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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4qm860xn

Journal
Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 87(4)

ISSN
0002-7189

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Publication Date
2019

DOI
10.1093/jaarel/lfz082

Peer reviewed

Self-Critique and Moral Ground:

Saba Mahmood's Contribution to Remaking Secularism and the Study of Religion*

In 1996, the journal *Cultural Studies* published a brief exchange between a PhD student and one of the left's leading thinkers—between Saba Mahmood and Stuart Hall. Their disagreement ran deep, and at times, they talked past one another. Their inability to settle on even the terms of agreement highlights an intractable question with special importance for scholars of religion: *is there moral ground from which to act*? Returning to this debate offers an opportunity to think more deeply about the future that Mahmood has bequeathed the study of religion and the secular. For Hall, resting on moral ground, even if temporarily, is crucial for political action; the deferral of judgment is political paralysis. For Mahmood, critique is necessarily self-critique; engagement with an ostensible other is a spur to investigate the inherited self. In Mahmood's commentary on Hall, she articulated a critical imperative that would guide her research for the next two decades. Patient self-work remakes the moral ground on which the critique of others stands. Taken to its extreme, this ethic restricts scholarly labor to self-critique; criticism of others and the action it demands are best left to other fields. Settling the debate over whether and when to arrest self-critique and begin political action is likely impossible. Instead, this essay highlights some of the theoretical conversations Mahmood synthesizes in order to demonstrate the value of her particular approach to the "productive tension" (Brown 2001: 41) that structures the problem of political action. In the process, it also

demonstrates how Mahmood's exploration of this tension has remade both secularism and the study of religion.

Mahmood v. Hall

Mahmood initiates her exchange with Hall in a commentary on his essay, "Culture, Community, Nation," which he had published in the same journal, *Cultural Studies*, three years before (Mahmood 1996a; Hall 1993). He begins that essay by naming a deep debt to Raymond Williams before reflecting critically on the latter's "blind[ness] to questions of race" and his "unexamined 'national' cultural assumptions" (Hall 1993: 360). For Hall, Williams' support of "the Welsh national cultural revival" (359) especially in *Towards 2000* (1983), fails to account for the ways in which the social relationships necessary to invent a tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and mobilize it often exclude certain people and especially people of color. Identity-based nationalism was an important means of collective action for colonized peoples who sought self-governance and freedom from European powers, but Hall sees a different, more dangerous nationalism "in political cultures with strong ethnic and religious absolutist traditions" (Hall 1993: 355; see also Said 1993: 307-12). He draws a distinction between closed and open forms of social cohesion and warns against the former:

> Since cultural diversity is, increasingly, the fate of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late-modernity, the greatest danger now arises from forms of national and cultural identity—new or old—which attempt to secure their identity by adopting closed versions of culture or community and by the refusal to engage—in the name of an 'oppressed white minority' (sic)—with the difficult problems that arise from trying to live with difference. The capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century. (361)

Hall concedes the inevitability of global connectivity in late modernity and argues for cultural openness as the best way forward. "Cultures of hybridity," such as diasporic cultures, are not mere negative consequences of global flows, but sites of resilience and possibility (362). He grounds his analysis in Marxist economics, though he observes that Marx's "grand-narrative" has not led to the disappearance of nationalism that many expected (353).

In her 1996 commentary essay, "Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism," Mahmood criticizes Hall for being heir to harmful "Western" assumptions. She homes in on Hall's use of the term "fundamentalism," in particular:

> Yet as a student of Islamic movements in the context of late-capitalist modernity, I was taken aback by characterizations in [Hall's] article such as 'political cultures with strong ethnic and religious absolutist traditions' and 'species of *fundamentalism* every bit as backward-looking as those to be found in some sections of the Islamic world.' (Mahmood 1996a: 2; Hall 1993: 355, 358).

Hall uses the term to group together a range of deplorable or "repugnant cultural others" (Harding 1991). Some of these fundamentalisms he describes at modernity's periphery; they are "either left out of 'modernity' or ambiguously and partially incorporated in one of its many forms" (Hall 1996: 358). Others "are afflicting 'modern' national cultures [and] are not only arising from the very heart of modernity but are a continuing reminder of the dark shadow which has persistently accompanied modernity and the European Enlightenment from its inception" (ibid.).

For Mahmood, distinctions like these between good or full moderns and those that are bad or partial conceal modernity's harm by valorizing its ideal subjects. "[E]thnic and/or politico-religious movements" that appear "fundamentalist" from a modern perspective need to be taken "seriously as political challenges that must be dealt with through argumentation"

(Mahmood 1996a: 7). She is also skeptical of Hall's faith in cultures that he describes variously as diasporic, open, hybrid, translated, and impure (Hall 1993: 362). Rather, "among communities undergoing hybridization," she finds "forced assimilation, political cooptation, destruction of linguistic and cultural heritage, as well as internalized prejudice" (Mahmood 1996a: 10). Hall's optimism about modernity and his denigration of ostensible fundamentalisms is a symptom of "analytical assumptions we continue to be heir to, despite our best intentions" (ibid.). Self-critique and engagement with other ways of being in the world are crucial because "it is incumbent upon us to challenge the global currency that Western modernity enjoys, so as to explore political languages that seem to depart from and question this hegemony" (ibid.).

In his response to her essay, Hall claims that Mahmood misreads him (Hall 1996: 14), and in some ways, he is right. She overlooks, for instance, his insistence that at least some types of fundamentalism are inherently modern and not partially so; they are its "dark shadow," "arising from the heart of modernity" (Hall 1993: 358). Hall acknowledges that his "phrasing has not been careful or scrupulous enough," but he misunderstands Mahmood's essay as a shallow indictment of reification, as if he has merely taken the category of "fundamentalism" too seriously. He misrecognizes the depth of her critique of his "critical analysis and political assessment" of national movements (Hall 1996: 12). She is not simply calling him an essentialist, and her concern is not merely that Hall considers some nationalist movements essentially good or essentially bad. Though she "remain[s] sceptical of the reductionism entailed in terms such as fundamentalism" (Mahmood 1996b: 507), she observes that Hall's appeal to cultural hybridity intentionally avoids essentialist "notions of racial/ethnic identity" (Mahmood 1996a: 9). Deeper and more unsettling, she critiques the moral ground on which his

very "analytical assumptions" rest (Mahmood 1996a: 10) by critiquing where Hall places the moral burden. For her, there are not good (i.e., modern, hybrid) and bad (i.e., antimodern, fundamentalist) ways for those affected by colonial and postcolonial violence to respond. The moral burden lies with the colonial centers that have forced a response in the first place. Deflecting critique from modernity's others, she directs it back to modernity itself.

The final sentence of Mahmood's brief response to Hall's reply articulates the imperative that would guide her research in the following decades: "My writing… is motivated by the desire to challenge the adequacy of our inherited analytical tools in understanding political challenges that we currently face in the world" (Mahmood 1996b: 507). In his scholarship, Hall tried to better understand those challenges in order to accomplish strategic goals; he was an avowed socialist who engaged in contemporary political debates throughout his life (Hall 2017). For Mahmood, scholars can leave their concrete political goals unarticulated and pursue indefinitely a critique of the norms that undergird them:

> The tension between [analyzing a phenomenon and defending our secular beliefs] is a productive one for the exercise of critique insomuch as it suspends the closure necessary to political action so as to allow thinking to proceed in unaccustomed ways. The academy, I do believe, remains one of the few places where such tensions can still be explored. (Mahmood 2009: 862)

Mahmood was engaged in a self-critique more powerful and unsettling than Hall was willing or perhaps able to acknowledge. Even as a graduate student, she fully considered the implications of the absence of a universal moral ground, a condition in which agents can only authorize their actions by means of the contingent values they inherit. For Hall, there is an imperative to judge and act despite contingency, in the conditions in which one finds oneself, however temporary and impure. Mahmood questions the certainty of this ability to judge and thus to act. Her work

has clarified the productive tension that arises from contingency and its uncertainty, and in the process, as the next section demonstrates, she has remade the ground on which we stand.

Constructing a Virtuous Hybrid

The *constructive* labor of Mahmood's self-critique is too easily lost if seen only as a deferral of action. Surely, her scholarship is generous and patient, but it is also productive and creative. She diagnoses the ways in which modern analytical assumptions re-inscribe hierarchical divisions that justify Euro-American domination, but she also finds within the modern inheritance and in its ostensible others a kind of counterfactual possibility. These other ways of living are not necessarily better, but by engaging them deeply, a once-certain self is remade. In conducting this critical self-excavation (Foucault 1977), she relies heavily on the genealogical work of Michel Foucault (1997) and Talal Asad (1993, 2003). Foucault and Asad are notorious for the ways in which they undermine moral grounding and frustrate the certainty of political action. Though Foucault took public political stances throughout his life—perhaps most famously in support of the Iranian revolution (Afary and Anderson 2005; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2016)—Asad has played the gadfly, as he explains in a 2011 interview:

> I remember talking once a long time ago with Edward Said about empire and how it might be defeated. We were just sitting and having coffee, and at one point I responded to some of his suggestions by saying, "No, no, this won't work. You can't resist these forces." So he demanded a little irritably: "What should one do? What would you do?" So I said, "Well, all one can do is to try and make them uncomfortable." Which was really a very feeble reply, but I couldn't think of anything else. (Schneider)

Throughout the interview, Asad advocates the need for resistance, despite his extreme pessimism: "I see it all as being absolutely disastrous. But people will try to resist, and they should. […] There's a long history of human choices that is leading us all, unintentionally, to

where we shall soon be—at a dead end." The paucity of moral ground does not justify acquiescence, but it hardly provides a platform for strategic action.

Building on Foucault, Judith Butler describes a more optimistic theory of agency, in which new possibilities emerge when the performance of norms necessary for their perpetuation fails, such as when people subvert those performances. Agency operates interstitially, "as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power" (Butler 1993: 15; see Mahmood 2005: 19-22). Mahmood borrows from Butler's Foucauldian approach, but she departs from Butler's model of subversion, and ultimately, from her feminism. She finds "resonance" (Mahmood 2005: 161), however, between Butler's theory of performativity and the Aristotelian model of ethical virtue that has also "been influential in shaping the pietistic practices of Islam" that she studied in Egypt (28). In both Butler's view and that of the participants in Egypt's piety movement, "the repeated performance of virtuous practices… [enables] the subject's will, desire, intellect, and body to come to acquire a particular form" (162-163). Butler and the Muslim pietists differ most sharply in their understanding of the goal of their performances; whereas for Butler, the aim is to subvert norms, the pietists strive to perform them virtuously.

Perhaps most interesting is Mahmood's reflection on her theoretical labor: "In order to make a particular theoretical formulation travel across cultural and historical specificities, one needs to rethink the structure of assumptions that underlies a theoretical formulation and perform the difficult task of translation and reformulation" (163). In the pages that follow, she proceeds as an ethnographer, attempting to better understand the "pious subject" (ibid.) by way of the theory she has built. But she could just as easily have explored the effects of her

constructive theoretical labor on herself and her readers. As she writes early on in *Politics of Piety*, "Critique, I believe, is most powerful when it leaves open the possibility that we might also be remade in the process of engaging another's worldview, that we might come to learning things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement" (37). This remaking is not nihilistic self-destruction; the remade self is not merely that which survives a relentless assault on its foundations. It is the creative product of her virtuous translation and reformulation of a dizzying array of disparate sources.

In *Politics of* Piety, ten years after her debate with Hall, Mahmood published an inversion of Hall's hybridity that accords with her own ethical imperative. The resulting construction synthesizes Aristotle, Foucault, Butler, and Egypt's Islamic piety movement, but by bringing them together and drawing on them piecemeal, it also subverts them. More importantly, Mahmood avoids subverting the women who are the object of her study. Instead, she makes herself the hybrid and performs the disorienting connectivity of late modernity on modernity's ideal subjects: the vast majority of her readers. Her hybridity is far more open than that which Hall advocated when he lumped together global fundamentalisms. Mahmood has left us heirs to her generative theory, which is both ingenious and productive. Like the Aristotelian subject formation that she recovers, the reading of her research disciplines the modern reader who approaches it with a properly receptive disposition.

Converting to Virtuous Scholarship

Pierre Bourdieu wrestled with many of these same questions, and a closer look at his reflexive sociology is helpful for understanding Mahmood's ability to resonate with and

transform those who read her. According to Bourdieu, good social science requires self-critique in order to avoid being merely tautological, which is to say, merely reproducing its inherited assumptions. Though Bourdieu questions the modern secular framework through his strong critique of positivism, Mahmood extends his effort much further; she creates new ways of provincializing secular subjectivity and thus new ways for social scientists and other scholars to render their perspectives contingent. In so doing, she enables not only better scholarship, but also better political action. Putting Bourdieu and Mahmood into conversation brings their shared labor into focus and shows how important Mahmood's research is for scholars, especially those studying religion and the secular. Their differences remain significant, however, and they underscore the stubborn persistence of the tension between self-critique and political action.

For Bourdieu, social scientists are constantly in danger of reproducing the presuppositions of their social inheritance. They risk becoming instruments of the parts of social life they have set out to investigate (Bourdieu 1992: 236-253). Avoiding the mere reproduction of common sense is a difficult task that requires social scientists to effect an "epistemological rupture" (251), or a break from their social context. This process of "participant objectivation" (253) demands a new perspective and perhaps even a new self:

> Rupture in fact demands a *conversion of one's gaze* and one can say of the teaching of sociology that it must first "give new eyes," as initiatory philosophers sometimes phrased it. The task is to produce, if not a "new person," then at least a "new gaze," *a sociological eye.* And this cannot be done without a genuine conversion, a *metanoia,* a mental revolution, a transformation of one's whole vision of the social world. (251, emphasis in original)

In her study of the piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood understands well the risk of reproducing secular assumptions about Muslim women that reduce them to irrational

fundamentalists and strip them of agency in the modern liberal sense (Mahmood 2006: 196).

She warns against the same tendency in her debate with Hall. But unlike Bourdieu, Mahmood

does not try to become a disinterested producer of knowledge; she converts her gaze, but does

not make a clean epistemological break. The Egyptian women among whom Mahmood was a

participant observer diffract (Barad 2003) the progressive feminist gaze that she says she first

brought to her research (Mahmood 2005: ix-x). Through the tremendous effort of assimilating

their and other perspectives, Mahmood remakes herself and how she perceives the world. The

hybrid subject that she converts herself into becomes a means for those who read her to

remake themselves, too, if not as fully.

This difference between Mahmood and Bourdieu is significant. In *Politics of Piety*, she is

critical of his concept of *habitus*, which is the way in which the normative assumptions of a

society are "inscribed in the bodies and dispositions of social actors" (Mahmood 138; Bourdieu

1977). Bourdieu adopts a non-reductionist Marxist approach, in which norms are determined,

"in the last analysis, by the economic bases of the social formation in question" (1977: 83).

Mahmood criticizes Bourdieu for asserting that the re-inscription of these norms through

habitus is largely an unconscious process (2005: 138). She recovers from Aristotle an older

notion of *habitus*, in which "conscious training in the habituation of virtues itself was

undertaken, paradoxically, with the goal of making consciousness redundant to the practice of

these virtues" (2005: 139). Formation of the self does not require resistance to a structure or

ideal; the self can achieve virtue by training itself to accord with a structure, toward an ideal.

Herein lies the key to their different approaches to the productive tension between self-

critique and political action. Bourdieu maintains an opposition between interest or investment

in a particular field and consciousness of that interest. Self-objectivation, or reflexivity,

produces disinterest in the field being studied, which effects the epistemological rupture

necessary for objectivity. Mahmood does not require this opposition. For her, as for Aristotle

and for the women in the Islamic piety movement, self-consciousness is a condition of proper

self-habituation, or the proper attainment of virtue. There is no freedom from *habitus* for

Mahmood. The goal for her is not reflexivity, but hybridity. The new gaze is not the

disinterested effect of a break with inheritance, but rather, an awareness of inheritance that

effects a new and less certain relation to it by means of engagement with its internal and

external others (Mahmood 2006: 199). The ideal social scientist, then, is not disinterested, but

productively self-conflicted. The virtuous ideal of social science is peripatetic wandering across

moral grounds with the goal of understanding both an object of inquiry and the conditions of its

legibility.

Mahmood, Bourdieu, and Hall offer three different understandings of the proper

relationship between scholarly self-critique and political action. All three agree that scholars'

ability to extend inquiry and suspend judgment is unique and valuable because it creates new

conditions for political action by inventing new possibilities for subjectivity and remaking moral

ground. But because the judgment necessary for political action demands that self-inquiry

cease, Mahmood and Bourdieu think that scholars should be autonomous and leave such

action to other fields. They should pursue self-critique in order to achieve self-hybridity or self-

objectivation, in Mahmood and Bourdieu's respective terms. (Mahmood 2006: 195-196; 2009;

Bourdieu 1992: 192-200). For Hall, scholars' theoretical labor can "make meaning slide" (Brown

2001: 41), as with his own decades-long rethinking of the concept of identity. Scholars,

however, need not restrict themselves solely to this important work. They can temporarily

arrest self-critique, strategize, and act politically on moral ground. For Hall, the scholar's

domain should not be restricted to the production of knowledge and new forms of subjectivity.

Indeed, positivism's "knowledge for knowledge's sake" risks being re-inscribed in an apolitical

ethos of self-knowledge for its own sake (see Latour 2004).

In Mahmood's own view, she does not so much avoid politics as reimagine the

conditions of its possibility. In her analysis of women in Egypt's piety movement, the personal

becomes political through the conscious remaking of the self. This politics of the self is

consistent with her view—and Bourdieu's—of the proper role of the self-remaking scholar. For

this reason, like Mahmood, Bourdieu avoids explicit statements of political strategy. But like

Hall, he maintains a thoroughgoing commitment to Marx's class-based analysis, which reflects a

goal-oriented concern for material conditions and this-worldly life. Both scholars extend

Marxist analysis to culture without reducing the latter to epiphenomena or mere ideology. Even

Marx argued strongly as early as his dissertation that understanding should not restrict itself to

objective observation and should always be in the service of subjective aims (Marx 1975; see

Eagleton 2016 on an Aristotelian Marx). More skeptical of secular approaches like Marxism,

Mahmood asks, "Can secularity—as a substrate of ethical sensibilities, attitudes, and

dispositions—provide the resources for a critical practice that does not privilege the agency of

the state?" (2016: 212). That these disparate approaches are strongly compelling is probably a

good thing. The tension between self-critique and political action is productive because it is

paradoxical (Brown 2001). The movement between attempts to resolve it and its persistent

resistance to resolution is the virtuous activity of moral life.

Remaking Religion and the Secular as a Pedagogical Process

In *Politics Out of History* (2001), Wendy Brown names the "productive tension" between self-critique and political action in precise terms and finds it at work among a wide range of thinkers, including Benedetto Croce, Michel Foucault, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (41-44). Mahmood relies on Brown in *Politics of Piety* to help her negotiate this tension and balance her desire to improve the lives of women with the desire to avoid the destruction of ways of life that can appear only "unenlightened" to secular moderns (2005: 196-7). How to manage this dilemma—how to know if and when there is solid moral ground on which to act—is an especially stubborn problem for scholars of religion, who recognize in disparate worldviews the deep differences that undergird seemingly intractable political conflicts. This tension structures many debates and generates diverse solutions (see, for instance, Harding 1991, 2001; Sullivan 2005; Fitzgerald 2015; Goldstein, King, and Boyarin 2016). Perhaps there is a best way forward among these responses to a stubborn problem, but in this essay, I have argued for the simple usefulness of observing its thorniness and appreciating Mahmood's distinctive approach.

Negotiating the paradox of political action is perhaps even more important in the classroom than it is in print. Introducing students to methodologies like Bourdieu's and Mahmood's gives them purchase on the self they inherit, but it also disorients them, as it disorients their teachers. Living in and with this disorientation is the peculiar and sometimes harrowing burden of the scholar and the student alike. Engaging deeply with Mahmood's approach and sharing it with others is not so different from other pedagogical processes that she analyzes, such as a Muslim child learning how to pray:

> [I]n order for a child to learn to pray, the parent must make her conscious of her gestures, glances, and thoughts. When the child undertakes the act hurriedly, or forgets to perform it, her parents may present her with various kinds of explanations for why praying is important, what it signifies, and how it is different from the child's other activities. Such a pedagogical process depends upon inducing self-reflection in the child about her movements and thoughts and their relationship to an object called God—all of which require some form of reflection about the nature of the practice. In other words, conscious deliberation is part and parcel of any pedagogical process, and contemporary discussions about it cannot be understood simply as a shift from the unconscious enactment of tradition to a critical reflection upon tradition. (Mahmood 2006: 54)

The particular aims and the bodily discipline required differ from process to process, but becoming a good scholar requires just as much conscious reflection and bodily attunement as pedagogical processes like prayer. Anthropologists Charles Hirschkind (2011) and Abou Farman (2013, 2018) have asked, along with Asad (2011), what makes a secular body, and how does the secular sensorium discipline itself into formation? Seen this way, the question, "What makes a good scholar?" becomes very literal. What painful, disorienting self-discipline must scholars engage in to understand the world well and not merely reproduce their own inheritance? How many hours do we need to spend sitting and reading, or making awkward conversation in the field, and thinking later with uncertainty, "What really happened?" or "What was really said?" What struggle—of the body, of feeling, of cognition—must graduate students go through in order to apprentice into this strange way of knowing and doing?

I owe a debt to Mahmood for the ways she has remade herself and enabled and encouraged me to do the same. Paying my debt forward is bittersweet. An undergraduate came to me a few weeks ago hoping to write a paper on "moderate Islam" because she, very humbly, said the phrase was confusing, and she wanted to understand it better. I gave her little instruction, but recommended she read Mahmood's essay, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and

Empire" (2006), along with a report by Cheryl Bernard (2003) and congressional testimony by Angel Rabasa (2005), both senior political analysts for the Rand Corporation. After turning in a wonderful essay, the student came back to talk with me about a challenge she was facing that she described as an "existential crisis." Though she feels that certain behavior like the oppression of women is clearly wrong, she also recognizes that she is heir to assumptions that condition her values. I know how she feels, but I have no fix for our problem. We talked for a while about how disorienting it is to learn about ourselves and to try to understand others, but also the importance of politics and taking a stand. She was certain she wanted to read more of Mahmood, so I lent her a copy of *Politics of Piety*. Mahmood's work leads us through a fundamental problem that is difficult to glimpse, much less see clearly. That she guides us with so much kindness and sincerity is a generous gift.

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