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Abstract

“Reading ‘The Muslim,’ Tracing the Biopolitics of Race in the Age of Global Counterterrorism”

In February 2015, the Department of Homeland Security hosted the first ever White House International Summit on Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) to introduce a new global program that seeks to collaborate with local law enforcement and community institutions to combat global youth radicalization. Although CVE claims its program is designed for radical groups inspired by a wide range of beliefs, it has thus far only been implemented in the Muslim world and Muslim minority communities in the U.S., and justified by the global threat of Muslim youth extremism. With the emergence of the “War on Terror” and programs such as CVE which specifically target Muslims globally, social science and humanities scholars alike have started to examine the genealogies and historical intersections of race, religion, and modern modes of governing through the figure of “the Muslim” (Rana 2011; Daulatzai 2012; Fernando 2105; Johnson 2015). “The Muslim” has thus not only become an important figure to understand modern ethical life and religious practice, but also to examine modern political power and biopolitical technologies of governance.

Drawing on data and documents regarding the Department of Homeland Security recently implemented Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) counterterrorism program, this paper uses a semiotic approach to examine the templates and diagnostics used to determine the threat of Muslim youth radicalization to understand emerging post-9/11 biopolitics of race. More particularly, I argue the global CVE program and counterterrorism U.S. State produces a semiotic reading of “the Muslim” as racial other, by bundling everyday acts, practices and behaviors into a statistical rubric for gauging susceptibility to violent extremism. CVE’s conception of the radicalization process is produced through what Talal Asad and Webb Keane consider the semiotic indeterminacy of signs, or in my case, the uncertainties and ambiguities for gauging which practices and sensibilities should be read as dangerous and criminal (Asad 2007; Keane 2003). Through a semiotic reading of certain religious practices as suspect, the U.S. counterterrorism state and the CVE program construct a new post-9/11 racial logic mediated by the ontological Thirdness of the Muslim as terrorist, or “a general law that governs possible instances” of types and tokens, icons and indexes (Keane 2003, 420).

Through this analysis, I not only consider how the post-9/11 U.S. State racializes everyday practices and sensibilities, but more importantly how the U.S. State uses neoliberal reason concerned with risk and statistics-based modes of truth-making to produce racial difference. Wendy Brown argues neoliberalism “takes shape as a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life” (Brown 2015, 30). More importantly, neoliberal rationality does not solely marketize or monetize ethical life and social relations, but “casts them in an exclusively economic frame, one that has both an epistemological and ontological dimension” (Brown 2015, 62). In other words, the market’s model for quantifying future risk and reward based on statistical data about the past and present enters domains of life where money or profit-seeking are not an issue. I analyze CVE’s risk-assessment and statistics based framework for gauging Muslim radicalization as part of a broader shift in the modern state’s recruitment of neoliberal reason as a governing rationality. Thus, this paper will consider how CVE and the counterterrorism U.S. State’s

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racialization of Muslims can help us understand the biopolitics of race in the “War on Terror” as well as the ways in which neoliberal reason is increasingly used to legitimate securitization of the modern state.

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