

Nicholas Robillard

Security or Survival

Historically, America has been praised as a haven of liberty, a land of opportunity, and a “melting pot” for the world’s cultures. In the Declaration of Independence our founding fathers proclaimed the equality of all human beings and despite the hypocrisy inherent within this Declaration, coming from aristocratic slaveholders, the principles that it established have become synonymous with Americanism. Our country has struggled with the poisons of racism and religious persecution since its genesis: slavery, the genocide of the American Indians, Chinese Exclusion laws, the blanket internment of those of Japanese ancestry, and this is hardly scratching the surface. Today, in the aftermath September 11th, we are facing another issue of racism: racial and ethnic profiling. The issue of profiling is not new, it has been prevalent for decades; the “Global War on Terrorism” has exacerbated the existing divisions within our society and enflamed the passions of leaders on every side of the issue. Although combating terrorism and crime are goals worthy of government attention, the use of racial and ethnic profiling, in an attempt to solve social ills and prevent catastrophe, is inherently dehumanizing, ineffective, and counterproductive: profiling reifies stereotypes, generates fear, and alienates the very communities whose cooperation is needed for any lasting solvency.

The “justifications” for racial profiling rely on two key assumptions: that potential threats to society can be identified based on biological and cultural characteristics, and that any burden placed upon the identified groups is justified in the name of national

security and defending the “homeland”. These assumptions make up the foundation of ethnic profiling and, as with any structural foundation, if it is deconstructed and disproved, the structures and contentions that it supports will collapse into rubble.

The first assumption, that racial and ethnic characteristics are useful to identify threats to the social body is empirically disproved by a myriad of historical events. Advocates of ethnic profiling as a counter terrorism tactic ignore those who do not fall within their strict racial rubric. Profiling failed to prevent Timothy McVeigh and Eric Rudolph, both white males, from perpetrating the Oklahoma bombing and the Olympic Park bombing of a gay nightclub respectively. More recently, no amount of racial profiling would have prevented the numerous bombings of Russian apartments, train stations, and theaters committed by separatists from the Caucasus and, in the words of Washington Post Editorial Director Colbert King, “you can't get any more Caucasian than that (King A19).”

Along with being ineffective at preventing terrorism, racial profiling has actually hindered the government’s ability to combat it. The fact that most attacks against the United States that are labeled as “terrorist activities” have been perpetrated by people from the Middle East is indisputable, although the criterion for labeling an attack as “terrorist” surely is. Vague generalities such as this are useless as a basis for law enforcement and only serve to waste valuable resources and time. Arab and Muslim communities are far more likely to help identify the “Al Qaeda needles in the haystack than are broad-brush programs treating these communities as a whole as suspect (Cole

55-56).” Ethnic profiling destroys any possibility for cooperation with these communities. It sends a clear message to community members: we do not trust you; you are guilty by association. By alienating entire communities racial profiling has actually prevented the development of a potentially invaluable partnership in the fight against terrorism.

The second assumption, that discrimination based on ethnicity is justified in the context of security, is a symptom of a worldview in which life has no value. The logic becomes circular: violations of the human rights of members of society is justified in order to defend those same rights; and if questioned regarding what makes society worth defending at such cost, the answer is surely to be the “liberties and freedoms” of its members. Profiling violates rights in order to secure them. This seemingly paradoxical reasoning becomes clear when brought into context: ethnic profiling does not violate *our* (white, Christian) rights in an effort to secure *us*; it violates *their* (Middle Eastern, Black, Asian, Hispanic, Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, etc) rights, not to secure *their* freedoms, but to deliver *ours*. *We* are no longer facing a question of trading *our* liberty for safety, which as Benjamin Franklin once said, would leave us deserving of neither; *we* now trade *their* liberties for *our* safety. It is an infinitely more simple decision to sacrifice the rights of others for personal gain than it is to sacrifice equally. This outlook values the lives of some over those of others based on ethnic characteristics and thus is inherently racist whatever its goals. Even if racial profiling were proven to be successful in preventing terrorism any potential “greater good” would be mooted by its racist means. Every atrocity ever committed has been the result of dehumanization. Every day that we, as a

society, rely on racist means to achieve our ends is one day closer to society's self-destruction. "To study racism is to study walls", whether these walls are the literal constructs of prisons and ghettos or the metaphorical barriers of prejudice and dehumanization they must be dismantled "brick by brick, stone by stone" if we wish to escape our path toward oblivion (Barndt 155).

Racial profiling is a form of "identity politics" where differences are illuminated, not to celebrate diversity, but to create division, conflict, and normalization. Our need to feel "secure" has empirically been the catalyst for racist policies. The Nazi state, under a program to "defend the homeland" and protect the "health of the social body", used race, ethnicity, and religion as a way to eliminate political enemies and secure uncontested rule. India's Caste System uses a complex hierarchy of traits to monopolize power and prevent any questioning of the Hindu Brahmins in power. Following the September 11th attacks President Bush declared that we must be either with him or with the terrorists and that within our own borders there are Islamic terrorists who could strike at any moment. These examples are obviously not equal or truly comparable but their motives are.

Racism today is not external to society; it is an internal racism of constant "purification" and redefinition. It is a tool that has been harnessed for social control (Stoler 66). While today's racial profiling is not tantamount to genocide in any sense, it is supported by the same logic taken to the next level. "Genocide starts with classification and fulfills itself as a categorical killing", its victims are not guilty of any crime in the conventional sense; they, like the countless victims of the humiliation of racial profiling, "are guilty of being accused" and for the perpetrators of genocide that is more than enough (Bauman 203).

Today we are faced with a choice: security or survival. The decision is ours, as a society, to make and its consequences are of utmost importance. Racial profiling, despite its ineffectiveness, does appear to give people a sense of security, albeit a false one. The question that remains is whether we are willing to sacrifice this feeling, to cast it away, or is our fear too prevalent and insidious to allow us to do so? The shackles of racism that bind us in our prison of fear are growing tighter by the day and before long our circulation will be stopped and any chance of escape will become impossible. We, as human beings, must realize that in our hands we hold the keys to unlock our individual shackles, it is only inertia and ignorance that hold us back. The key is not an erasure of identity, it's not colorblindness: the solution is to embrace identity and difference as the essence of what makes us human instead of as a means of division and violence. It is impossible to prevent every mindless act of violence and we must recognize that. All that we can do is work every day to break down the walls of racism brick by brick, stone by stone if we care about our species, if we care about the world, if we care about each other, we must devote ourselves to this task. Racial profiling is but one brick in this wall, but it is a brick that holds up numerous others and in removing it we may well set in motion the collapse of the wall itself.

Works Cited

Barndt, Joseph. Dismantling Racism: The Continuing Challenge to White America.

Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1991.



Bauman, Zygmunt. Life in Fragments. Vermont: Blackwell Publishing, 1995.

Cole, David. Enemy Aliens. New York: New Press, 2003.

King, Colbert I. "You Can't Fight Terrorism With Racism." The Washington Post (30 July 2005): A19.

Stoler, Laura Ann. Race and the Education of Desire. North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1995.