

MORAL PANIC IN A PLURAL CULTURE

Joseph Heathcott

The United States is walking the knife-edge of moral panic, and immigration is the touchstone. As the Tea Party movement propels Republicans back into shared power, the country faces a period of raw political acrimony. While the economy underlies much of the disillusion in America, Tea Partiers and their Republican beneficiaries will surely expand their rage-fueled campaign of scapegoating immigrants. In the dark days ahead, we Americans must take a hard look at ourselves and the kind of world we are creating. Legislators, civil rights groups, unions, and congregations will have to act with moral courage to reaffirm a vision of America as a plural democracy.

The Tea Party is only the most recent manifestation of an ongoing trend. In June of 2007, after the Bush administration's brief flirtation with immigration reform, a network of right-wing nationalist and vigilante organizations formed the Secure Borders Coalition and promised to oppose candidates that supported immigration reform measures. Similar groups, from Eagle Forum and the Family Research Council to the deceptively named Federation for American Immigration Reform, have publicly denounced all efforts to overhaul immigration laws except those that lead to mass deportation.

While many on the right view these as principled stands against law-breaking "aliens," the rhetoric of groups like Secure Borders glides seamlessly into a general stance against immigration, foreignness, and cultural pluralism. Secure Borders does not just promote zero tolerance measures against illegal immigrants, it favors a virtual cessation of all

immigration to the United States—legal or otherwise. In a newsletter address to Eagle Forum membership, founder Phyllis Schlafly suggests that the Christian approach to immigration is to “erect a fence and double our border agents in order to stop the drugs, the smuggling racket, the diseases, and the crimes.”

Schlafly’s suggestion may come as a surprise to those raised with the Protestant Social Gospel or Catholic Social Teaching, for whom the image of Christ as an erector of fences is nothing short of blasphemous. Yet Schlafly’s stance demonstrates just a small sample of the moral panic sweeping through our civic life.

A moral panic is an upwelling of intense emotion and feeling over conditions that challenge people’s deep-seated values and threatens the established social order. Immigration is the leading-edge issue provoking the current panic, as fearful Americans rally against an increasingly diverse social landscape brought about through tectonic shifts in the global economy.

We were treated to a preview of the current moral panic during the 2008 campaign, as audience members at McCain-Palin rallies spewed hate-filled retorts to media crews. John McCain himself was visibly rattled by the quavering anger of one supporter who expressed distrust of Obama because he is an “Arab.” McCain only fueled the paranoia when he responded that Obama is not an Arab, but rather a “decent, family man,” as though the two were mutually exclusive. Meanwhile, the “birthers” challenged Barak Obama’s citizenship status and, despite ample evidence to the contrary, engaged in rage-fueled fantasies of a foreign president occupying the White House.

The recently ginned-up controversy over the Park 51 Muslim Community Center in Lower Manhattan (aka “Ground Zero Mosque”) follows the same well-worn script. Right-wing strategists—and their close allies in the Republican Party and Fox News—generate, and then report on, fear-driven “issues” grounded in very little fact and a great deal of hearsay, ad hominem, and speculation. These specific issues then spin into generalized anger over the supposed loss of pre-eminence of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture. In the case of undocumented Americans, for example, the anger is rationalized along the lines of legality and citizenship, whereas in the case of the “Ground Zero Mosque,” where many among the organizers are actually U.S.

citizens, the upwelling of anger is rationalized along religious and patriotic lines.

Such episodes expose the sober reality that racism, bigotry, and xenophobia are prevalent in America, despite (or in reaction to) the election of the first non-white president. Politicians, activists, and ordinary citizens alike are directing anger toward a broad range of “others”—from a black presidential candidate to undocumented people, immigrants generally, and finally to people who just plain seem foreign. A spike in reported hate crimes since Obama’s election, including the brutal killing of nine-year-old Brisenia Flores by members of the Minutemen American Defense organization, the slaying of a guard at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, and the recent stabbing of a Muslim cab driver in New York City, only clarifies the challenge we face.

In the end, while such episodes have tragic outcomes for individuals and families, the hatred is not really about this immigrant lacking documents or that Muslim community center. Rather, such hatred reflects deeply rooted anxieties about cultural pluralism. Demagogues like Glenn Beck, Pat Robertson, and Sarah Palin have grown adept at exploiting the fears of ordinary white Americans, deflecting their attention away from the institutions that truly rule their lives and onto scapegoats.

In this climate, not even the U.S. Constitution is safe. Republicans and pundits who otherwise tout “originalism” are now attacking the Fourteenth Amendment guarantee of citizenship to children born on U.S. soil. For originalists like Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who view the Constitution as a near sacred repository of unchanging wisdom, the idea that it would be read through the prism of cultural and historic context is anathema—except when it justifies their crusade against a plural society. Such grotesque contortions of one’s own principles for the sake of expedient politics and demagoguery are part and parcel of behavior in a moral panic.

People of good will can disagree on the full range of issues raised by immigration policy, from matters of enforcement, documentation, and punishment to amnesty and citizenship pathways. The problem is not the rule-of-law view on immigration, but the ease with which this view shades into xenophobia and moral fog. Time and time again, right-wing pundits on the national stage follow pronouncements in favor of “enforcement” with revelations of more general anxieties about non-white people, the influx of foreign cultures, and an imagined America lost. Former

Congressman Tom Tancredo (R-CO), for example, spoke openly on the importance of distinguishing between legal and illegal immigration, but worked tirelessly on legislation to limit immigration per se, which he regards as a threat to American culture. He received substantial funding for his campaigns from John Tanton, an active promoter of sterilization and birth control for Third World women. Of course, Tancredo is “pro-life.” Moral panic over cultural pluralism makes strange bedfellows indeed.

The void of federal action on immigration reform has also opened a space for the emergence of an anti-immigrant political crusade at the local level. Apart from a series of high-profile but largely symbolic factory raids, both the Bush and Obama administrations have dithered on the issue. As a result, some towns have taken matters into their own hands to establish local ordinances against undocumented people, egged on by national demagogues like Lou Dobbs.

In Valley Park, MO and Hazelton, PA, town councils established ordinances making it illegal to rent to or employ individuals without proper documentation. A subsequent ordinance passed in Hazelton at the behest of anti-immigrant mayor Lou Barletta declared English to be the “official language”—a cruel, contemptible, and procedurally unnecessary action, but a highly symbolic gesture that goes well beyond merely enforcing immigration statutes. In Irving, TX the council thwarted the U.S. Constitution and gave local police power to enforce federal laws on the border with Mexico. Most recently, the Arizona legislation arrogated the power to enforce Federal immigration law, providing legal cover for police to inquire after a person’s papers merely upon suspicion that they might be undocumented.

Proponents of these policies argue that they merely want to apply existing federal laws to root out and expel undocumented people. But their own rhetoric in speeches and at rallies betrays a much deeper set of cultural anxieties, as they tack between pious legalities and fear mongering. At a June 2007 rally in support of the Hazelton ordinances, organizers recruited white supremacist rock band Pokerface to provide entertainment. Appearing on CNN in 2008 to support Irving, TX law enforcement, prominent North Carolina anti-immigrant activist William Gheen articulated the fears motivating local efforts. “We got a half a million felon illegal aliens,” he proclaimed, “that are out there tonight, murdering, raping,

assaulting and stealing from Americans.” According to the Anti-Defamation League, Gheen maintains ties to the Minutemen, the vigilante organization responsible for the shooting death of Brisenia Flores.

A battery of court challenges and counter-challenges have placed local and State anti-immigration efforts into a legal limbo, but they remain on the books. The town council of Valley Park has spent over a quarter of a million dollars of its taxpayers’ money to defend an ordinance that has no tangible benefit, and inflicts pain and misery uncharitably on immigrant families. The ordinances might constitute a temporary legal accomplishment, but they are ultimately hollow victories because they are rooted in commitments to a civic culture of reactionary exclusion. They also establish poor public policy, providing a quick “Not in My Back Yard” solution that does nothing to solve the basic problems that induce people to cross borders in the first place. In any case, while local anti-immigration ordinances may eventually be rendered moot by court decisions, this will not erase the prejudices that lurk behind the laws.

Undocumented people are not here in the United States because they inherently yearn to live in our country, or because they are eager to flaunt laws or commit crimes against citizens. They are here because they have run out of options in their homelands. Barrios and villages across Mexico, for example, routinely send their men—and increasingly women—across the Rio Grande to find desperately needed work. In some of these places, nearly all of the working age men are absent, far away from their loved ones. If they are lucky, their families join them. But it is a hard, dangerous, and emotionally devastating ordeal to leave one’s home and country just to earn a living.

Indeed, the universe in which people make such choices is vastly more complex than anti-immigration advocates grasp. Many undocumented immigrants are refugees from the very countries whose economies have been wrecked by global trade policies strong-armed into existence by multinational corporations—the same trade policies that have eroded jobs and devastated communities here in the United States. So why blame immigrants, or mosque builders, or “foreign people”—undocumented or otherwise? Given these broader realities, we should think in terms of reconciliation rather than punishment.

Imagine if town leaders in Valley Park had approached the issue of undocumented immigrants in a spirit of humility and grace. Imagine if,

instead of giving way to reactionary prejudice, they had reached out to embrace immigrant families—with or without documents. What if Valley Park leaders had begun with the assumption that these families could be an asset to the town, rather than a liability, and committed themselves to engaging Latino leaders in building a better, safer Valley Park. Valley Park could be a beacon of tolerance and decency instead of a national example of bigotry and hate. But of course in Valley Park and elsewhere it was never really about documents or immigration. It has always been about cultural difference, and the fears provoked among whites by the loss of privilege and primacy.

We Americans have long written our petty hatreds and unjustified fears into the law—from slavery and Jim Crow to women-as-property, Chinese exclusion, Japanese internment, and pogroms against First Nations. If we have learned anything from history it is that prejudice enshrined in law saps a society of moral strength. Yet we continue to use the law to animate the lesser angels of our nature, to divide human communities, and to deny basic rights and human decency in favor of organized bigotry.

Immigrant or citizen, president or piker, nobody is above the law. But neither is the law a substitute for grace, love, compassion, reason, and tolerance. The phantasm of an immigrant-free community betrays a deep spiritual poverty—a decidedly wicked approach to dealing with fellow human beings. As Tea Partiers and their supporters gain a firm footing in the corridors of power, there is every indication that they will use the issue of immigration to incite the body politic with apocalyptic visions of end times—at least the end of the “real America” imagined by anti-immigration forces. Valley Park and Hazelton got the ball rolling with poorly conceived laws rooted in retribution, exposing a civic culture based on divisiveness and fear. Are these the kinds of communities that we want to build for ourselves? Are these the lessons we want to teach our children?

Now more than ever should we heed the command of Jesus recorded in Matthew 22:39 to “love thy neighbor as thy self.” Or, if you like, Voltaire, who said: “What is tolerance?—it is the consequence of humanity. We are all formed of frailty and error; let us pardon reciprocally each other’s folly—that is the first law of nature.”