

BIN LADEN IN THE SUBURBS

Criminalising the Arab Other

Scott Poynting, Greg Noble, Paul Tabar and Jock Collins, Sydney Institute of Criminology, 2004; 352 pp; \$49.95 softcover.

This book's evocative title was inspired by a front-page headline in one of Sydney's tabloids; 'TERROR AUSTRALIS: Bin Laden groups in our suburbs'. Written one month after the 9/11 attacks on the US, it well captures the 'moral panic' surrounding that event and the emergence in contemporary Australia of 'the "Arab Other" as the pre-eminent "folk devil" of our time' (3). The book asks what it is in our cultural background that made the alarmist headline resonate with readers and how 'such hysteria' could become so commonly shared (1). Taking the view that answers to these questions will tell us something about Australian society at the beginning of the 21st century, it examines a series of seminal moral panics about the 'Arab Other', including 'ethnic crime gangs', 'race gang rapes', the 'Tampa crisis', the 9/11 attacks and the Bali bombings:

to throw light on what relevant popular anxieties are arising in contemporary Australian society, among whom, how they are taken up, how they are elaborated, how they are circulated, by whom, with what effect, in (or against) whose interests, how the folk devil is 'assembled' even how (some of) the diabolised people themselves (some of the time) are drawn into this construction. [3]

The book argues that this Arab Other 'functions not only in terms of the specific concerns embedded in fear of crime; it also functions in the national imaginary to prop up the project of national belonging' and 'meshes with national and international politics in forming an image of a violent and criminal Arab Other' (3). The book moves 'between global, national, state, city and local events to show how these levels are imbricated in moments of moral panic' (5).

The book investigates the 'commonsense' of 'race' — a category thoroughly deconstructed and problematised — nation, fear and criminality using a wide range of media sources over the five years between 1998 and 2003. These sources are supplemented by interviews and to

a lesser extent participant observation. Although there is a range of national and international sources, the bulk of the media, interviews and many of the events described in detail are centred around Sydney, which is, as the book points out, the major destination for Arab-speaking immigrants in Australia.

The book's chapters examine, analyse and interpret these seminal events and moral panics to reveal 'social perceptions of the "Arab Other"', arguing that a 'racialised frame ... naturalises cultural explanations of criminal and terrorist activities' (6). This racialised frame amounts to a selective ethnicity which reflects the 'invisibility' of whiteness, so that it is only crimes committed by the ethnic Other that can be constructed or seen as causally connected to race or culture. The book examines the racialised dimension of media discourses about crime and argues convincingly that, it has 'helped produce a climate where fear of crime is not just on the increase, but merges with perceptions of terrorist threats to foster a paranoid nationalism' which moves beyond the symbolic to impact substantially on 'policing, and intelligence services, the judicial system, legal change, government, immigration and welfare policy' (252). The chapters are framed by a foreword by influential anthropologist Ghasan Hage entitled 'The Anatomy of Anti-Arab Racism' and a conclusion that sees the current moment not just as one for despair but as an 'opportunity to reflect upon the nature of community, cultural diversity and national belonging' (9).

The book is nuanced and multileveled, successfully blending contemporary and historical material to suggest what is new and unique in the now and what might be read as echoes from the past; taking into account class and gender as well as race; moving between the domestic and international, state and national, and critiquing not only the politics of representation as it emanates from the media and politicians but also from inside 'ethnic communities' themselves. Consistent with its layered analysis the book refuses to settle for essentialised notions of 'community' seeing it instead as a useful but flawed concept that

cannot be taken for granted. The book also rejects simple solutions but instead sees a way forward in abandoning an 'over-defined' or ethnic nationalism for a 'fluid-state nationalism' (264). This notion of 'fluid-state nationalism' is captured most eloquently in the interviews with second-generation youth from a Lebanese background set out in the third chapter entitled 'The Lost Boys: Caught Between Cultures or Resisting Racism?' These interviews reflect 'intercultural connection, the permeability of cultural boundaries and the creativeness in constantly shifting them' (112). The authors suggest that 'it is through such creativity as can be found in their lively, nuanced, struggle-produced culture-in-the-making, that history might be made for the better' (98).

This timely, highly readable book based on thorough empirical research deserves a wide audience amongst those interested in critically examining what are amongst the most important events of our time and reflecting on what it means and what it costs to be an 'ordinary Australian' at the beginning of the 21st century.

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