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Fear and Insurrection

Back in 2006 I featured a quote from Robert Pape, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, who is the author of “Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism.”

Pape is still at the U of Chicago, and is now the director of the Chicago Project on Security and Threats. A little more than a year ago they put out a study called “AMERICAN FACE OF INSURRECTION: Analysis of Individuals Charged for Storming the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.”

The Report notes that “The violent assault on the US Capitol that took place January 6, 2021 is a major act of domestic political violence the like of which is unfamiliar in recent U.S. history. We need to take the threat of increased levels of domestic extremist attacks seriously.” Part of taking it seriously, they say, is to understand who, exactly *are* those people who attacked the Capitol. What they found may surprise you.

They ask the question: “How do the insurrectionists compare to right wing violent offenders, the US electorate, and Trump voters?” Their answer: “The insurrectionists closely reflect the US electorate on most socio-economic variables and, hence, come from the mainstream, not just the fringe of society.” Then they talk about race and gender:

“Results demonstrate that both right-wing extremists and insurrectionists are predominantly male and white, especially when compared to the 2020 US electorate. Among those arrested for right-wing extremism between 2015 and 2020, 94% were white and 94% were male. Of the insurrectionists, 93% of perpetrators were white and 85% were male. While 2020 Trump voters were also predominantly white (84%), the male-to-female ratios remain uniquely unbalanced for insurrectionists and right-wing extremists.”

Another question: “Where do the insurrectionists come from within the United States?” Answer: “They come

from 45 states plus the District of Columbia, with more coming from counties won [in the 2020 Presidential election] by Joe Biden than Donald Trump. The key county characteristic is that the counties with insurrectionists lost the most non-Hispanic White population.”

The Report notes that “A common narrative amongst the political left maintains that insurrectionists come from places where Trump is the most politically dominant – rural, almost completely white, and with high unemployment – not Biden strongholds. But we find that this is not the case. Although the January 6 insurrectionists are all pro-Trump activists, they do not hail from just the reddest parts of the country. Indeed, they come from 45 states plus the District of Columbia, including large pools from urban parts of ‘blue’ states such as New York and California and none from some of the ‘reddest’ states such as North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Wyoming. While most large urban counties tend to be very blue, there are still vast numbers of Trump supporters in them, and insurrectionists are often drawn from this population.”

They list several “specific characteristics of the counties that produced insurrectionists,” including these:

- Most insurrectionists came from counties that Biden won
- Most insurrectionists came from counties that are less white than the national county average
- Most insurrectionists came from urban, not rural, counties
- Most insurrectionists do not come from counties with higher than average unemployment.”

What, then, asks the Report, “does explain where the insurrectionists come from?”

Before I tell you what the Report said, consider this

continued on page 2

Greetings,

For several months now I've been publishing longer issues of Nygaard Notes, often in "series" form. Most recently the New Reconstruction series and related essays took up 5 or 6 issues in a row. And it's not really done! But I'm letting it go for now, and this issue, with just two stand-alone essays, plus the "Quote" of the Week, should tax the attention span of the average reader less than those more ambitious recent issues.

Of course, everything is related, so the essays in this issue aren't really "stand-alone" essays. They deal with emotion, perception, Othering, and Belonging. What do we see when we look at our modern world? What scares us? What gives us hope? You no doubt have your own answers to such questions. Nygaard Notes will continue to point to new ideas and new connections that I hope will help us all choose paths that will help to create a world with more hope and less fear.

700 issues published. How about that?

Nygaard

Fear *from page 1*

thought: The day is fast approaching when white people will no longer be the absolute majority in the United States, and white men in particular are terrified that this change could result in a re-ranking of the social order, causing them to lose their place as the dominant group. For most people (people, that is, who are not studying data sets, but are just looking around in their daily lives), this demographic reality is most evident at the local or neighborhood level, and the people who respond most readily to the call to Make America Great Again are those white people who suffer from this fear of a loss of status, which I call Demographobia.

Could the increase in the numbers of extremists and insurrectionists be seen, at least in part, as a symptom of Demographobia? Here's what the Report said:

"Our analysis suggests that local decline of the non-Hispanic white population has a galvanizing effect, and counties that have had higher rates of non-Hispanic white population decline in the last half-decade are likely to produce insurrectionists at a higher rate."

And not only does the sight of increasing numbers of non-white faces strike fear in the hearts of many white people, but that fear apparently makes it seem to them like they are seeing *even more* dark faces in their communities. The next essay explains. ♦

Fearing What We See, Seeing What We Fear

The root of the polarization about which everyone seems to be talking in recent years is the Othering and Belonging dynamic. Regular readers are familiar with my favorite quote when thinking about this issue, which is the following, uttered a number of years ago by John A. Powell of the Othering and Belonging Institute, who tells us "When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society."

Since we are in a time of big and rapid change, I always keep my eyes peeled for evidence of this narrowing, of

this defining, for evidence of the ways in which white people in the 21st Century are adapting racism to perform its traditional "Us/Them" function. In this most recent period, when the always-ambiguous racial categories get fuzzier and more absurd with every passing year, how are white people adapting? A while ago I ran across a fascinating study that sheds light on this very question.

The study was titled "The Threat of a Majority Minority US Alters White Americans' Perception of Race,"



→→ and it was published in the December 10 2021 issue of the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology. It started off like this:

“Racial minorities will soon outnumber white Americans in the U.S. Prior research suggests that this demographic shift is likely to increase white peoples’ feelings of threat and anti-minority discrimination. But might this demographic shift also alter who is considered a minority in the first place? We tested whether knowledge of an impending ‘majority-minority’ shift in the U.S. would increase threat to white status, leading white perceivers to see mixed-race faces as minorities rather than white—a strategy historically used to preserve white status in the American racial hierarchy.” And that is just from the abstract of this scholarly paper! Here are a few excerpts from the introduction to this 13-page study:

“The racial demographics of the United States are changing at a rapid pace. Projections indicate that the U.S. will soon be a ‘majority-minority’ nation with racial minority Americans outnumbering non- Hispanic white Americans by 2050. Although some may view this diversification positively, research suggests that many white Americans are likely to perceive this demographic shift as a threat to their status as the dominant racial group in the United States. Awareness of demographic shifts can also cause fears about changing definitions of ‘Americanness,’ increased ‘ intergroup resource competition, and white ‘replacement’”.

I haven’t written much about “Replacement” theory so here is a nutshell definition. In the words of the London Guardian newspaper, the Great Replacement “is a set of racist and antisemitic paranoid lies and delusions that has cropped up around the world in the past decade. In the US it is expressed as the false idea that an elite cabal of Jews and Democrats is ‘replacing’ white Americans with Black, Hispanic and other people of color by encouraging immigration and interracial marriage – with the end goal being the eventual extinction of the white race.” I’ll be writing about the Great Replacement before long. But now, back to the study’s introduction:

“Further, white people who are made aware of this impending demographic shift experience more anger and fear toward minorities, express more explicit and implicit anti-outgroup attitudes, show greater support for anti-minority policies, donate more to white than minority recipients, and report a greater willingness to move away from diversifying neighborhoods.”

“We propose that white perceivers motivated by demographic shifts to bolster their status at the top of the racial hierarchy do so by lowering their perceptual threshold for seeing someone as a minority, thereby keeping the white group small, selective, and high-status.

“While it may seem unlikely that race perception could shift at all because such categories are typically regarded as fixed and unchanging, visual processing can change when people are motivated to see things in a preferred way.”

In other words, as white people get more scared, people who used to look “white” to them begin to look like they’re maybe *not* white. That’s what the study’s authors mean by “lowering their perceptual threshold.” When they say that “visual processing can change” they mean that white people literally *see* minorities where they used to see white people. More of *Them*. Fewer of *Us*. Scary.

In a press release announcing the publication of this study’s results, the Cornell Chronicle succinctly summarized what they consider the researchers’ main point: “The threat of demographic decline motivates white Americans to lower their threshold for assigning racially ambiguous faces to historically subordinate groups. Doing so bolsters white status by raising the bar for who is considered white.” Which is an almost perfect illustration of what John A. Powell is talking about! Recall his comment that I quoted to start this essay: “When societies experience big and rapid change, a frequent response is for people to narrowly define who qualifies as a full member of society.”

If you find it difficult to believe that fear born of white supremacy can actually alter how we see the world, I suggest that you go online and read the entire 13-page study for yourself. ♦

“Quote” of the Week: “*Fascism Operates by Scapegoating*”

Jason Stanley is the Jacob Urowsky Professor of Philosophy at Yale and the author of 5 books, including a 2018 book called *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*. This past September he was interviewed on an intriguing podcast called *Future Hindsight*, during which he uttered this issue’s “Quote” of the Week. But before we get there, I will note that Stanley cites a famous comment made in the wake of WWII by a German pastor named Martin Niemöller. Since some of you may not be familiar with this profound comment, here is the full quote he cites: First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

OK, now here is the Nygaard Notes “Quote” of the Week, which is Stanley’s response to the question “What is the link between anti-fascism and transgender rights?”

So fascism operates by scapegoating. There are a number of different kinds of politics that do, but fascism centers the supposed threat of various minority groups and that’s the way it builds a coalition, because you can’t think of a fascist social and political movement as made up just of people who are fascists. It’s rather that there’s the business community who supports it. There’s the social conservatives. The group that supports a fascist social and political movement is made up of lots of people who themselves are not fascistic in their ideology. It’s just they see the fascists as getting things done for them.

So the focus on trans as scapegoats, which we’re seeing very much right now, is meant to bring in, say, minorities who otherwise would not join a fascist grouping. But enough people hate trans persons that you can get African-Americans, Latinos, etc., into the grouping by scapegoating trans people. If you’re continually scapegoating, say, Black people, then you’re not going to get enough Black supporters. So you need to find a scapegoat that is small enough in size that it won’t threaten your voting population; will instead broaden your voting population.

So, how to fight this? Does anti fascism require supporting trans rights? Yes, absolutely. I mean, we all know this. It’s Martin Niemöller’s old saying. ‘First they came for the communists and I was not a communist. So I said nothing. Then they came for the...’ I mean, that’s what they do. They just go through a whole bunch of scapegoats. And so you have to defend them from the very beginning. We are failing that test and so the outlook is rather grim.

For a discussion of 21st-Century fascism, see Nygaard Notes #661: Fascism in the United States?
<https://www.nygaardnotes.org/issues/fascism-in-the-united-states/>

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