

From Bensonhurst to Oslo and Beyond

Jerry Krase (August 08, 2011)



Negative, or at least puzzled, reactions to visibly different newcomers is universal. Whether in America, Italy or Norway, learning how to see difference positively as part of all our communities is something devoutly to be wished.

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It seems that bad news travels much more slowly than we think. In the summer of 1989, I received a call from Frank Lombardi at the New York Daily News. He was a relative of a Brooklyn College student who had taken my Italian American Studies class when I was Director of the Italian American Studies Center. It seems that a “black kid” by the name of Yusuf Hawkins had been murdered by a mixed, but predominately Italian American, mob of miscreants. Lombardi asked why, or better how, this could happen. My simple judgment was that Yusuf unknowingly had crossed the invisible border between the sacred Whitopia of Bensonhurst and the rest of the world as we knew it then. Having worked with many groups there, I described the community as “insular,” so I and the easy-to-use label carried the story further; first to John Kifner at The New York Times, then to PBS’ McNeil-Lehrer Report, and beyond. It was Italian American insularity that killed Yusuf, and all, except me, agreed. Vainly, I also tried to explain that such “they don’t belong here” attitudes towards “outsiders” is universal; the only differences being the whats, whens, wheres, and hows of bias, not the reality of it. I also stressed that the most violent responses to difference are usually connected to “anti” climates created and maintained by political and other prattlers who say they are protecting “us” from “them.” Most racist mobs claim to be protecting “our” turf. But as we knew even before Rupert Murdoch, Big Media thrives on simplicity, therefore the story line was how the “Italian” version of America killed Yusuf.

To smugly progressive Europeans on the other hand, the story line was simply America as usual. Yusuf was just the latest lynching. They thought the ocean between them and their cousins insulated them from “American” racism. Since then, evidently, Europe has become more and more like America, as the recent massacre in Norway shockingly reminded us. Despite the fact that neither Timothy McVeigh nor Anders Behring Breivik is Italian American, Bensonhurst had moved to Oslo in a big way. There, on July 22, 2011, Breivik with a bomb and bullets slaughtered 77 people causing people to ask why, or better how, this could happen where each year the Nobel Peace prize is awarded.

In the New York Times, Steven Erlanger and Michael Schwartz wrote in the aftermath that

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[***“In Norway, Consensus Cuts 2 Ways***](#) [2]” and suggested that the nation have moved away from its monoethnic, egalitarian culture. Like in Bensonhurst, mono-ethnicity has few virtues. From a Brooklyn perspective, where close to half of its scant three-million residents came from elsewhere, the fact that “...more than 11 percent of the population of some 4.9 million were born someplace else — Pakistan, Sweden, Poland, Somalia, Eritrea, Iraq.” is hardly enough diversity to cause Norway’s “cultural shock.” But post-9/11, in both Brooklyn and Norway, anti-Muslim sentiments have increased, especially in the form of objections against the building of mosques. At the national level, one can easily correlate bias incidents with the rise of anti-immigrant political parties, such as Norway’s second largest -- the Progress Party and with our own Tea Party.

Erlanger and Schwartz’s report provides other, symbolic, perhaps even Freudian slippish, clues to the problem of seeing community in multicultural societies. They note for example that “The young people Mr. Breivik shot at a summer camp on the island of Utoya were all Norwegians, but some were the children of immigrants (*italics added*), who have now been memorialized in the country’s greatest modern disaster.” They then quote a sociologist, Grete Brochmann, who seems to explain,



almost excuse, the slaughter, by saying “When you are confronted with multicultural immigration, something happens.”... “That’s the core of the matter right now, and it’s a great challenge to the Norwegian model.” This reminded me that when I asked local people about Yusuf’s murder in Bensonhurst most were appalled but added that, being Black, he must have been “up to something.”

The right-leaning Norwegian Progress Party, is trying to create distance between its words and Breivik’s actions. But, Erlanger and Schwartz quote Magnus Marsdale’s assertion that “There is one political party in this country that has worked with the line of reasoning that the terrorist used to legitimize his atrocities, Of course the Progress Party is not accountable for this guy’s actions, but the sentiments that are spread through political propaganda are not innocent.” The Times also reports exploitation of fears about Norway’s religious and cultural uniformity by arranged marriages, genital mutilation, and homophobia. It seems that “Islamophobia and resentment of immigrant criminals and “welfare scroungers” of every religion and color has arrived in Norway from elsewhere (perhaps Bensonhurst?). A more enlightened view however, is provided by cultural anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen who recognizes that Norway’s “quiet” ethnic nationalism has some unexamined ugly features”... “a feeling of specialness, an element of racism,” In support of my own concerns about visibility, Eriksen added “Non-ethnic Norwegians are visible and still seen as out of place.” (*italics added*).

In 2009 I had already expressed my opinion on Italy's futile attempt to stem the tide of immigration under the title "Turning Back the Tide: It's Already Too Late Silvio." At the time, Italy had returned 227 migrants to Lybia and suggested that the rest of Europe should adopt this as a model for dealing with illegal migrations. After more than a thousand immigrants had to be evacuated from southern Italy following attacks on African farm workers, the Pew Global Attitudes Project found “[Widespread Anti-Immigrant Sentiment in Italy](#) [3].” In their 2007 global survey, “Italians overwhelmingly said that immigration was a big problem in their country and that immigrants -- both from the Middle East and North Africa and from Eastern European countries -- were having a bad impact on Italy. In the fall of 2009, more than eight-in-ten Italians said they would like to see tighter restrictions on immigration.” Italians were more likely than any others in the 47-nation survey to see immigration as a big problem. Ninety-four percent said immigration was a “big” problem, including sixty-four percent who said it was a “very big.” South Africans were a distant third with fifty-three percent saying it was “very big.” Results from Norway were not reported but her sister nation, Sweden, was near the bottom of anti-immigrant sentiments with only eleven percent saying it was a “big problem.” This obvious underestimation shows that the survey did not reach very far into that part of the brain where biases can be carefully hidden from view.

Most coverage of negative reactions to migration pays greatest attention to numbers, but in my experience it is the degree and especially the visibility of difference, that is the root of the problem. When migrants remain invisible it means they are keeping their (inferior) place. For example, undocumented workers have been around for decades but only when they congregate in public spaces, are they seen as polluting it. In a related way, when Moslems pray out of sight and don’t try to build imposing mosques they are more likely to be tolerated. Of course, the reverse of this is true for Christians and Jews in Islamic countries.

As to the visibility of “[Europe's Homegrown Terrorists](#) [4]” Gary Younge wrote in The Nation about the knee-jerk reaction in the mass media that the terror in Oslo was caused by Islam as opposed to Islamophobia. They introduced their analysis with a reflection on an earlier case of mistaken ethnic identity.

"Two weeks after the fatal terrorist attacks of July 7, 2005, in London, and one day after another failed attack, a student, Jean Charles de Menezes, was in the London Underground when plainclothes police officers gave chase and shot him seven times in the head. Initial eyewitness reports said he was wearing a suspiciously large puffa jacket on a hot day and had vaulted the barriers and run when asked to stop. Anthony Larkin, who was on the train, said he saw 'this guy who appeared to have a bomb belt and wires coming out.' Mark Whitby, who was also at the station, thought he saw a Pakistani terrorist being chased and gunned down by plainclothes policemen. Less than a month later, Whitby said, 'I now believe that I could have been looking at the surveillance officer' being thrown out of the way as Menezes was being killed. The Pakistani turned out to be a Brazilian. Security cameras showed he was wearing a light denim jacket and clearly in no rush as he picked up a free paper and swiped his metrocard. "

Just like Yusuf Hawkins, Menezes looked "suspiciously out of place."

Americans also suffer from ethno-myopia, Timothy Williams wrote about "[The Hated and the Hater, Both Touched by Crime](#) [5]" "Mark Anthony Stroman, 41, a stonecutter from Dallas, shot people he believed were Arabs, saying he was enraged by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. He killed at least two: Vasudev Patel, an Indian immigrant who was Hindu, and Waqar Hasan, a Muslim born in Pakistan. (italics added) A third shooting victim, Rais Bhuiyan, 37, a former Air Force pilot from Bangladesh, survived after Mr. Stroman shot him in the face at close range. Mr. Stroman admitted to the shootings. He is scheduled to be executed on Wednesday."

Christopher Caldwell provides America with another unflattering allusion in "[Europe's Arizona Problem](#) [6]"

"Alongside Greek debt and the Libyan intervention, European Union countries are bickering over another issue, one that could well determine the future of their would-be megastate: immigration and internal borders. A growing number, including Italy, France and Denmark, want to carve out exceptions to the agreements under which member states open their borders to one another. The issue has been simmering for years, but unrest in the Middle East and North Africa and fears of a new wave of migrants have brought it to a boil. Of course, closing off Europe to newcomers violates the cosmopolitan vision on which the European Union was built, and doing so could kill the project altogether. But as the continent's leaders are now learning, it's also possible to kill Europe by opening its doors wider than its citizens will tolerate."

I have been trying to break down imaginary walls between otherwise fellow human beings for decades. In the 1970s I began lecturing on the symbolic and visual basis of inter-group bias in Europe and suggesting that they could learn by our terrible mistakes. I was politely informed that such problems were as American as apple pie but had little relevance for more enlightened European social democracies. Some thought that their last genocidal war had cured it of xenophobia. "American Exceptionalism" also meant we were exceptionally racist. Sadly, they were very wrong, and obviously unprepared for the current reality. Intolerance enhanced by the spectacle of difference is happening all over the world. Even in China Moslem Uighers and other local minorities are responding with violence to the invasion of their home turfs by majority Han Chinese. Bensonhurst seems to be alive and well in Oslo and elsewhere around the globe. What all these incidents have in common is visibly different groups making claims on local, native, territory. Finding a way to include difference in community will keep us occupied for at least another generation.



Note: I have a forthcoming book, [Seeing Cities Change](#) [7], which deals with these and other related issues. In it I write that cities have always been dynamic social environments for visual and otherwise symbolic competition between the groups who live and work within them. In contemporary urban areas, all sorts of diversity are simultaneously increased and concentrated, chief amongst them in recent years being the ethnic and racial transformation produced by migration (*italics added*) and the gentrification of once socially marginal areas of the city.

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