Thinking with Saba Mahmood

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Saba Mahmood’s work and life made the case for anthropology as a field whose task it is to achieve “understanding” through a studied engagement with material. Mahmood’s way of asking questions was generally guided by a desire to achieve what she herself called an understanding. Of course, analysis and criticism were part of that effort, as was gaining knowledge of history and economics and bringing them to bear on her task. When she failed to deliver a strong ethical judgment on a situation, she could disconcert her audience or her reader. But her task—we could call it her critical task—was to ask her readers to consider the epistemic frameworks within which they formed judgments so that their understanding would not be restricted in advance, ruling out other epistemic possibilities. Those who misunderstood her projects expected, for instance, that if she conducted a critique of the secular state, she was therefore in favor of a religious state. That conclusion was wrong, but tellingly so. Similarly, if she criticized the Danish cartoons for their caricature of Muḥammad, did it follow that she supported censorship and restrictions on free speech? In the case of the secular state, she sought to point out that political states that define themselves as secular often actively engage in distinguishing public from private religions, and that they also seek to define religion itself—with definitions that are far afield from those offered by religious communities. Further, she contended that secular states generate conflicts among religions as a result of their being defined by the secular state as more and less valuable. Hence, Christianity can function as the presumptive religion of a secular state that then identifies non-Christian religious minorities. The task is not to destroy secularism, but to understand its modes of regulatory and generative power, its ways of imposing a differential value scheme on religions, in order to then come up with an ethical and political vision that can right those wrongs. The point is not to topple secularism
with religion, but to develop interreligious understandings of the use and limits of secular authority.

In the case of the Danish cartoons, she sought to explain that many practicing Muslims objected with vehemence to those cartoons because they maintain a living relationship to the image of the Prophet. Indeed, the very self who was injured was defined not as a discrete body who looks at images as something other than the self. When the self is defined as an embodied relation to a set of texts and images, and religious practice consists in the renewal of that embodied relation, then the text and the image are part of the very self, and when the image is disgraced, the self is violated. Once we grasp the injury in this way, our understanding of injury is transformed. We can also see that the very distinction between offense and injury that forms the crux of debates on free speech seeks recourse to a version of injury that cannot grasp the kind of injury claimed in this case. Once our understanding has changed in this way, our responses to the debate may differ, but at least we are not missing the epistemic fissure at the heart of the debate.

Saba Mahmood lived in the world with her mind, unlike those who withdraw from the world into their minds or those who lose themselves to the world in a mindless way. Her philosophical thinking and her political theory could have served her in many fields. But ethnographic fieldwork mattered because it was the way she found to yield to another’s experience, to dignify the words she was given, to grasp the meaning of the ethical practices of the daily life of those she sought to understand. And understanding was paramount. She was always leaning outside of herself toward another. She was living over there with another but also in her own place. She was living in another’s time even as she lived in her own. She did not lose herself in fieldwork, but neither did she remain intact. She was, in her encounters, constantly affected by and transformed by what she came to understand. Understanding was a mode of knowledge dependent on encounter, but encounter was the means through which she was repeatedly transformed into someone with a broader understanding, a way of grasping forms of knowing and living that are too often dismissed through ignorant caricature.

We cannot overestimate the brilliant power of her first book, which contested the secular assumption that Muslim women read the Qur’an without a mind, that they forfeit their mind when they read, that there is nothing but unthinking obedience, submission, and subordination in their reading and religious practices. Indeed, none of the women interviewed for Politics of Piety sought to overthrow religious norms or seek liberation; rather, they sought to embody and transmit a living tradition in the context of the contemporary world. The act of devotion was not separate from the practices of reading, but reading itself was but one form of bodily discipline that established a living relation to tradition—its practices, its
institutions, its texts and images. In their daily practice in public and especially in the workplace, the women Saba Mahmood came to know were translating between incommensurable temporalities. They were living in contemporary Egypt with its consumer values, its television shows, its sartorial styles, its modes of transportation and public life. But they were also embodying and transmitting a tradition, and so engaged in a daily way in the reproduction of the temporal continuity of the religion. Saba Mahmood insisted that modernity is defined by these converging and diverging temporalities, thereby disputing the idea that history consists of the progressive realization of secular values. She refused the presumptive equivalence of secularism and modernity. And she asked, what does it mean to identify modernity only with secularism when so many people are living within religious traditions that can be neither understood nor valued in the terms that secularism provides?

To understand a religious tradition was to understand its value, its way of valuing, its understanding of a valuable world.

This trenchant critique of secularism took new form in her book *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Focusing on the conditions of Copts and Baha’is in modern Egypt, she argued that their religious difference was managed by a historically specific form of political secularism with its own logics and history. Coptic Christians could enter into the secular and liberal notion of formal equality only by accepting the state’s rendering their religion private—which meant accepting its devaluation as well. And yet even as the Copts insisted on having recourse to their family law within the sphere of the state, they could not escape subordination by secular authority. Although secularism provided necessary protections for Christian minorities within a predominantly Muslim state, Saba Mahmood argued that secularism was never neutral, never a value-free arbiter of religious conflict. The Copts found that they could accept the civic rights provided by the public religion only at the expense of accepting their unequal and devalued status. This bind was a difficult one, to be sure. Civic rights were important given the violence and discrimination to which they were exposed. And yet to become a “minority religion” meant accepting a scale of values in which one finds one’s own religion misunderstood and devalued.

Saba Mahmood questioned the appeal to the principles of secular equality that rely upon, and strengthen, a form of state power that regulates religious differences, distorting their meanings and producing hierarchies among them. Saba called instead for an “ethical thematization” of religious difference but also an *ethos*, an interreligious mode of life, a sense of ethics as shared social practice in the midst of difference. She did not regard secularism as a monolith. She understood it as a form of power characterized by its uneven and discontinuous operation. Even if the aim of secularism were to re-create the world in its image, and impose upon
history a progressive teleology in which its own aims would be finally realized, it rarely operates without disturbance, contestation, opposition. Something from the past that is supposed to be overcome returns; a religious group rebels against its redefinition and distortion; another temporal scheme interrupts the progressive one. In writing about her fieldwork, Saba Mahmood remarked upon those “fragments of the past congealed into the present, their temporal weight pressing into it.”4 The present could never be the pure present of secularism. Secularism could not destroy these animate traces, these persisting lifeworlds. They existed less as ghosts from the past than as forms of life within the present, adamant and persistent.

In “Humanism,” a short, final essay revised just days before she died, Saba reflected on the social meanings of death.5 The certain prospect of death by cancer brought her into a social network of care; her death did, and did not, belong to her alone. At the same time, she was certain that the concern with mass destruction in our times is an ethical and political imperative, and that in the end, even as we face our own death, we have to turn toward the world, attend to its increasing destructiveness. She was skeptical of the early Heideggerian view that death alone establishes the singularity of our lives (since no one can die in our place). This emphasis on the solitary and singular relation to death struck her as suspiciously antisocial. She was affected by The Thought of Death and the Memory of War, a book written by the French philosopher Marc Crépon, who considers how the experience of war implicates one’s own death in the death of the other.6 For Mahmood, it was ethically productive to consider “the reversal of my care for myself in the face of the other’s annihilation” and to accept an indelible link between how we think of our own personal death and new ways of visiting “mass catastrophic death”: both confirm the social meaning of death.7 The implication of finitude in a social world “cries out for a rethinking of the relationship between the ethical and the political.”8 In her words, “we live and die socially, and the meaning of death cannot be fixed a priori, without regard for the relationships that give it shape. Death unfolds within the distinct social context wherein it occurs.”9

In the end, Saba Mahmood voiced a desire to remain present, to keep company, to stay vital for those she loved less as a memory than as a presence who could still be sensed in present time—a temporal weight pressing into the present. One time lives on in another, and no existential account of finitude and no idea of historical progress can fully eviscerate the many layers of life that weigh upon present time and take up an abode within its structures. She imagined living on in the way you sense the world, in your responsiveness to the ethical and political claim that the world makes on you, accompanying your way of knowing, loving, and seeing. She remains with us as a neighboring sense, a proximate voice, the enlivening part of the way one feels. She wanted to live on where others were and are, surging up every time one’s body opens to the beauty of the world, or when one is disoriented.
by the understanding that another's world is not constructed in the same way as one's own. She wanted to live on in the angry response and clear analysis to the annihilating force of present powers, in the desire to imagine and live in a world without shying away from its brutality or its wonder.

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Notes
6. Crépon, Thought of Death.

Works Cited