FORUM

Sexular fantasies:
The Occident and its religious Others

Edited by

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Abstract: In Europe today, the most heated identity politics revolve around matters of sexuality and religion. In the context of “integration” debates that occur in different forms in various countries, sexuality has gained a new form of normativity, and new sexual sensitivities have replaced former ones. So far, scholarly discussions deal with these sensitivities in a deconstructivist and critical manner, denaturalizing discourses on culture, identity, and religion. However, these debates do not consider the experiences of people implicated in these debates, and their often emotional and political engagement in matters where sexuality and religion intersect. Joan Scott's coinage of the term “sexularism” denotes a particular form of embodiment that is part of secularism in Europe today. Rather than studying the discourse of secularism, this article focuses on the practice of secularization; how do people fashion their daily lives concerning sexuality, religion and its intimate intersection?

Keywords: ethnography, nationalism, religion, secularization, sexuality

Since the Salman Rushdie controversy in 1989, many of the social issues regarding migration in Europe are increasingly interpreted as having a religious component, especially issues concerning sexuality and gender. With many Western European nations’ half-hearted acceptance of their status as countries of immigration, Islam has become a central issue in processes of self-definition after the fall of the Berlin Wall in a time of European integration and global neoliberalism. The growing visibility of Muslim migrants in European cities has fostered a fear that recently won secular freedoms are no longer safe. This sense of a beleaguered secularism has been at the center of many recent public, political, and academic debates in Europe about issues such as European civilization, Enlightenment, citizenship, national identity, and race. Depending on one’s point of view, secularism is either presented as an intellectual political tradition that has saved Europe from religious intolerance and bred an open modern society, or critiqued as a discursive convention that works to conceal certain power relations by declaring some supposedly secular arguments more rational than other allegedly religious ones.

This article proposes that anthropologists are uniquely equipped to provide a particular perspective on these issues that is still largely missing. So far anthropologists have intervened in these discussions in a deconstructivist and critical manner, denaturalizing discourses on culture, identity, and religion, and pointing out the disparities within these discourses. Para-
doxically, these interventions—important and instructive as they may be—seem to ignore some of the basic premises of the anthropological perspective on culture as practice. Perhaps Sherry Ortner’s (1984) prediction several decades ago that practice was about to become the new paradigm in anthropology has not come true entirely, but some of the insights of a practice approach have indeed become highly influential. Following the work of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Gramsci—all of whom influenced practice theory in anthropology—anthropologists have explored how political ideologies and discourses penetrate the domain formerly called cultural, engendering certain bodily dispositions, desires, and forms of consciousness. Yet few anthropologists have asked how secular discourses become part and parcel of “lived worlds” as people engage with them in either a consenting or critical manner. We are not the first to call for an ethnography of secularism. Yet because secularism has become such a powerful discursive force in processes of in- and exclusion in Europe (and beyond), we want to raise the issue again. To be sure, this is not a call to “go beyond” the discursive in order to analyze how secularism works on the level of emotions, affects, and anxieties. It is rather an invitation to take secularism seriously as a cultural practice. By simply deconstructing secular discourses we cannot understand why some people sincerely feel that the separation of state and church—in itself somewhat of a myth—is under threat if a city government sponsors the building of a new mosque or why it is so obvious for some people that the headscarf is a sign of the oppression of women. If practice theory was meant to suggest that anthropologists study the everyday situated production of power relations, an ethnography of secularism might start from these very concrete questions.

An anthropology that does not primarily seek to deconstruct secular discourse as a mystification of power relations, but takes everyday secular sensitivities seriously ethnographically is not a politically neutral stance, as scholars like Talal Asad, William Connolly, and Slavoj Zizek know well. To argue that secularism is not merely a discursive tradition, but also operates at the level of “habits” (Zizek 2008) and “the visceral” (Connolly 1999), fundamentally undermines the secular claim to rationality and neutrality. That is precisely Connolly’s critique of secularism. Although Connolly sees the visceral, as a major source of human energy and creativity, much more positively than radical rationalists would, he criticizes secularism for denying the relevance of this domain of human perception. This denial is profoundly political because it obscures the habitual and visceral aspects of its own acts and arguments vis-à-vis religious perspectives. The intolerance of secularism lies in its refusal to come to terms with its own subjectivity. In the case of Europe, such secular soul-searching would imply the recognition that certain notions of religious intolerance or backwardness are shaped by recent histories and collective bad experiences with religious nationalism, which do not necessarily lead to a sensible appreciation of popular religion today. By reclaiming these cultural and historical aspects of the secular, then, the critique of secularism leads to ethnographic questions as to how secular worldviews and convictions are shaped. One obvious starting point of an ethnography of secularism would be, the “historically contingent routines, traumas, joys, and conversion experiences [that] leave imprints upon the visceral register of thinking and judgment” (Connolly 1999: 9).

A similar approach, pioneered by Talal Asad (2003), explores what it is that gives secular notions such as freedom and liberation their emotional intensity. Although on the surface liberation may primarily be something pleasurable, its pleasure gains depth because it is connected to pain. Asad argues that despite the fact that secularism tends to view pain negatively, as something that comes from without and stands in the way of secular autonomy, pain can also be seen as the basis of a secular notion of conscience and individual responsibility; “the idea that someone can be held accountable and blamable for a particular outcome,” writes Asad (2003: 99). Rather than an expression of religious passion, pain may force a person into life
crises when confronted with various moral ques-
tions. These crises make one a better and more
mature person, and they may lead to the deci-
sion to take one’s responsibility and become a
different kind of person. Pain is accepted in or-
to live through it and transform it into the
moral ground on which to stand as a responsi-
ble and free person who is able to lead his or her
life conscientiously. In that sense, pain can still
be an agent of moral change, although a slightly
different one from religious traditions of pas-
son in which pain is to be endured as fate. Ex-
plorations like Asad’s foreground the moral and
existential dimensions of secular discourse.

Joan Scott’s (2009) coinage of the term “sexu-
larism” leads us to another obvious angle for
ethnographically studying secularism: one
rooted in Foucault’s emphasis on the micro-
physics of power. For Scott, “sexularism” denotes
a particularly salient form of body-politics that
is part of today’s secularism in Europe. The sex-
lar describes the form secularism takes in
present-day debates about the relation between
supposedly secular Europe and supposedly non-
secular religion. Secularism is no longer prima-
arily about political arrangements, like the sepa-
rated religion from the state (Casanova
1994; Habermas 2008). Redefined as the sexu-
lar, secularism plays itself out in the intimate
sphere of sexuality and religion. In state policies
on migration and national identity, sexuality has
replaced religion as the body-politics through
which hegemonic ideology becomes internal-
ized, naturalized, commodified, and authentic
(Butler 1990; Foucault 1978; Weeks 1989).

Within the context of so-called integration
debates, sexuality has gained whole new forms of
normativity. New sexual regimes organize
shame and desire—those powerful forces of in-
ternalized social norms (Butler 1993; Elias
1976; Foucault 1978; Nussbaum 2004)—dif-
ferently. It is well known that sexism has been a
prevalent nation-building discourse, often in
combination with racism and in the context of
the colonial encounter and the disciplining of the
working classes (e.g., Balibar and Waller-
stein 1991; Mosse 1988; Yuval-Davis 1997). In
Europe, particular forms of religious national-
ism imposed a rigid sexual regime that turned
the modern citizen not only into a religious sub-
ject but also into a profoundly sexual one (e.g.,
Stoler 2002). Following Kantorowicz’s (1957) and
Douglas’s (1996) writings on “the two bodies,” it
could be argued that the mortal and ideological
bodies of the national subject overlapped be-
cause of the religious regulation of sexuality
that paralleled nation-building. To many pro-
gressive Europeans, most of this seems outdated
and a bad, often traumatic, memory. In postwar
Europe the meaning of freedom and autonomy
changed from “free from the state” or “free from
foreign occupation” to “free from oppressive re-
ligious/sexual regimes” (Verkaaik 2009). The
emancipating processes of the 1960s and 1970s
have ingrained a profound fervor for sexual au-
tonomy and a passionate distrust of religious
authority, the depth of which can only be un-
derstood against the backdrop of the sudden
and abrupt decline of earlier forms of reli-
gious/sexual discipline.

The “integration debate” that is raging all
over Europe shows, however, that new sexual
sensitivities have replaced former ones. The
issue of nation and sexuality is back with a
vengeance, but the normativity has changed al-
most completely. The growing visibility of Islam
in Europe revives fears that pre-1960s forms of
sexual regulation may return with the result
that the sexular regime is defended and pro-
moted within the context of “national integra-
tion.” New disciplinary measures are designed
to integrate migrant populations of Islamic
background into a post-1960s sexual national-
ism. Many have already commented that sexual
tolerance becomes intolerant once it is turned
into a state-promoted social norm (e.g., Butler
2008). Perhaps more pertinent, however, is the
fact that the norm does not always describe re-
ality very well. The demand that new citizens
are able to digest public displays of nudity and
free sexual expression sits somewhat uneasily
with new laws against exhibiting nudity post-
cards on street corners in Amsterdam, or older
laws against making sexually loaded remarks in
schools and offices, which have been intro-
duced as a result of the feminist movement of
the 1970s. It is perhaps even more striking that homophobia is increasingly seen as an Islamic, or religious, problem, from which sexular society supposedly no longer suffers. Integration courses that teach migrants that homosexuality is socially accepted convey a norm, not a reality. The sexular also sheds a different light on modern religion as a force that is intrinsically related to secularism (Asad 1993). In that sense, sexuality and religion may be called mirror discourses of the authentic to the extent that the most heated identity politics revolves around these issues. Another way to put it is that sexuality is now as holy as religion is sexy. For good reasons, the state has become a defender of sexual identities and the free public expression thereof. However, it has also gone a step further by setting the terms of how in the context of the nation one is to think and feel about sexuality. Religion is seen as a powerful counterforce to the favored way of thinking about sexuality. Willingly or unwillingly, therefore, religious identities contain an element of transgression in them or become a bulwark against the far-reaching state interference in intimate life. In this context, a religious identity is increasingly seen as something of one's own choice, a struggle uphill, not the result of submitting to powerful socializing or disciplining processes. Interestingly, European Muslims begin to defend their right to wear headscarves or organize separate swimming lessons for boys and girls with reference to “true liberalism” or “radical secularism,” meaning that the state has no right to interfere in private matters. As a result, wearing a headscarf in a “sexular” public space has become more of a public scandal than publicly flaunting a particular sexual identity. As a sign of a transgressive, authentic identity, it may also be “sexier.”

Whereas the freedom of expression of sexual identities is at once an ongoing emancipatory project, a sign of European civility, and part of new disciplinary state politics, it is also related to other forms of identity politics and group formation. Without aspiring to be conclusive, we end with a few remarks about the sexular and its relations to nation and class. Globaliza-
to us one of the most pressing questions for the anthropology of Europe today.

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