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Reactions: Natsu Taylor Saito's 'Colonial Presumptions: The War on Terror and the Roots of American Exceptionalism'


Lama Abu-Odeh

Georgetown University Law Center, la34@law.georgetown.edu

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1 *Geo. J.L. & Mod. Critical Race Persp.* 111 (2009)

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Reactions

LAMA ABU-ODEH*

Is the word “civilization,” evoked by Bush in contemporary times, the direct genealogical descendant of the mission civilatrice¹ evoked by his Anglo Saxon predecessors to justify their onslaught on the native inhabitants of the land they have chosen to settle and appropriate? Is the contemporary project by the current political elites of the US to “spread democracy in the Middle East” the same as and co-equal with the mission to civilize the “beast” in the lands where “beasts” wandered two centuries ago? If the ethno/race of the old mission was Anglo Saxon, what is its contemporary ethnic/race today? Does the election of Obama complicate this question?

Perhaps to answer this question we first need to ask the following one: what is the meaning of “the race of a mission”? Is it that the mission acquires the race of those who launched it materially and discursively? Or is it that it acquires the race of whoever benefits from its ill effect even if they were not its initiators, indeed came long after it has been completed? Or is it the launching of the mission itself that distributes color/ethnicity among those concerned, so they would not be identifiable as a race even to themselves short of this mission? So that whether you agree or disagree, benefit or lose, participate in the mission or not, the mission endows you with color depending on which side of the dividing line you happen to fall? In contemporary times, the debate on “spreading democracy in the Middle East” between the Democrats (we should not be in the business of spreading democracy in other countries) and Republicans (yes, we should), the debate itself is a race distributor so that those “who own the democracy,” whether they are for spreading it or not are racially distinguished from/superior to those “who don’t own it”? Perhaps race is created and is continuously rejuvenated through the launching of missions: on crime (black), on illegal immigration (Latino), on terrorism (Muslim)? Perhaps, mission is the modus operandi of race. Or is it that we need to mix all of the above and argue that a mission civilatrice is launched by a particular ethnic/racial group configuration that is politically dominant but that marshals support for its mission (manufactures consent) by inviting others to participate in a discourse that colors them in a way that allows them to get a sense of superiority even though in fact they do not benefit, may indeed lose (their lives) by the launching of the mission?

If this is so, when Obama declares he will not hesitate to bomb Pakistan “in pursuit of terrorists” without consulting with the Pakistani government, how has the race/color of the mission civilatrice or should I say *disciplinaire*,² come to be re-aligned in the US?

* Lama Abu-Odeh is a Palestinian American Professor of Law at Georgetown Law. © 2009, Lama Abu-Odeh.

1. French for “civilizing mission.”
2. French for “disciplinary.”