

SPECIAL SECTION

On the Work of Saba Mahmood



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ABSTRACT This special section collects memorial essays and testimonies on the life, work, and legacy of Saba Mahmood, who died March 10, 2018.

KEYWORDS Saba Mahmood, secularism, religion, feminism, anthropology, ethics

This special section collects memorial essays and testimonies on the life, work, and legacy of Saba Mahmood, who died March 10, 2018. Born in Pakistan, Mahmood earned degrees in architecture and urban planning before completing a PhD in anthropology at Stanford. At the University of California, Berkeley, where she was a professor of social anthropology with affiliations in Critical Theory, the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, and the Center for Middle East Studies, she was a powerful intellectual and political voice, a cherished faculty colleague, and a

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revered graduate student mentor. Among the most important anthropologists of her generation, Mahmood wielded influence well beyond the discipline of anthropology and the academy. Her first book, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, underscored the complex ethical and political agency of subjects who belonged to the women's piety movement in Cairo. A delicate, searching ethnography, it also disturbed Western feminist and secular liberal assumptions about freedom and developed an idea of ethics as an embodied and relational practice. In *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*, an ethnography of Egypt's Coptic Christian minority, Mahmood deepened her exploration of how secular strategies delimit modern religions, including their differences, conflicts, and hierarchies. By the time of her second book's publication, Mahmood had also become a major voice in international scholarly and political debates about secularism, religious freedom, and the West's construction of Islam. Her work on the veil, the Danish cartoons, and secular and religious legal practices was influential throughout the academy and the media. Her ethnographies were illuminating for both Middle Eastern and Western worlds, providing a nuanced understanding of Islam in the midst of a xenophobic culture too often dedicated to studied ignorance. In her writing and teaching, she invited readers and students to consider how presuppositions about the subject, ethics, and religion found in critical theories rooted in Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism, and liberalism are challenged and revised by studies of practices outside the West. The contributors to this special section consider some of the challenges of her texts and the continuing legacies of Mahmood's work, affirming the power and precision of her imprint on the way we think our world.