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WHAT IS WRONG WITH CRITIQUE?
SECULARISM AND THE NECESSITY OF CRITIQUE

Review of: Wendy Brown (ed.) (2009) *Is critique secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 154 p.

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The aim of modern critical theory since Marx has always been twofold: its purpose is not just to investigate the scope, nature and conditions of possibility of critical (rational) thought, but also to shed light on the concrete reality of everyday life and politics. In this sense, the small but dense book presented by Wendy Brown can be regarded as a typical instance of critical theory. Starting from the Danish Cartoon affair of 2005, it proposes to raise questions of a more general nature concerning the role and meaning of critique in the contemporary global world. With a view to bridging conventional divides between modern European critical theory and non-Western and post-Enlightenment critical theoretical projects, its central aim is to 'rethink […] the putatively secular foundations and premises of critique' (7).

The publication is based on a symposium that took place in 2007 at the Townsend Center for the Humanities at the University of California, Berkeley. It comprises essays by such distinguished authors as Saba Mahmood, Talal Asad and Judith Butler. The book is designed to render something of the controversial atmosphere of an academic symposium by staging a debate between the three principal contributors. Thus, the introductory remarks by political scientist Wendy Brown are followed by two fairly comprehensive essays written by anthropologists Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood. The book closes with an article by political philosopher Judith Butler and the responses made to her comments by Asad and Mahmood.

Of course the Danish cartoon affair that caused protracted polemics in all the important media and upsurges of social violence in several countries is both an obvious and a somewhat complicated place to start a reflection on the role and nature of critique in the post-secular world. The most influential narrative given of the events was (and to a certain extent still is) that of a conflict between two different civilizations, between the secular liberal value of free speech and a religious taboo. Yet as all three authors agree, to describe the conflict in this way as part of a 'clash of civilization', as an antagonism between free speech and blasphemy, is already to subject it to an interpretation that casts the debate in the light of a particular moral and political agenda. Consequently, the task of critique, before anything else, must be to look out for an adequate description of what was at stake in the events of 2005, and to reflect on the vocabulary that was used both in the conflict and in the accounts given of it.

This is exactly what Asad and Mahmood are doing in their essays. Both authors carefully avoid adopting a normative stance (for example as to whether the cartoons constituted a substantial injury, or whether those who published them were rightfully exercising their freedom of speech) and instead try to answer the more fundamental question as to '*why* outrage against the cartoons by Muslim populations across the globe was of a certain kind, and what specific *meaning* that injury had and has' (Butler,101). As they do so, they are exercising critique in a performative way. Their theoretical reflections on critique however are only loosely integrated in their essays, forming something of a historical (Asad) or methodological (Mahmood) addendum. In Butler's article, by contrast, the theoretical concern with critique is predominant, whereas she offers her views on the cartoon affair by means of a relatively short 'Coda on Dutch politics'. Hence, despite the fact that all three authors try to address the various aspects of the problem, the book cannot but illustrate the diffi-

culty of bringing the two strands of the argument (interpreting the cartoon affair, reflecting on the definition, function and importance of critique) together in a single project. The ensuing lack of unity may be considered a weakness. Yet it is nonetheless possible to summarize the essays in a coherent way, as shall be done in the following.

Talal Asad begins by interrogating the notion of blasphemy. He does so in a very thoughtful way, by not only looking at Muslim tradition, but also by reflecting on the place of blasphemy in a secular liberal society. The main idea of his article is that 'we will not understand blasphemy if all we see in it is a threat to freedom' (46). The notion of liberty as something that is either present or absent – present in Western democratic societies, absent in Islamic civilization – seems deeply unsatisfactory to Asad. For him it is simply not true that speech in Western societies is completely *free*; as a matter of fact, there are certain legal conditions that define what may be communicated freely and how. Hence Asad suggests we take a fresh look at the notion of blasphemy, defining it not 'as a discursive device for suppressing free speech but as an indicator of the shape free speech takes at different times and in different places, reflecting, as it does so, different structures of power and subjectivity' (35).

What distinguishes secular and Muslim societies then, according to Asad, is not the presence or absence of blasphemy, but rather the specific idea of the human that lies behind the various legal conditions shaping the articulation of free speech. In liberal societies, according to Asad, the human is defined by means of property and self-ownership, a definition that with some qualifications also extends to matters of religious belief. By contrast, Asad argues that the legal status of belief is quite complex in Islam: Muslim scholars in general adopt a position of epistemological scepticism with regard to matters of personal faith or belief. In their eyes, however, religion is marked by an irreducibly social dimension, and this is when the notion of 'blasphemy' comes in. Blasphemy for Muslims is not so much a question of faith or religious doctrine, but of social order and practices; it is perceived as the 'disruption of a living relationship' (46). Hence, according to Asad, what the impassioned reactions of Muslims against the Danish cartoons revealed is not so much the absence of 'freedom' in 'Islam', but rather an entirely different conception of the human: 'What matters, finally, is belonging to a particular way of life in which the person does not own himself' (45).

Saba Mahmood equally contests the current interpretation of the Danish cartoon affair as a conflict between the liberal value of free speech on the one hand and a religious taboo on the other. For Mahmood, those who published the cartoons and those who scoffed at Muslim anger over this event 'failed to attend to the affective and embodied practices through which a subject comes to relate to a particular sign – a relation founded not only on representation but also [...] on attachment and cohabitation' (70). They did so because they implicitly universalized their own understanding of images, an understanding which she refers to as 'Protestant' and which is based on the distinction between subject and object, signifier and signified, thereby reducing the function of images to the mere communication of meaning.

According to Mahmood, however, a very different understanding of icons was operative among Muslims who felt offended by the cartoons. For devout Muslims 'the power of an icon lies in its capacity to allow an individual to find itself in a structure that influences how one conducts oneself in the world' (74). Mahmood argues that the sense of injury that emanates from such a relationship is necessarily quite distinct from the one the notion of blasphemy encodes: '[T]his violation emanates not from the judgement that 'the law' has been transgressed but from the perception that one's being, grounded as it is in a relationship of dependency with the Prophet, has been shaken' (78).

So like Asad, Mahmood argues that what caused the offence of the Muslim population was in fact not a transgression of the law, not the violation of a moral interdiction, but that it was a 'structure of affect, a habitus that feels wounded' (ibid.). And she pursues her argument by pointing out that because the law is not the origin of the offence, it cannot be the right way to address, let alone to redress it. This is why in the second part of her essay Mahmood turns to the question of what happens when Muslims seek protection from the law (hate speech law, ECtHR jurisdiction on public order and safety) of the kind of offence they experienced by the cartoons. In Mahmood's eyes, these attempts are bound to fail because of

the structural constraints internal to secular liberal law, its definition of what religion is, and its ineluctable sensitivity to majoritarian cultural sensibilities.

Judith Butler quite generally agrees with Asad and Mahmood that 'secular terms should not have the power to define the meaning or effect of religious concepts' (105). With respect to their texts, Butler's article offers at the same time a summary, a critical commentary and the elaboration of a personal viewpoint. Like Asad, Butler is primarily interested in the 'speech politics' associated with the Danish cartoon affair; like Mahmood she wants to inquire into 'the costs entailed in turning to the law or the state to settle such a controversy' (71). In a very interesting reversal of perspectives, however, Butler is concerned not so much with Muslim recourse to juridical language but with the problems faced by those Europeans, especially members of the left or of progressive sexual movements, who turn to the state for protection of their freedom of expression. Her main argument is that these people are facing a political quandary, since 'freedom of speech not only depends on protection by the state but also empowers that state' (129). To avoid a political situation in which the rights of one minority end up being defended at the expense of another, with the state acting as the supreme arbitor concerning which groups 'deserve' protection and which do not, Butler calls for 'a critical conception of freedom of speech', one that 'legitimates itself outside of state power, that is able to criticize state power as part of its free expression' (ibid.).

Given that there is a large area of agreement between the three authors with regard to their approaches and political sympathies relating to the Danish cartoon affair, it is somewhat surprising to see them disagree about the second main topic of the book, the idea and importance of critique. Talal Asad in this respect is the most skeptical of all three. Though he refrains from straightforwardly identifying critique with Enlightenment reason, he nonetheless points to the secular presuppositions of critique, denouncing what he calls the 'secular heroism' associated with the critical attitude in the West. And he draws our attention to the problematic relationship between critique and (religious) taboos. Secular critics, Asad argues, are not just unwilling to accept (and respect) religious taboos; they even tend to regard the transgression of a taboo as liberating, as something that serves to 'reassure the limitless self by making a distinction between good and bad violence' (56). Thus, while reacting to Muslim anger over the publication of the cartoons, secularists saw themselves as critiquing the power to suppress human freedom. This type of critique, however, according to Asad, is not merely liberating; even though it may be carried through in the very name of freedom, it 'also reinforces the existing distinction between the paradigmatically human and candidates for inclusion in true humanity who do not yet own their bodies, emotions, and thoughts' (ibid.).

Judith Butler replies to Asad by stressing the inherent 'sensibility' of critique, its power to denounce social exclusion and processes of minoritization. To Butler, critique is all about displacing 'taken-for-granted modes of moral evaluation, including certain established juridical frameworks' (105). Hence, for Butler, like indeed for Mahmood, critique – and not the law – is the adequate response to the situation of 'hegemonic secularism' underlying the Danish cartoon affair. Given that every description, every affective response already implies a normative evaluation, the task of critique is 'not only to see why we *evaluate* (and value) certain norms as we do, but also to evaluate those very modes of evaluation' (104f). And she affirms that as the emergence of a critical perspective with regard to our inveterate moral frameworks requires the work of comparison or cultural translation, it is best entrusted to the hands of anthropology as an academic discipline.

In a certain sense, then, Butler is trying to state her case by showing that Asad already in practice subscribes to her own understanding of critique, though he might object to it in theory. By taking recourse to this expedient however she somehow fails to address his most unsettling objection, namely that critique, in theory just as well as in practice, may become a means of social discrimination, thereby perpetuating social strife and cultural division rather than healing it. Butler's theoretical commitment to the defense of critique eventually leads her to make a distinction between 'good critique' and 'bad critique' (which for her goes by the name of 'criticism') that in fact repeats the distinction between good and bad violence made by the secularists as pointed out by Asad. One wonders whether this kind of 'split thinking' (129) is accidental, or whether it is structurally

inherent to the concept of critique, and, if so, what this tells us about its value as a political and philosophical practice.

Generally speaking, the book as a whole succeeds much better in addressing the topics listed in the subtitle (ie. 'Blasphemy, injury and free speech') than in answering the actual question 'Is critique secular?'. Both Asad's and Mahmood's reservations about critique would have benefitted from a more thorough theoretical elaboration and a less biased response by Judith Butler. Not only Mahmood's argument that critical theory's traditional dismissal of religion should be re-considered, but also Asad's remarks on the secular presuppositions of critique should have been taken more seriously. At this stage of the debate, it certainly does not do to point out that critique is not identical with Enlightenment reason, that it is based on 'ethos' rather than on reason or judgement. For as long as that 'ethos' itself is taken to be universal, as something quite independent of cultural conditions, there is a danger that the 'uncritical secularism' denounced by Wendy Brown in her introductory remarks will turn into a post-secular 'religion of critique'. Hence, the real challenge posed by the Danish cartoon affair, the issue really worth considering, may after all be not so much 'Is critique secular?' but rather 'Is critique (always) possible?', and maybe even: 'Is critique (always) necessary?'

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