Yeah, you read that right. Got you to look at the post, didn’t it?

This is not (just) an attention-getting shock tactic (though a little more site traffic has rarely hurt anyone. I guess we’ll see whether I come to regret this). Anders Behring Breivik, on trial in Norway for killing 77 people with a bomb and a shooting spree because he wanted to “save” Norway from supposedly nefarious multiculturalism, does indeed have point. Just not the one he thinks he does.

As reported in a number of news outlets (my source here is an April 23 article in the New York Daily News) Breivik has declared questions about his sanity a “racist plot” to discredit him. The confessed mass killer correctly pointed out that the sanity of Islamic terrorists generally isn’t questioned, and wondered therefore why the issue was being raised in relation to his own behavior.

Breivik, of course, meant that this inquiry into his sanity was racist against him as a white person—more or less his attitude toward all things he dislikes. And he is wrong about that. But he’s not wrong that there’s a racist logic at work in that differential accusation of insanity.

Whiteness has historically been constructed as rational and controlled through constructing nonwhiteness as irrational and out of control (I know parenthetical citations and works cited are bad form in a blog, but the sources are too numerous to link, so here it comes, with apologies: Dyer 1997; Floyd 2009; Roediger 1991; Savran 1998).

Whiteness, then, is at once stabilized by the deployment of this constitutive Other (as I noted in a 2010 post on Nietzsche, a “good vs. bad” morality) and simultaneously holds that Other inferior for failing to live up to the standards set by the dominant (a “good vs. evil” morality).

According to this structure, “of course” brown folks from the Muslim world would be violent and destructive, because they’re Other to the norm of control, at the same time that this alterity is also evidence of their “pathologized psyches” (Puar and Rai 2002, p. 117).

Moreover, whiteness is the unmarked category that masquerades as no category at all, as default, universal, invisible, nothing (Chambers 1997; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Hill 1997a, 1997b; Kusz 2001, 2007; and Newitz and Wray 1997a), which means that white folks are understood as individuals. Nonwhite people, however, are frequently imagined to be explained by the category to which they belong.

Hence, the sanity of the Islamic terrorist isn’t questioned—we already “know” he’s insane because members of his group definitionally are (as is explained in considerably more depth in Puar and Rai 2002). But there is a presumption that a white Norwegian is rational and individual. His extreme violence requires an explanation. He must be insane to do such things.

This happens in much smaller ways all the time. I’ve been startled to notice in the last little while the ways that people’s bad behavior is excused under exactly these
sort of racist premises. Being a jerk is a personality flaw, not the essence of somebody’s racial or ethnic category.

*It is fundamentally racist to ascribe anybody’s behavior—good or bad—to their race.*

Now, I’m not some sort of radical individualist (as I hope is clear from my posting history). We should absolutely examine and question the norms and options available to people on the basis of belonging to whatever category, because these do absolutely constrain behavior.

But we can’t let “Person A is a member of category B, which comes with XYZ baggage, which influenced the way they ultimately behaved” become “Person A did X because they are B.” Ever.

**Works Cited**


Privacy has been a hot topic in the last few years, due largely to the confluence of digital media that travels easily with social platforms that encourage inputting all the information about one’s life. But the term gets thrown around and used to mean keeping all kinds of things private from all kinds of people.
I read something recently that made an offhand remark about privacy and privatization while citing Amitai Etzioni’s 1999 book *The Limits of Privacy* (I don’t know what I was reading and I really did go looking but I can’t find it again; however, I’m fairly certain it was either Saskia Sassen or Nick Dyer-Witheford, based on when it was in the semester, and the latter seems the more likely suspect).

That reading, whatever it was, sparked me to think about the relationship between privacy and privatization, public and publicity, and what we talk about when we talk about privacy. (Lapsed English major FTW with the Raymond Carver reference!)

It seems that people are most concerned with interpersonal privacy. They don’t want their mom to know they got totally wasted last weekend, their employer to know they lied to go to a party, or potential stalkers nearby to know their location. They are, to a lesser degree, concerned with privacy from the government. Post-9/11 surveillance in the name of counterterrorism has gotten some pushback—certainly, SumOfUs.org wants me to petition Facebook not to give its members’ information to the government without a warrant, which both seems important and like a drop in the proverbial bucket of surveillance—but the sheer trauma of that event was sufficient to convince at least some people of what Etzioni contended in 1999 that Americans generally steadfastly refused to accept, that public goods (like safety and health) sometimes require violating privacy (p. 2).

However, there is markedly less concern about privacy when it comes to corporations. As Etzioni put it, “although our civic culture, public policies, and legal doctrines are attentive to privacy when it is violated by the state, when privacy is threatened by the private sector our culture, policies, and doctrines provide a surprisingly weak defense” (p. 10).

There are exceptions, of course, as shown by discomfort with the fact that Target can figure out women are pregnant based on their purchases and will send them coupons for pregnancy and baby items, often before they’ve told anyone in their immediate families. By and large, though, protecting privacy from corporations doesn’t generate a lot of attention among the general public.

Likely this is at least somewhat because most people are not aware of how Facebook or Google or any of the other big Internet companies works. They get, to use Dallas Smythe’s famous terminology, a free lunch, and they think that’s in exchange for the advertisements they can freely ignore, so it seems like a good deal.

However, what the company really gets from them is not their attention, but the traces of their life—demographics, location, social relationships, likes, hobbies, what they click on, what other websites they visit, etc. etc. etc.—left behind every time they do anything, much like footprints, fingerprints, or dead skin cells in the physical world.

(For a detailed critique of Google’s use of data, which forms some of my background knowledge here, see Christian Fuchs’ *Google’s “New” Terms of Use and Privacy Policy: Old Exploitation and User Commodification in a New Ideological Skin*).

However, I suspect that even if people did know how it worked, protecting privacy from corporations still wouldn’t get very many people’s dander up, for two reasons:

1. Privacy is imagined in relation to publicity, such that as long as the information is impersonal, aggregate, and not released to the public, it seems compatible with privacy; and

2. The strong pro-privatization ethos in much of U.S. public discourse has tended to operate with the assumption that the private sector is in some sense controlled by the public through competition and people voting with their dollars.
Etzioni described this as “the privacy paradox: Although they fear Big Brother most, they need to lean on him to protect privacy better from Big Bucks” (p. 10), but I think that’s no longer true (and indeed I’m skeptical that it ever was). That is, though multinational capital is capable of overpowering any other force on the planet, with the possible exceptions of the U.S., E.U., and Chinese governments should they suddenly decide to stand up to it, there’s a persistent and mistaken belief that “the market” can keep it in check and thereby keep customers in the driver’s seat as companies compete for their dollars.

The real paradox, then, is that ultimate belief in consumer sovereignty leads consumers to quite freely give up sovereignty over their own data. Or that, we don’t want our data to be publicized, and we don’t want the public sector to intervene, but, as Safiya Noble points out, these Web technologies are themselves framed as a “public good,” which constrains how (and how much) they can be critiqued.

To say: “Obviously it’s good! It gives people access to information and social connection! For free! Well yeah, maybe it also takes, but it’s worth it! And my information is still private!” takes some pretty complex mental gymnastics and willful ignorances, and the fact that those contortions have become unremarkable is actually quite remarkable.

This week, I’ve been provoked into critiquing the casual ease with which people who, by all indications, ought to understand how to avoid stereotyping reproduce the reduction of groups people to the least common stereotype.

Now, I have myself been nailed for this. I wrote in a response paper for my Ethnic Studies 10AC course that “when I think Asian, I don’t think turban” as part of my discussion of the ways Indians get elided. And I was meaning this as a commentary on other people reducing Sikhs to turbans, but that wasn’t clear, and I got a very snarky comment in the margin from my TA. My fault for not being precise. Bad 17 year old me!

I want to distinguish the objects of my ire here from the Unintentionally Hilarious Figure version of stereotyping, where people had actually found a pattern among groups of people but then just reported it without the necessary commentary or critique:

(I’m pretty sure this got from the Atlantic to me via @anetv but Twitter’s extreme non-searchability precludes verifying. I’ll give her credit anyway.)

Instead, what I’m interested in is the ways that knowledgeable people, generating a name or an image, are using extremely loaded iconography that reproduces stereotypes when they don’t have to. They’re starting from scratch—with the acknowledgement that “scratch” is “the ideas already swirling around in culture around the objects they’re describing”—and yet they deploy these stereotyped ideas, seemingly without sufficient thinking-through.

This first came to my attention when I was forwarded a call for papers: From Veiling to Blogging: Women and Media in the Middle East. This was a goodly while ago now, but it sat there in my inbox until quite recently. The subject is not my area of expertise, so I wasn’t going to submit and should probably have just deleted it. But every time I came to it, I just got mad and tempted to fire off a reply to the listserv about it. I didn’t, because I know enough by now to doubt that I...
What was particularly problematic about it was that the people doing the special issue should have known better. The general public discourse around this may well be still about “white people saving brown women from brown men”—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak specified men doing the saving in the case of sati, but the way some feminists have picked up the veil and run with it makes it an equal opportunity formula—but academics should really know better, because “Can the Subaltern Speak?” is as old as I am.

And indeed the organizers did, in fact, know better, because the actual text of the CFP started out by framing the special issue as a critique of precisely the way that “Middle Eastern women have traditionally been viewed as weak and submissive, passively accepting male authority and leadership rather than seeking to be a leader in their own right” as well as how “women of the Middle East have been portrayed as helpless creatures who are often hidden behind the veil, quietly waiting to be liberated.”

It’s therefore baffling to me why on earth they’d frame the topic as “from veiling to blogging.” Why imply that’s a chronological shift in “women and media in the Middle East” rather than (as they probably intended) in the thinking on women and media in that region? Why redeploy the veil at all, given the enormous risks of re-instantiating the very discourse they’re attempting to dispute?

The second entry in the “wow, you didn’t think that through” file, and the one that solidified my determination to write this blog post, comes from reading the article Minimalist posters explain complex philosophical concepts with basic shapes, which I got from @mikemonello

So there I am, scrolling down, not finding the geometric shapes particularly illuminating—the black and white X for Nihilism, sure, but many of the other Venn diagram-looking ones didn’t strike me as the “surprisingly simple and accessible package” the article’s introduction had promised—when I get to Hedonism and come to a screeching halt.

Really? A pink triangle for Hedonism? What decade is this that we’re still reinforcing the idea that gay sex is about irresponsible pleasure-seeking and gay folks have a worldview in which, as the poster-makers describe Hedonism, “Pleasure is the only intrinsic good. Actions can be evaluated in terms of how much pleasure they produce”? I mean, yes, clearly that’s the world Rick Santorum and other far-right ideologues live in, but the rest of us get that homos are no more or less irresponsible in their pleasure-seeking than anyone else.

If these are people who have enough grasp on philosophy to make posters summarizing it, they should be no strangers to sophisticated thinking. And they should therefore have enough intelligence and sense of the world to think of something considerably less reductive. Like the veiling example, some people may not know better, but these people should.

And I guess that’s the issue. How will the general public know any better if we who do aren’t more careful in how we communicate, to each other (the CFP) and to people in general (the posters)?
This week's post is a recap of an event in which I participated on Monday, April 2. It's housed over at the blog of the organization that hosted the event, the venerable Unit for Criticism at the University of Illinois.

So please do head over there and check it out: Hack This Post! Contesting Technological Neutrality at Technology in Theory and Practice
Monthly Archives: April 2012. Preparing the hosts in Provider VDCs with PowerCLI. Leave a reply. Luc is also due to present a second webcast on April 25th, this will take your PowerCLI learning one step further to being an automation wizard, to sign up for this and have the chance to ask questions live make sure you follow this link. Get notification of new blog postings and more by following VMware PowerCLI on Twitter: @PowerCLI. This entry was posted in Webinars on April 19, 2012 by Alan Renouf. About this Blog. This blog provides insight and highlights for VMware PowerCLI, the best tool for automating management and configuration of VMware Products.