counters in response to the “civilization-mongers” that there were a range of political possibilities in Muslim countries, that western civilization itself had prevented the exercise of Western-style democracy in the Muslim world, leading their citizens to find political expression through Islam: “After WWII, the US backed the most reactionary elements as a bulwark against communism or progressive/ secular nationalism. [In Iran] the secular opposition which first got rid of the shah was outfoxed by British Intelligence and the CIA. The vacuum was later occupied by the clerics who rule the country today. ... The 70-year war between US imperialism and the Soviet Union affected every single ‘civilization’.” We are all victims of imperialism, all losers, our cultures distorted and perverted rather than merely anachronistic, including American culture and Islam itself.

Sheehi points to an important difference between the manifestation of Islamophobia in the US and Europe. Muslim communities in the US eagerly assimilate and have a high median income and education level compared to other American minorities, while many European Muslim communities tend to be more insular.

The European version is grounded in anxiety arising from the colonial past. The colonial centres have always been uncomfortable with interacting with brown people as equals, compounded by the transposition of feelings of resentment, and anger over the loss of imperial power while still having to bear the social, cultural and economic consequences of their colonial past.

European Islamophobia also finds its origins in anxiety about and hatred of its own European “other”, namely European Jewry. Pre-WWII Europe feared a Jewish conspiracy to subvert Christian society. In the post-Holocaust era, this is no longer politically correct, so Europe’s traditional fear of Jews has been displaced onto its newer Muslim immigrants, even by the traditionally anti-Jewish far right such as Le Pen’s National Front and the British National Party, which are now Zionist and racist at the same time.

This phenomenon has repeated itself in every European country in the past decade, with far-right parties gaining rapidly by exploiting fears of the “Islamification” of Europe, the degeneration of institutionalised secularism, the bankrupting of the welfare state, and the “demographic bomb”. Most notorious has been Holland’s Geert Wilders with his Freedom Party. He has compared the Quran to Mein Kampf and called for a “headscarf tax”.

Such bigots are working to form a Europe-wide International Freedom Alliance, even including the US and Canada; an “Atlanticist Islamophobian”, according to analyst Pepe Escobar. Considering that US and Canadian Muslims make up less than two per cent of the population, this leads to “the surrealist American phenomenon of Islamophobia without Muslims”.

Tariq Ramadan is one of the few media personalities given a chance to counter this slide towards a Euro-Reich; he argues that forcing Muslim immigrants to abandon their traditions merely reinforces racism. “What we need is a new narrative, a new ‘we’, a multicoloured, multicultural European identity. Europeans need to psychologically integrate that into their world view.”

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The racism against Native Americans and Muslim Americans comes together in US Middle East policy, with the victimisation of Palestinians. US domestic racism is projected internationally on the Middle East in the unqualified support of Israel as a Jewish state, as argued by University of Illinois law professor Francis Boyle in *The Palestinian Right of Return in International Law*. Boyle is both a brilliant academic and a controversial political figure, as adviser to Provisional Government of the Palestinian Authority since 1988.

If Boyle has any bias, it is in favour of victims, especially Native Americans and Muslims. He has served as special prosecutor in the International Tribunal of Indigenous Peoples and Oppressed Nationalities in the United States of America, as adviser to the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria vs the Russian Federation, as counsel to Bosnia and Herzegovina vs Slobodan Milosevic, and as adviser to American activists intent on impeaching both US president George W Bush and US President Barack Obama. In all cases, he charged the accused with committing genocide and crimes against humanity.

But he is no Don Quixote. He also drafted the US domestic implementing legislation for the Biological Weapons Convention, known as the Biological Weapons Anti-Terrorism Act of 1989, which was signed into law by President George H W Bush.

Boyle argues that the two-state solution for Israel-Palestine would not only create an unviable Palestinian Bantustan-type nation, but that the current state of Israel and its illegal settlements already amounts to a Jewish Bantustan- type nation, and that neither is viable. That one is Jewish and privileged and the other Arab and poor and oppressed; it merely reflects the inherent racism underlying this projection of US power in the Middle East.

The just resolution of the Palestinian right of return is at the very heart of the Middle East peace process. Nonetheless, the Obama administration intends to impose a comprehensive peace settlement upon the Palestinians that will force them to give up their well-recognised right of return, accept a Bantustan of disjointed and surrounded chunks of territory on the West Bank in Gaza, and recognise Israel as “the Jewish State”, as newly demanded by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and seconded by all US officials and mainstream media.

Boyle compares the current situation in Israel-Palestine with the collapse of Yugoslavia which he observed and participated in. “The correct historical analogue here is not apartheid South Africa, but instead the genocidal Yugoslavia that collapsed as a state, lost its UN membership, and now no longer exists as a state for that very reason.” Boyle “played a role in propelling this historical and principled process forward and ushering in the final extinction of the genocidal Yugoslavia as a state by debunking its legal, moral, and political right to survive and exist in front of the entire world for all humanity to see”.

Israeli settlements are “clearly illegal and criminal”, and “all these so-called settlers are committing war crimes, except the children, who are obviously not old enough to formulate a criminal intent.” Even before Operation Cast Lead, Boyle proposed that the UN General Assembly set up the “International Criminal Tribunal for Israel” as a “subsidiary organ” under Article 22 of the UN Charter, a suggestion endorsed by Malaysia and Iran, and supported by several dozen Arab and Muslim countries.

Boyle cannot be faulted for his legal brilliance. He devastatingly exposes the underlying racism in US-Israeli Middle East policy, portraying Israel as genocidal, and showing a way for the world to bring it to its knees. Boyle is a maximalist, rejecting any compromise with Israel. For him the endgame is “Sign Nothing, Win It All!”

But Israel-Palestine is neither South Africa in the 1980s nor Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Neither of these countries was created by and became indivisible with the US empire. Israel is a much harder nut to crack. Which is not to say that it won’t crack. Frankly, I don’t know where to place my bets on how this last racist nation state will be dismantled. I can only hope Boyle’s optimism is warranted.

What can one conclude from these very different studies about how to overcome racism, which is alive and well not only in the US but around the world? The authors present different approaches — Mihesua concerned with education, Sheehi with deconstructing the myths, Boyle with fighting in the international arena the monsters responsible for inflicting their racist policies on the world.

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### **About the author:**

Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch,

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