



Terrified: How Anti-Muslim Fringe Organizations became Mainstream

Christopher Bail

Author Info

Chris Bail is Professor of Sociology, Public Policy, and Data Science at Duke University, where he directs the Polarization Lab. A leader in the emerging field of computational social science, Bail's research examines fundamental questions of social psychology, extremism, and political polarization using social media data, bots, and the latest advances in machine learning.

Publisher, Date & Pages

Princeton University Press, 2015, 223 pages

Cover Description(s)

In *Terrified*, Christopher Bail demonstrates how the beliefs of fanatics like Terry Jones are inspired by a rapidly expanding network of anti-Muslim organizations that exert profound influence on American understanding of Islam. Bail traces how the anti-Muslim narrative of the political fringe has captivated large segments of the American media, government, and general public, validating the views of extremists who argue that the United States is at war with Islam and marginalizing mainstream Muslim-Americans who are uniquely positioned to discredit such claims. Drawing on cultural sociology, social network theory, and social psychology, he shows how anti-Muslim organizations gained visibility in the public sphere, commandeered a sense of legitimacy, and redefined the contours of contemporary debate, shifting it ever outward toward the fringe. Bail illustrates his pioneering theoretical argument through a big-data analysis of more than one hundred organizations struggling to shape public discourse about Islam, tracing their impact on hundreds of thousands of newspaper articles, television transcripts, legislative debates, and social media messages produced since the September 11 attacks. The book also features in-depth interviews with the leaders of these organizations, providing a rare look at how anti-Muslim organizations entered the American mainstream.

Endorsements

- Winner of the 2016 Distinguished Book Award, Sociology of Religion Section of the American Sociological Association
- Winner of the 2015 ARNOVA Award for Outstanding Book in Nonprofit and Voluntary Action Research
- Honorable Mention for the 2016 Charles Tilly Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Book Award, Collective Behavior and Social Movements Section of the American Sociological Association

Comments

Todd Gitlin, Columbia University – Christopher Bail’s book is not only a carefully researched, subtly written, and thorough account of anti-Muslim panic, but an astute demonstration of investigative sociology at its best, combining big data, content analysis, interviews, and the history of a whole ecology of sentiment. *Terrified* is one of the best studies of media impact in many years.

Douglas McAdam, Stanford University – In this important and groundbreaking book, Bail uses a rich combination of data to map the efforts of civil society organizations to shape the popular understanding of Islam in the wake of September 11. Empirically rich and theoretically compelling, *Terrified* will find a large and receptive audience among those interested in September 11, Islam, and the dynamics of cultural change.

Francesca Polletta, University of California, Irvine – Timely and important. *Terrified* looks at the rise of anti-Muslim beliefs among Americans and policymakers in the wake of September 11. The book offers one of the most incisive analyses of the role of the media in amplifying some voices while muting others in the public sphere.

Randall Collins, University of Pennsylvania – This book explains how the media’s emphasis on fringe messages and sensational issues has produced a massive shift away from favorable views of Islam to ones where Muslim Americans are viewed as harboring terrorists and supporting harsh Shari’ah law. *Terrified* is perhaps the most advanced study yet done on what shapes changes in public opinion.

Bruce R. Lawrence, author of *Shattering the Myth: Islam beyond Violence* – Many Americans are terrified of Islam, or at least of a version of Islam portrayed in the mainstream media. As this pioneering and well-researched book demonstrates, the first step to combat this error is to expose its sources. *Terrified* is a necessary read for all who care about freedom of speech and protection of minorities as foundational American rights.

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Rating on a scale of 1 to 5:

1. Not a good use of your time
2. Okay, but not that useful
3. Satisfactory, not great – but a good read
4. Loved reading it
5. Impactful, highly recommend

This book is rated as: 1-2

“Recommendation” Statement

Bail received high profile funding and support to write this book from The National Science Foundation, Harvard Divinity School, The Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. However, his work has been characterized as academic malfeasance, such as in an article from the Colombian College of Arts & Sciences of The George Washington University. It serves as an example of how a veneer of respectability can be placed on a political agenda. In Bail’s case, this was accomplished using academic software and massive computing power to crunch large volumes of published data with the wrong initial assumptions. Using excerpts from the article is helpful to briefly summarize the book and its issues as follows, so as not to belabor the point.

Bail’s “anti-Muslim fringe organizations” are “mainstream conservative organizations whose personnel write for major publications, testify before Congress, and staff Republican administrations” the Center for Security Policy, the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, the Investigative Project on Terrorism, and the Middle East Forum. Conversely, what Bail calls “mainstream Muslim-Americans” are not mainstream but Islamist. These include the Council on American-Islamic Relation (CAIR), the Islamic Society of North America, and the Muslim Public Affairs Council. Meanwhile, Bail ignores the actual mainstream Muslim groups, such as the

American Islamic Forum for Democracy and the Center for Islamic Pluralism. “Bail can reasonably expect to teach elite undergraduates for many decades, stamping left-wing orthodoxies onto impressionable minds,” however, his thesis conflicts with reality.

Reviewer

Steve Krstulovich
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