

## REVIEW

**Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), ISBN: 978-0-691-14980-6**

The recent ethnographic account by Saba Mahmood, devoted to the feminine pietistic movements in Egypt,<sup>1</sup> offers crucial theoretical insights for foucauldian deconstruction of both subjects and sovereignty.

The analysis of a movement, which could be easily inscribed into what is now called the “Islamic revival,” and which is too often dismissed through the incredibly vague label of “Islamic fundamentalism,” reveals itself as the actual possibility to organize one of the most sophisticated theoretical contestation of that liberal framework through which—almost always—we look at ethics and politics. Mahmood recalls all the theoretical attempts at subverting this framework. Cases such as those of the Subaltern Studies collective or the historiographical school inspired by the British New Left could easily be considered paradigmatic in this effort, which seeks to “give voice” to subjects excluded from the trajectory of liberal modernity and from its forms of categorization. This amounts to exclusion from what counts as “politics” and from whom who deserves the title of “political subjects.” However, according to Mahmood, even such a theoretical exercise seems somehow dependent on an idea of agency centered on autonomy.

This is the very same problem encountered many years before by Lila Abu-Lughod in her study of Bedouin women.<sup>2</sup> Returning to the issue years later, Abu-Lughod critically called into question the very theoretical impulse that forced her to look for gestures, attitudes, and actions that should have exhibited possible traits of “resistance.” Those traits were at the same time what prevented her from analyzing the operations of power contributing to fabric the very same scene on which resistance acquired an intrinsically positive moral salience.<sup>3</sup> Such

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<sup>1</sup> The first edition was published by the same publisher in 2005.

<sup>2</sup> L. Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women,” *American Ethnologist* 17, 1, (1990), 41-55.

<sup>3</sup> L. Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): “First, how might we develop theories that give these women credit for resisting in a variety of creative ways the power of those who control so much of their lives, without either misattributing to them forms of consciousness or politics that are not part of their experience—something like a feminist consciousness or feminist politics—or devaluing their practices as prepolitical, primitive, or even misguided? Second, how might we account for the fact that Bedouin women both resist and support the existing system of power (they support it through practices like veiling, for example), without resorting to analytical concepts like false consciousness, which dismisses their own understanding of their situation, or impression management,

as an impulse to romanticize resistance made many other gestures, actions, and experiences opaque, because they were not immediately recognizable as acts of resistance. They thus remain mute to the observer, even if they produced relevant transformations in the actual experience of social actors.

Abu-Lughod therefore proposed to interpret resistance itself as a diagnosis of power, so as to attain the double objective of distinguishing more accurately different modes of resistance and describing more precisely those operations of power with which subjects were confronted and through which they were produced: "We should learn to read in various local and everyday resistances the existence of a range of specific strategies and structures of power. Attention to the forms of resistance in particular societies can help us become critical of partial or reductionist theories of power. The problem has been that those of us who have sensed that there is something admirable about resistance have tended to look to it for hopeful confirmation of the failure-or partial failure-of systems of oppression. Yet it seems to me that we respect everyday resistance not just by arguing for the dignity or heroism of the resisters but by letting their practices teaches us about the complex interworkings of historically changing structures of power."<sup>4</sup>

The novelty introduced by Mahmood into this theoretical *démarche* is precisely the capricious scrutiny to which she submits the very concept of resistance. What she is propounding is in fact an attempt to elude the teleological trap that does not allow new forms of life and action, which are not already encapsulated into a narrative of subversion and inscription of the norms to appear. This is, as one can see, an extreme critique. The paradigm of negotiation, to which the foucauldian idea of governmentality relates, depends precisely on this dialectic between subversion of norms and extension of their field of signification through creative appropriations, deliberate abuses, and conscious distortions. Mahmood's project has a clear resonance with this project of demoralizing theory, while reinforcing and complicating it.

What she is contesting is in fact the presumption and the presupposition concerning the universality of the liberal desire of being free from subordination. The intrinsic normativity of the concept of freedom leads to a neutralization of those liberal presumptions presiding to the unfolding of whatever theory. Mahmood's theoretical gesture indexes the possible separation of both auto-realization from the autonomous will and of agency from the discursive infrastructures of progressive politics. This attempt holds the very lesson of Mahmood's ethnography: even the most aggressive and, let's say, demoralized post-structural theory always ends up thinking of agency as entrapped by the opposite poles of subordination and subversion. Certainly, negotiation itself renders this framework much more porous, showing the transitivity and the radical contingency between these two poles and all the subjective positionings that can be found along the infinite range of concrete situations historically and locally occurring between them.

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which makes of them cynical manipulators? Third, how might we acknowledge that their forms of resistance, such as folktales and poetry, may be culturally provided without immediately assuming that even though we cannot therefore call them cathartic personal expressions, they must somehow be safety valves?" (47)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 53.

While insisting on the absolute contingency and historicity of agency, and instead of confining it to the pattern of resistance to norms, Mahmood expands it according to the idea that norms can also be “inhabited.” All in all, the auto-comprehension of social actors becomes crucial, although it is coupled with the foucauldian paradox of subjectivation. This line of reflection comes to Mahmood via Judith Butler who considers subjection the possibility of agency itself. But if Butler insists on the radical transitivity between the doing and undoing of social norms, due to the performative iterability, which institutes them, according to Mahmood she would be still prisoner of an agonistic model of norms, which can be only confirmed or subverted. On the contrary, according to Mahmood, norms can also always be performed and inhabited. In this way she is trying to elude the traps of an antagonistic or dualistic framework so as to consider the possibility that norms actually structure even the interiority of the subject.

It seems that Mahmood’s project could go hand in hand with the paradigm of negotiation, which is by no means confined to the brute alternative between confirmation or subversion of norms, but which rather permits a reading of the myriads of intermediate spaces hosted between these two poles, and, in so doing, it offers a virtual catalogue of all possible contacts between subjects and norms. According to the catalogue offered by Mahmood herself, norms can actually—besides being confirmed or subverted—also be inhabited, aspired, searched, and consumed.

The paradigm introduced by Mahmood also subverts the framework of a theory of power as negotiation, multiplying the foundations of a demoralized reading of subjectivation processes hosted by neoliberal governmentality. The suggestion to look at agency in a non-liberal framework offers the opportunity of gaining an analysis of those complex relationships between the immanent form of a normative act, the model of subject it presupposes, and the types of authority on which is based. In order to produce such as an analytic palimpsest, Mahmood explicitly recalls Foucault, introducing his late reflection on ethics and trying to give to it a resolute and affirmative reading, giving the right place to corporeal practices and their effects on the self and conduct.

What is at stake here is the clear articulation of the relationship between practices and way of life, or, in a foucauldian vocabulary, the relationship between ethics and moral, so to trace the relationship between moral code and ethical conduct, which may crystallize in a particular form of life. This relationship is not metaphorically embodied in those practices through which moral norms, which are historically produced, are lived and interpreted. Though, Mahmood’s question to those women who engage themselves in pietistic Islamic movements sounds like that: what is left of freedom in a framework where submission to authority and the deployment of subjective potentialities are indiscernible? Consequently, the theoretical question will be: how can we think of agency beyond freedom?

Similar moral difficulties could be experienced in even less exotic settings. A conception of agency based on the dramatic idea of decision and representing the genetic patrimony of the paradigm of sovereignty is now passively contested also in affluent countries. In that context of ordinary difficulty to conduct oneself through the landscape of advanced capitalist

economies, which Lauren Berlant calls “slow death,”<sup>5</sup> even obesity can reveal itself as a special form of counter-conduct. In fact, Berlant studies a social scene where the concept of sovereignty seems to be exhausted and presses us to rethink some forms of reproduction of social life beyond the liberal framework of autonomy.<sup>6</sup> That of Berlant is a hypothesis on agency, which is equal and opposite to that propounded by Mahmood. Both contest the normative value of will; but if the case of women engaged in Egyptian pietistic movements reflects an idea of sensibility to the authoritative character of norms, that of the obese people refers rather to forms of detachment and passive auto-suspension from hegemonic social signifiers.

In this case one deals with a special form of “lateral agency,” which constitutes a way in which to inhabit non-sovereignly the epoch of “slow death”: an auto-interruption—or an interruption of the *autos*—and a suspension of will: “In the scene of slow death, a condition of being worn out by the activity of reproducing life, agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making; fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience, without full intentionality; inconsistency, without shattering; embodying, alongside embodiment.”<sup>7</sup>

This could be seen as a twofold exercise: on the one hand, it implies a suspension of an already capitalistically and productively oriented will and, on the other hand, it suggests a possible accommodation in the same horizon of “slow death” in order to render it more hospitable: “These pleasures can be seen as interrupting the liberal and capitalist subject called to consciousness, intentionality, and effective will.”<sup>8</sup>

Of course, Mahmood’s operation, as that of Berlant, is not free of risks and she is fully aware of that. Mahmood replies the accusations of subjectivism and of eluding the political dimension or its implicit absorption into the moral or the ethical, through a resolute historicization of the concept of agency. This one should be explored, she argues, within the conceptual grammar where it resides. Furthermore, Mahmood argues about the importance of managing the nexus between politics and ethics to the point where, in certain contexts, one could consider the latter as an historical instance of the former. This is a fundamental piece of the argument, according to which it seems necessary to enlarge the boundaries of experiences and subjects, which could be annexed to the threshold of politics. This exercise implies the capacity to grasp what, even though not discursively reducible to politics, produces it otherwise. Dismissing this fragile, though crucial, metamorphosis one runs the risk of losing not only

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<sup>5</sup> L. Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry*, 33 (2007), 754-780. Now also in Ead, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 95-120.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 756: “Because of these convolutions and variations sovereignty is an inadequate concept for talking about human agency outside of the power of the king’s decree or other boundary acts in proximity to certain performances of law, like executions and pardons. For so many reasons the ordinary subjects of democratic/capitalist power might best be redefined as only partially (that is to say phantasmatically or *not*) sovereign. But some may want to continue using the concept because of the history of investment in it as a marker for the liberal sense of personal autonomy and freedom or because of the association of democracy with the legal protection of the body politic and subgroups within it.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 759.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 779.

“politics,” but more trivially and more culpably, all that eludes the political radar of the researcher.<sup>9</sup>

It is the very idea of critique and theory that is profoundly transformed; far from being a disruptive exercise it transforms itself into a transformative exercise. A transformation that touches the subject engaged in the research. According to the foucauldian idea of «modifications», the knowing subject should work on the effects produced by the object of the research on herself and therefore construct new conceptual tools each time, enhancing the ancient ones, and organizing the very field of visibility according to new measures and scales.

The extreme case of Mahmood’s Islam is the *hic Rodhus hic salta* of a demoralized theory seeking to question its own sense of inadequacy and uneasiness, elaborating strategies to expand its own conceptual horizon, so as to make it more hospitable and less auto-referential. The extension of the field of politics and of its subjects seems to be one of the more urgent tasks solicited by neoliberal processes of subjectivation. To decide moralistically not to play the game, deciding that a certain kind of experience does not deserve the attribute of “politics” —and maybe confining it to the larval dominion of the pre- or the post-political—, is the best way to make oneself blind to political experimentations speaking of new ways of being subjects in the present, of surviving, living, inhabiting, interpreting, and fighting neoliberal governmentality.

The core of Mahmood’s challenge is her attempt, operated through the ethnographic supplement, to contest the anthropology of liberalism and, above all, its intrinsic normative value. One should undo the knot which unifies property, will, and freedom, and links this conceptual constellation to interests and desires. (Late) liberalism has become a form of life that decides the very way in which we imagine humanity. Of course it is, and it continues to be, a crucial discursive resource even to think of resistance and, according to the spivakian logic of the “enabling violation,” a number of pieces of its trans-local discourse are by now a patrimony shared also by those who contest or simply are subjected to it. Nonetheless, liberalism remains absolutely blind to the possibility of other experiences; to the fact, in other words, that could exist other conceptions of the self-irreducible to the—cohercitive—discourse of liberal freedom.

The theoretical effort that neoliberal processes of subjectivation are claiming, is the capability to recognize other political imaginaries, peopled by another quality of subjects who hold desires that do not coincide all and only with that of liberal freedom. These are different ways to imagine and to live difference. Obviously, in this theoretical framework, genealogy is a fundamental tool to show the contingency of the present through the disclosure of neglected conceptual fields or the recovery of salient historical sequences. And, by the way, the anthropological narrative, referring to contemporaneity, has the very same function: to show the contingency of our present being-so-and-so, eluding the forclusion of possible futures and the occlusion of the possibility to imagine ourselves differently.

In order to accomplish this ambitious theoretical program one should question all liberal normative assumptions about human nature, calling into question that naturalization of the desire for freedom that Mahmood has singled out as the crucial tool through which liberal-

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. S. Mahmood, 35.

ism institutes itself as the normative model of politics, displacing it at the core of the Manichean dialectic between freedom and coercion. One should even run the risk of losing the “reference model” in order to both accept the plurality, contingency, and diversity of different models, and to reconstruct new models at the height of those forms of life that materially embody and contest them.

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