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Michel, Noemi Vanessa

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## Book Reviews

### **Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech (The Townsend papers in the Humanities; No.2)**

Asad, T., Brown, W., Butler, J. and S. Mahmood

*Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press (2009), 154 p., ISBN 978-0-9823294-1-2*

*Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech* regroups six contributions: an introduction by Wendy Brown, two essays written by the leading anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, a response on these essays by Judith Butler, followed by the replies to Butler by Asad and Mahmood who helpfully clarify and develop some of their arguments. The dialogical form of this publication reflects the original context of its production – a symposium held at Berkeley in 2007 that called into question the “presumed secularism of critique” and was conceived as the inaugural event of a new research and teaching program in critical theory (p.7). This focus on dialogue also seems to reflect the general ambition of the new program, which Wendy Brown describes as aiming to “bridge conventional divides between modern European critical theory and non-Western and post-Enlightenment critical theoretical projects.”(p.7) The contributions in *Is critique secular?* undertake this challenge through various angles and highly articulated reflections by problematising the complex and interdependent notions of “the secular” and of “critique”.

Without a doubt, these essays’ greatest value is their thorough problematisation of “the secular” in relation to recent controversies about Islam and Muslim minorities in Euro-America. They show how secularism functions as an uncritical Western imperial discourse beyond its commonsense understanding as the formal separation of private religious beliefs from public life. In his essay “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism,” Talal Asad mobilises the Danish cartoon Affair as an illustrative case to develop general reflections on “the place of blasphemy – a religious concept – in secular liberal society.” (p.21) Following his central argument, liberal interpretations of blasphemy are based on Western narratives of secularisation that are rooted in Christianity. They instantiate a binary opposition between European secular criticism associated with freedom and reason and Islamic religious criticism associated with coercion, obscurantism and intolerance. Within this logic, blasphemy is identified with a “sign of civilizational identity” (p. 21), namely the sign of Muslims’ “inability to grasp the supreme importance of freedom.” (p. 23) Such logic reinforces the “ideological status of European Muslims as not fully human because they are not yet morally autonomous and politically disciplined.” (p. 56) Throughout his reflection, Asad seeks to disrupt this binary logic by calling into question the “assumptions of coherence that underlie what may be called the secular liberal interpretations of religious irruptions.” (p.137) He engages in a complex discussion on the conceptions of belief, religion, truth, blasphemy and subjectivity within both liberal intellectual traditions – evoking, for example, Greek philosophy, Kantianism, Marxism and the contemporary discourse of Pope Benedict XVI – and Islamic intellectual and legal traditions – discussing Abu Zayd’s trial for apostasy and the Islamic central concept of seduction. A particular point of interest in

the essay discusses how Muslim claims of blasphemy are hardly legible within “patterns of liberal restriction” to free speech (copyright and indecency laws) that define the “*free human*” as a liberal self-owning subject (p. 30). However, the guiding thread of this highly referenced genealogy of secularism may be difficult to follow for non-specialist readers.

Saba Mahmood also begins by questioning the presumed incommensurable opposition between “secular necessity” and “religious threat” that was staged during the Danish cartoon controversy (p.65). Under the title “Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?”, her well-structured essay demonstrates how the secular produces a normative model of religion and religious subjectivity that hinders the intelligibility of the moral injury inflicted upon Muslims by the Danish cartoons of the Prophet. Mahmood develops two thought-provoking lines of reasoning. First, she suggests that some Muslims’ claims of injury can be related to a specific semiotic ideology within which the icon pertains not just to “images but to a form of relationality that binds the subject to an object or imaginary” (p.74). In contrast, within the semiotic ideology implied by the secular frame, religious symbols constitute simple objects standing in for “the divine through an act of human encoding and interpretation.” (p.73) Within this hegemonic frame, Muslims’ claims of injury become signs of improper and confused reading practices that are devalued just as non-Christian natives’ forms of piety were devalued by 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial missionaries. Second, Mahmood shows how liberal secular understandings of injurious speech, since they strongly pertain to the language of rights and state sanctions, tend to relegate Muslims’ claims of blasphemy to the realm of “psychic or imagined harm” related to a chosen set of beliefs. Such claims are defined as less “real” than claims of “worldly harm” related to ascribed biological status such as race (p.81). Mahmood offers a rather pessimistic conclusion to her account. In the European legal context, religion can only be protected against verbal attack under the name of social order. European Muslim minorities’ chances to see their religious traditions and practices protected are consequently very poor, since these traditions and practices tend to be perceived as a threat to state security.

In contrast to Asad and Mahmood, Judith Butler gives a resolute political tone to her response. She discusses recent controversies linked to Dutch politics on speech acts, such as the scandal around a movie accusing Islam of being a murderous religion or the Civic Integration test of 2006 examining candidates for citizenship for their tolerance of images of homosexuals kissing, in order to think “about hate speech in light of a commitment to a left alliance that refuses to sacrifice one minority for another” (p. 128). Butler argues that instead of blindly condemning any particular form of censorship, sexual minorities committed to an alliance-based leftist queer politics should redirect their critique to the state, which should be acknowledged as the central regulatory instance of speech acts:

The question is not whether hateful speech is part of free speech, but rather, why has freedom in certain European contexts come to define itself as the freedom to hate? What does it mean when the notion of freedom has been twisted to ratify discrimination, xenophobia, racism, and nationalism? (p.129-130)

In summary, by expanding Asad’s and Mahmood’s developments through complementary empirical examples and political reflection, Butler goes a long way towards completing their problematisation of uncritical imperial secularism.

Overall, however, the problematisation of “critique”, the other central object of this volume, is less convincingly conducted. In her introduction, Brown stresses that the Western conception of “critique” remains strongly rooted in Enlightenment projects and carries a problematic “tacit presumption of reason’s capacity to unveil error” (p.9). Since the

“Western academy is governed by the presumptive secularism of critique”, she claims that it is “with this governance that we must begin” (p.8). Brown’s claim entails ambitious challenges on an epistemological as well as political level. How should critical theory re-define itself once secular conceptions of critique, its “founding planks” (p.13), are themselves put in question? What does it concretely mean to “unseat” the governance of secular critique within the Western academy? (p. 8). And where and how should this governance be shaken? The authors of the collection certainly attempt to tackle these questions, but their answers remain quite underdeveloped, as they drown in exegetic disputes around the difference between critique and criticism.

All the authors call for a re-connection of critique with power. Asad brings attention to the ambiguities implied by the disciplinary practice of critique, since this practice is historically linked to the development of modern powers that “have encouraged and used the developing sciences to normalize and regulate social life” and that tend to escape “effective public critique”(p.54). Freedom to criticise not only constitutes a right, but a duty of truth-producing “watched over by corporate and state power to ensure that citizens can be useful” (p. 54). Consequently, he demands a “critique of “critique”, something that must begin with genealogy” (p. 144). In a similar vein, Mahmood calls for a critical theory that is concerned with its own limitations especially with regards to religious assumptions and which engages in a critical dialogue across “the putative divide between *Western* and *non Western* traditions of critique and practice” (p.91). Butler describes in even greater detail the analytical tasks implied by such a dialogue:

The ways to do this are various: through tracing internal contradictions, through comparing and contrasting alternative cultural lexicons for similar concepts, through offering a historical account of how a set of culturally specific assumptions became recast as universal and postcultural (p. 116).

One can rarely grasp how such epistemological and political enterprises go beyond the scope of current practices of critique among critical thinkers. In addition, it is regrettable that Asad, Mahmood and Butler do not deploy the same intensive critical stance on secular academic institutions as they do in their discussion of secular state institutions. Nonetheless, *Is Critique Secular?* provides insightful analytical tools for anyone who seeks to engage in a systematic reflection on free speech, blasphemy, religion and secularism. Such reflection remains particularly urgent in a European context marked by public debates and politically extremist rhetoric that obsessively targets Muslims’ practices and symbols.

Noémi Michel  
University of Geneva

### **Muslime in der Schweiz Allenbach, Birgit und Martin Sökefeld (Hrsg.)**

*Zürich: Seismo (2010), 396 S., ISBN 978-3-03777-090-0*

Trotz der öffentlichen Islam-Debatte, die bereits vor der Annahme der Minarettverbotsinitiative begonnen hatte, gibt es bis heute wenig wissenschaftliche Erkenntnisse über Muslime in der Schweiz. Vorhandene Literatur diskutiert zwar verschiedene Aspekte der Minarettverbotsinitiative (Tanner et al. 2010), rechtliche Fragen wie eine mögliche öffentlich-rechtliche Anerkennung des Islams (Hafner und Gremmelspacher 2005, Nay 2002),