

Agency and Illiberal Others: A Retrospective Review of Mahmood's *Politics of Piety*

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This review engages with Saba Mahmood's Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, focusing on Mahmood's explication of illiberal desires and locating the piece within the body of feminist literature. Politics of Piety examines the women's mosque movement in Egypt, taking up the question of how we are to understand a very different situation in which actors are shaped and can enact agency, and a very different set of desires from those commonly assumed under a secular-liberal, particularly feminist, framework. In carefully engaging with her analytical object Mahmood challenges her readership, and herself, to rethink both profoundly held political beliefs, and deeply entrenched analytical conceptions. Mahmood is engaged in a project of shifting the locus of analysis from the theoretical abstractions of a universalized politics, to an attempt to analyze a movement through the concepts and theories that are internal to it, and then to use this knowledge to expand and revamp intellectual traditions "at home."

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Introduction

At the core of Saba Mahmood's elegant book *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* is a rumination on the many ways of living in the world that exceed, contradict, or challenge the secular-liberal ideals with which most Euro-American scholars are familiar. Focusing on the women's mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood takes up the tricky question of how we are to understand a very different situation in which actors are shaped and can enact agency, and a very different set of desires from those commonly assumed under a secular-liberal, particularly feminist, framework (Jivraj 2007). The women's mosque movement, or da'wa movement, is part of what is commonly referred to as the Islamic revival in Egypt—a series of new practices of public religiosity that have blossomed over the last 20 to 30 years. In carefully engaging with her analytical object Mahmood challenges her readership, and herself, to rethink both profoundly held political beliefs, and deeply entrenched analytical conceptions. Mahmood is engaged in a project of shifting the locus of analysis from the theoretical abstractions of a universalized politics, to an attempt to analyze a movement through the concepts and theories that are internal to it, and then to use this knowledge to expand and revamp intellectual traditions "at home."

Mahmood's work to explicate the logic internal to the mosque movement is, more fundamentally, an attempt to expose the limits of a certain number of theoretical concepts in a great deal of anthropological literature; primary among these being agency and subject formation. Because the mosque movement is predicated on a public religion, and on subjects desirous of illiberal things, it provides a stark challenge to the body of feminist theory

and theories of agency that she is holding up against it for comparison's sake (2005: 2). Her reconceptualization of agency is both an anti-programmatic reading of the da'wa movement from the perspective of feminist theory, and is a very serious attempt to answer one of the nagging questions in anthropology about *what counts as agency*. *Politics of Piety* demands that we address the question of how we are to understand illiberal movements, and desires that may be repulsive to cherished political positions, in non-reductive ways. It is a deeply serious work, and shows quite a dedication to reading the multiple sources of theory on morality (Kant and Aristotle), feminism and subject formation (Butler and Foucault), and with concepts and theoretical positions within Islamic scholarship itself. In this review I will take up a discussion of two critical questions on Mahmood's work: 1) the author's positioning and its impact on the ethnography; and 2) the author's approach to conceptualizing and researching agency and desire, which requires a brief overview of her theorizations of subjectivity and embodiment.

Positionality & Dis-identification

In the preface and introductory chapter of *Politics of Piety* Sabah Mahmood locates herself in particular political and ideological frameworks, informed by her experiences of being involved in "progressive leftist" politics in her native country of Pakistan, which included feminism and critical Marxism as ideological bulwarks (ibid: ix). She clearly articulates her discomfort with the Islamic movement as public religion on a political and personal level, yet is intellectually attracted to the conundrum that it presents for secular-liberal theorizing and politics, particularly as they are manifested in feminist theory. Mahmood's self positioning is clearly one of dis-identification with those involved in Islamic movements, and the women involved in the da'wa movement in particular (ibid: xi). Her dis-identification with the women in the mosque movement throws light on the location of this book within the genre of feminist ethnography.

In her critical review of feminist ethnography, Kamala Visweswaran suggests that a fundamental aspect of the genre is the identification(s) of feminist anthropologists with their subjects (1997: 615). Such identifications, it can be understood from the article, include identifications of textual, ideological, political, racial, classed, and gendered forms, whereby the author presents herself as in tune with, one of, or 'like' the community of women with whom she has worked in particular ways. This 'likeness' of women is also part of the construction of a universal category of women in which the author of a feminist ethnography often situates herself and her subjects (ibid: 593). Visweswaran argues that this process of identification is central to the genre itself, but that some authors have chosen to textually elaborate a position of *dis*-identification with their subjects as a way to retain and demonstrate the

particularities of difference and inequality that structure the terrain of field-work and knowledge production (ibid: 596).

Visweswaran's suggestion of dis-identification is a helpful analytical lens through which to read Saba Mahmood's feminist ethnography, *Politics of Piety*. In my opinion, Mahmood follows a central tenet of Visweswaran's articulation of dis-identification in that she moves 'women,' understood in an essentialized and universal way, from the center of her project and instead privileges the women's da'wa movement itself as her analytical object. In this, I would not say that she is taking up Mary John's suggestion, quoted in Visweswaran, that we look for feminism 'elsewhere' as an antidote to the dichotomy of first world feminist researcher/3rd world un-feminist women set up by the Euro-American academy. Mahmood clearly states that she is *not* attempting to redeem a latent liberatory potential within the movement that would allow it to more easily align with feminist ideology (Mahmood 2005: 5). But she *is* very interested in the ways in which feminism cannot come to terms with what these women want. Her goal is not, as Mary John suggests for further feminist works, to find feminism where it lies, but instead to find where feminism is simply unequipped to go. Her choice of analytical object is, I think, geared specifically to point out the contradictions and failures of feminist theory on a number of fronts. By choosing to look at a situation in which people are not desiring freedom—a supposedly universal desire in liberal conceptions (Hollenberg and Sohrabi 2007)—but are desiring other things that come to be within a religious framework (which Mahmood argues is an area of human endeavor particularly difficult for secular-liberal social sciences to understand), Mahmood can ask tough questions about the nature and constitution of agency that feminist theory and politics are ill-equipped to tackle.

Agency and Desire

Politics of Piety is centrally concerned with a careful consideration of questions of agency and desire. The da'wa movement in Egypt, and the women who participate in it, articulate a very different set of desires from those commonly assumed under a liberal framework; desires that include the aspiration to be moral beings through inhabiting a location within a hierarchy (a location other than at the top of, or free from, that hierarchy). In an attempt to come to terms with these other desires, Saba Mahmood tries to undo the binary modes of inquiry that structure much scholarship on domination and resistance, to interrogate the structures of power that create particular desiring subjects, and to examine the moral frameworks that pit embodied morality (Aristotelian) against abstract morality (Kantian) (Mahmood 2005: 7 and 25). According to Mahmood, "[A]gential capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (2005: 15). Her ethnographic analysis of the da'wa movement in

Egypt provides an alternative analytical framework for the interpretation of agency by paying close and particular attention to how power structures the framework within which desiring subjects come to be, and come to enact agency and make choices. Working through Butler and Foucault, Mahmood describes a notion of doing and undoing social norms through their iteration, but is most deeply interested in the various methods and paths through which these norms can be inhabited, the structures of power and worldview that create subjects that *want* to inhabit these norms, and the effort necessary for the attainment of those norms by the subjects so created (ibid: 21 and see especially page 24).

The women of the da'wa movement are deeply invested in attaining a more pious self, a self that is located in a hierarchy of privilege and responsibility (ibid: 9). This desire is difficult for scholars trained within liberal secular frameworks to accept, but Mahmood does a good job of showing how this desire forms in the process of creating particular subjectivities (ibid: 17). The process of learning how to inhabit these locations within the hierarchy, and the effort (and hence choice) required to embody the religious norms of the da'wa movement, break down dichotomous readings of agency that can only account for resistance or accommodation, *and* also privilege an embodied morality. Mahmood points to the ways in which the effort and structured choice (structured in the sense of a set of choices delimited by a framework) entailed in becoming a more virtuous Muslim woman allows us to see how agency is enacted in the process of inhabiting norms, as well as resisting them. It is, I think, the pious desire that is itself the key difficulty for the feminist theorists, who often read the 'return to the veil' as a result of societal pressure or political defiance vis-à-vis Euro-American foreign policy in the Arab world. Mahmood instead reads the practices of veiling, and the assumption of gendered roles by the women in the da'wa movement, as manifestations of a deeply desired self, a way of being in the world that is profoundly meaningful to the women who live those lives and also provides a radical challenge to assumptions about what "women" are fighting for.

The particular means through which these women inhabit these norms, and the ways in which the norms are structured, brings me to my final point in this discussion of agency and desire—that of embodied versus abstract notions of morality. Mahmood gives a rendition of the difference between an Aristotelian and Kantian version of morality in which the prior lays emphasis on moral conduct and the latter emphasizes the ideology of morality behind behavior. In her articulation of the piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood suggests that this distinction marks an important piece of how the women conceptualize the attainment of a more moral self. In particular, the women in the mosque movement attempted to engage in pious forms of 'outward' behavior that then inculcate an inner pious disposition, structured in part around the triad of fear, hope and love (ibid:140). The spontaneous

and effortless enactment of proscribed behavior, the inhabitation of moral norms, came to be *productive of*, and a *reflection of*, the interiority of a moral self (ibid: 131). The women in the da'wa movement in Egypt are desirous of a pious self, which includes an acceptance of particular forms of male authority, and they actualize a more pious self through an embodiment of norms of moral behavior. This is the conundrum that Saba Mahmood wishes to explore, as these desiring agentive subjects expose limitations in the theories of agency and the politics of feminism and universalized politics (ibid:14).

Conclusion

In *Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood carefully constructs an analytical object at odds with secular-liberal theoretical positions and political leanings, and attempts to fit the clothes of feminist thought around the oddly shaped, uneven and irregular object of the da'wa movement in Egypt. *Politics of Piety* is the result of this attempt at merger and comparison, and Mahmood adeptly points out the rips, bumps and holes in the theoretical cloth as it attempts to encompass this new object. What we learn is that common dichotomous readings of agency as resistance and domination, the ways in which people can pursue a moral self, and the desires that these particular beings have for things other than the vaunted goal of freedom are all 'tears' in the theoretical cloth of feminism and agency. Mahmood suggests at the conclusion of her work that our political and intellectual projects may need to be separated, that we may need to detach our political beliefs from our intellectual endeavors in order to come to terms with those with whom we cannot identify (2005: 196). I find her suggestion both appealing and disconcerting. While she is not arguing for an absolute relativism, it does deeply trouble the loose moral core of feminist projects that have at their heart a commitment to enabling women to 'choose' freedom for themselves, a desire of liberal secular feminists structured by our own subjectivizing processes. But this discomfort may in fact have been Mahmood's goal in this work. Calling for an expanded definition of critique, Mahmood states that, "critique... 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 learn things that we did not already know before we undertook the engagement. This requires that we occasionally turn the critical gaze upon ourselves, to leave open the possibility that we may be remade through an encounter with the other" (ibid: 36-37). The encounter with these others, with whom Mahmood practices a textual (and seemingly personal) dis-identification, provides a lens through which critique of ourselves as academics and feminists can happen and we could potentially be remade.

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