The Postsecular Turn

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Abstract
In this article, I engage with three overlapping expressions of the increasingly postsecular cast of social and cultural theory. These currents – guided, respectively, by genealogical critique, neo-vitalist social philosophy and postcolonial anti-historicism – seek to problematize the frame of previous radical theorizing by exposing definite connections between the epistemological and political levels of secular understanding, and by assuming that the nature of those linkages counts heavily against secularism. As well as offering an interpretive overview of these contributions, I suggest that they are traversed by a number of conceptual flaws and inconsistencies. The tensions, I argue, stem from the fact that in spite of appearing to be driven by a strong anti-secular thrust, these positionings remain thoroughly intra-secular in character. This needs to be more emphatically acknowledged if the ‘postsecular turn’ is to be productive.

Key words
anti-historicism ■ genealogical critique ■ neo-vitalism ■ postsecularism

The Postsecular Spectrum

OVER THE past decade, issues of secularism and postsecularism have moved centre-stage in critical social theory. With the genre of ‘ideology critique’ fading alongside the background theoretical logics of structural understanding and neo-Marxism that sustained it, and with Left politics correspondingly failing to make itself distinct from a generalized multiculturalism, religious motivations, practices and modalities of belief had to be reconsidered, to say the least, non-reductively. Concomitantly, straight ‘secularist’ understandings of the course of (radical) modernity, in terms of which religious identifications would progressively be replaced by some kind of philosophico-scientific materialism, taking hold as such in popular mores, fell seriously into question. Or rather, the reliance of radical forms of critique upon some such secularist scenario, even if only implicitly, was more clearly perceived than before, and increasingly regarded as problematical. The resulting spread of discourses and

DOI: 10.1177/0263276410372239
insights has been wide, with postsecularism perhaps best understood not as any kind of clear position, but as a spectrum of concerns and possibilities (McLennan, 2010). Thus, manoeuvres sited towards the ‘religious’ end of the spectrum would include not only Charles Taylor’s monumental appeal to transcendence in *A Secular Age* (2007), but also the recruitment of Michel de Certeau to the cause of radical-orthodox theology (Ward, 2000). At the secular-materialist end stands someone like Slavoj Žižek (2001, 2003), who defends the Judaeo-Christian heritage in a rather ‘strategic’ Leninist fashion, and theorists such as Roberto Unger (2007) and Alain Badiou (2006), who cleave firmly to atheistic and historicist tenets, but whose energized vocabularies are streaked with intimations of infinity, eternity, grace and sainthood. Somewhere in the middle of the range sit Rorty and Vattimo (2005), engaging convivially on the prospect of religion without any theists or atheists; Habermas (2008), developing grounds for dialogue between ‘naturalism and religion’; and Derrida (2002) too, gesturing ever-enigmatically towards ‘religion without/beyond religion’.

For all the diversity within this domain, its ‘tilt’ – to use a term of Taylor’s (2007: 7) – unmistakably slopes away from established secularist horizons. Indicatively, Left theorists such as Terry Eagleton (2009) and Peter Dews (2008) propose to re-boot the whole question of ethics, with religion allotted a central, if perhaps not yet exclusive, place. In their case, religion means Christianity, but postcolonial authors (e.g. Chakrabarty, 2000) have long argued that it is the compound Christian-secularist heritage of modern Western thought that prevents it from fully respecting religions like Islam, and from fully comprehending those non-Western societies that it demarcates crudely as ‘traditional’. And now the reach of these matters has been taken by Rosi Braidotti (2008) and Judith Butler (2008), among others, into feminist debate, with the former calling for a definite *postsecular turn* in critical appreciation.

In this article I argue that postsecular questioning of – for want of a better designation – poststructuralist provenance lacks sufficient coherence to sustain such a positive ‘turn’. That it appears otherwise is largely due to the drive of the *anti-*secular rhetoric that characterizes such discussions. However, on closer inspection of three of its variants, critique in this vein turns out to be rather problematical and ambivalent, notably around the purported relationship between the epistemological and the political dimensions of secularism. I conclude that it is more appropriate to regard postsecular reflexive enquiries as *intra-*secularist rather than *anti-*secularist; that is to say, they form part of the intellectual process that has been dubbed the ‘secularization of secularism’ itself, rather than straightforwardly extending the ‘revival of religion’ into the heartlands of Western theory.

**Genealogy and Critique: Asad**

In the first sentence of his important book *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad sets the terms of much postsecular argumentation: ‘What is the
connection’, Asad asks, ‘between “the secular” as an epistemological category and “secularism” as a political doctrine?’ (2003: 1). And his most direct answer goes like this. In ‘secular ideology’, the rich and diverse human practices of religions are reconfigured as matters of ‘faith’ qua belief structures attaching to specific sorts of ontological objects or realms, especially the ‘supernatural’. Secularism, by contrast, is uniquely associated with ‘natural’ understanding, and with the comprehension of organizable space as saturated by the social, thereby allocating to itself the right to decide what demarcates ‘this-worldliness’ from ‘other-worldliness’, and the real-rational from the imaginary-irrational. Operating upon those epistemological distinctions, a ‘political metaphysic’ is said to take charge, consolidating the transcendent identity of the citizen at the heart of ‘public’ life and collective decision-making, simultaneously consigning the transcendent values and identities of religion – their symbolic aura diminished in the process – to the realm of the imagination and personal private life. With this stigmatic binary consolidated in secular law, Asad insists, the role of the state, far from being genuinely ‘tolerant’, cannot be other than coercive and exclusionary, taking upon itself the consequential task of enforcing what counts as being truly human. There is thus a necessary, palpable connection between epistemological and political secularism, and a corresponding, inexorable tendency of the secular state towards symbolic and political violence. There is also a bitter irony: secularism requires and even reproduces ‘religion’ as its own discursive and political condition of existence (e.g. Asad, 2003: 5–6, 38, 59, 155, 158, 184, 191, 194, 200, 255).

Even in truncated form, Asad’s argument is salutary for all those committed to goals of explanation and understanding that would appear to form part of the structure of power-knowledge that he describes. Thus, commentators like José Casanova (2006: 20) and William Connolly (2006: 75) perceive Asad as systematically challenging not only ‘the established unconscious of European culture’, but also ‘the secular self-understanding of modernity that is constitutive of the social sciences’. This is because, in the secularist logic of explanation, the apparently irrational is consistently re-presented in terms of the real-rational, and the apparently transcendent is encoded into a ‘this-worldly’ profile, courtesy of a kind of ‘sociological truth’ (Asad, 2006: 206). The postsecular critique appears, therefore, to be both bold and comprehensive, such that the need for a ‘turn’ against secularism in thought and politics alike begins to seem almost uncontroversial.

However, a series of counter-points to this line of thought can be offered, many of them triggered by things that Asad himself says. One group of problems concerns the fact that, in spite of abundant textual evidence for Asad’s commitment to the unremitting and, let us be clear, reductionist, critique of secularism as summarized above – secular rationalist ideology gives you the metaphysic of citizenship, which gives you the coercive liberal state, never so dangerous as when you think it might be diversity-friendly – he is also committed to a genealogically inflected anthropology which is very different in timbre. Thus, Asad explicitly sets
up the interrogation of secularism as a necessarily circuitous business, more a matter of ‘working back from our present to the contingencies that have come together to give us our certainties’ (2003: 16) than straight-ahead ideology-critique. Of course, there is still a critical element in this mode, but, notoriously, it is of a rather latent, indeterminate sort, not least because Foucauldians tend to be wary of essentializing and ‘epistemologizing’ the business of theoretical problematization itself. But it is important to realize that the ‘direct’ anti-secularist argument involves precisely that kind of essentialist move: once we cognize the necessary and seamless relationship between secularism’s (inadequate) meta-theoretical categories and its (repressive) politics, this superior knowledge then constitutes grounds for unequivocal negative judgement.

By the same token, once the circuitous analytical route is taken, it becomes difficult to re-enter the fixed groove of singular and moralistic rebuttal. So while Asad is clearly drawn into the strategy of framing up and demolishing the secularist ‘ideological order’ and ‘secular doctrine’, there is a red thread throughout Formations warning us firmly against viewings cultures and ideas in this doctrinal way, treating them instead as congeries of variously cohering sensibilities, attitudes, embodiments and ‘ways of being’ (2003: 17, 155, 194, 201). Thus, for example, Asad doubts that specifically ‘religious’ motives for action can readily be identified, nor should ‘the sacred’ be taken to signal a definitively ‘other-worldly’ form or value. It did not have these connotations prior to secularized versions of Christianity, and it still does not have them today in some non-Christian settings. However, this complicating move once more leads to a certain sort of conundrum. For one thing, if we are to have a non-judgemental appreciation of religions as ways of being, then this must apply to our understanding of secularism(s) too. Second, to direct our understanding of religion away from beliefs per se and towards lived, sensed, embodied, practical ways of life seems to constitute, even in the soft Wittgensteinian form that Asad gives it, just the kind of explanatory ‘naturalization’ and ‘socialization’ that Asad introduces as characteristically secularist.

Third, it is controversial to depict religion qua faith/belief as the product or consequence of secularist categories. Charles Taylor’s main purpose in his own postsecularist tome is to demonstrate that Christianity was profoundly and variously involved in the emergence of what we think of now as secular understandings. Asad knows this of course, and adds richly to the story, but he still hints that because of this intimate relationship, Christianity might perhaps have to be thought of as a slightly improper religion, seeing as it is the one that has carried secularism inside itself all along. The argument that secularism necessarily ‘produces’ religion thus risks two serious hazards. One is that, when couched as history, the ‘genetic fallacy’ is often committed: because the concept of the secular was Christian in origin, secularism is always bound to remain religious. To his credit, Asad repeatedly resists this familiar but rather facile ‘ironical’ deduction. But he does indulge a semiotic parallel to it, namely that because the
very meaning of the secular is locked into the meaning of something called
the religious, then, again, secularism is bound to produce, and thereby rely
upon, its opposite (2003: 193, 200). But this seems to be an unnecessarily
rigid and conservative stricture, abstractly forbidding the development of
changing understandings and lines of flight in conceptual signification.
More substantively, we need to consider that many religious people today,
and by no means only Christians, seek inclusion and recognition in the
public sphere precisely on the basis of their ‘faith’, conceived at least in
part in the ‘epistemological’ sense. Their ‘faith’ is what they are proud of,
and it is what they take to ground the moral distinction between themselves
and other actors in the sphere of justice and good work. So while we learn
much from Asad’s account of how, in past societies, faith was principally
regarded as pertaining to virtue rather than to knowledge/belief (2003: 38),
these modalities are inescapably more intertwined today, whether this is the
‘product’ of secularism or not. And it seems rather odd, as a consequence, to
be conveying to people that their understanding of their own faith would
alter if only they saw that it was the product of its apparent opposite.
Equally, though, where one takes issue with the epistemic claims that
appear to underlie such faith, one’s intellectual duty is to make this known.

With these difficulties inhabiting Asad’s discourse, it is not surprising
that his main ‘direct’ critique of secularism gets significantly qualified, and
in the end decisively disowned. Thus, Asad urges us to postpone any ‘hasty
pronouncements about the virtues or vices of secularism’, declaring that
‘the secular is neither singular nor stable’, and that there is no essential
meaning either of secularity or of religion (2003: 17, 25). ‘Even secular
views of the secular aren’t all the same’, because there are at least two secu-
lar myths in play, one to do with the collective will and the law of large num-
bers, the other to do with enlightened public knowledge and education
presented as a goal for all mankind (2003: 61–2). Asad sees these myths
as crucially different, because they stand in direct conflict with one another.
But in that case, once again, the implications of the unremitting critique
have been blocked rather than carried forward. It then becomes entirely
legitimate, without expecting our unreflective ‘certainties’ thereby to be
guaranteed, to think of major aspects of intellectual and political secularism
as still eminently defensible, and to feel able to own them. Asad himself,
in some such fashion, holds out hopes for the kind of negotiated minoritar-
ian democracy that ‘secular Europe could become’ (2003: 180).

So, in the end, perhaps the main purpose of the critique of secularism
is simply to counter its ‘triumphalist’ variant, except that Asad takes it as
read from the very start of Formations that, on almost all sides, the ‘straight-
forward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer
acceptable’. He still seeks to express ‘skepticism about the way in which sec-
ularism and the secular are set within a progressivist story’, but he also
allows that if the question of the universality of secularism has been
opened up to interrogation, it remains, precisely, open (Asad, 2003: 1, 25;
Scott, 2006: 302). It is fitting, then, that at the end of an interview with
Asad, appended to a discussion volume on *Formations*, David Scott feels the need to pose Asad’s original question one more time, and indeed with an air of continued puzzlement: just what is the connection between the epistemological and historico-political aspects of secularism? Asad replies that he did try ‘to bring [sic] some aspects of both the idea of the secular as an epistemic space and of secularism as a self-conscious political doctrine’. He also wishes he had been more explicit about how ‘the notion of legitimate methods of knowing tends to render some desires valid and some invalid’, and about how this issue of legitimation bears on issues of political reform. But the first of these retrospective formulations is notably more qualified and hesitant than the initial posing of the question in *Formations*, while the second formulation seems merely to re-state the query rather than to answer it. On reflection, even if the epistemological and political dimensions of secularism are ‘obviously’ connected, for Asad, they are multiply and only very indirectly connected. Indeed, the ‘entire project of *Formations*,’ he summarizes, was to argue against the notion that secularism forms a ‘unitary system’ (Asad, 2006: 228; Scott, 2006: 302).

**Neo-vitalist Appreciation: Braidotti, Connolly**

Where Talal Asad’s postsecular discourse is anthropological and broadly Foucauldian, Rosi Braidotti’s is more philosophical and quasi-Deleuzean. Seeking to develop a general neo-vitalist perspective within specifically feminist postsecularism, Braidotti commends (as does Judith Butler) William Connolly’s work as providing the sort of overview that can help sustain a new politics of multicultural appreciation. Interestingly, what emerges clearly from Connolly’s exchange with Asad in the debate volume on *Formations* is that Asad’s scepticism about secularism extends very deeply, if somewhat inchoately, into his personal sense of value and understanding in a way that Connolly’s does not. But this is not immediately apparent from the strongly anti-secularist vein struck in Connolly’s *Why I Am Not a Secularist*. In that book, the distinctions that are thought to be typical of secular social thought – public and private, reason and emotion, fact and morality, the cognitive and the visceral – are asserted to have completely broken down. Secularists, Connolly says, uphold such distinctions mainly in order to screen out any ‘metaphysics of the supersensible’, and so those distinctions themselves stand, precisely, as metaphysical commitments. Viewed in that light, secular philosophies can be regarded, and indeed must be pitted, as essentially ‘winter’ doctrines, formulae in search of an impossible moral stabilization and cognitive purity. But if instead we develop an ‘impious reverence for life’, embracing rather than disavowing desire, the intangible and the impure, and if we wholeheartedly accept the mixedness of modes of apprehension whereby we grasp the ‘protean energies’ that flow through the organization of all things, then we are better placed to avoid the political exclusionism that necessarily results whenever the ‘irrational’ is intellectually stigmatized or empirically ignored. What then emerges is a more pluralistic,
life-enhancing ethical stance, one that requires us to abjure altogether the traditional contraposition of social science to religious world-views. ‘Multiple loyalties’ might then be cultivated, a spiritual attitude that is nothing less than the very soul of the ‘democratic adventure’ (Connolly, 1999: 24, 54, 88, 95).

Braidotti’s use of neo-vitalist terminology to underpin the postsecular turn in feminism runs along similar lines, and is rolled out in a similarly effusive, declarative way. Challenging any necessary connection between secularism and either critical theory or the feminist heritage, Braidotti (2008: passim) points to the strong element of spirituality in those lineages, and also, with ironic intent, she alerts us to the ‘core’ element of faith that resides in the various neo-humanisms that abound today. Braidotti situates these observations within a larger attempt to pull feminism out of a merely negative, exclusively oppositional mode of engagement with currents and ideas that do not reinforce the familiar image of political women as the ‘secular and rebellious daughters of the Enlightenment’. These moves can be made, Braidotti asserts, by combining an ‘affirmative’ philosophical neo-vitalism with a positive political approach to religious groups, the latter often being in the forefront of all that needs changing in the world, and whose ranks already contain much progressive thinking (feminist theology, for example – and not only Christian feminist theology). Such a feminist repositioning is held to be all the more urgent in a ‘world at war’, in which masculinism and heteronormativity are constantly valorized, and in which images of the liberated West versus backward Islam run rampant.

The specifically political angle here is even more firmly driven home by Judith Butler (2008): we are in a situation in which patriarchal and racist politics lie entwined at the heart of contemporary state violence (not least in the French authorities’ manipulation of uprisings in the banlieues as the predictable extremism of children of absent fathers; and in the sexual torture of Abu Ghraib ‘justice’). The use of notions of liberated sexual politics/women as the test of Islam’s democratic adequacy cannot merely be accidental in this context; such judgementalism is nothing less than the result of the coercive logic of secularist modernity itself. The time has come, therefore, to be accelerating long-standing feminist dissatisfaction with the division between state/public/men and religion/private/women. This leads us to abandon the very idea of ‘secular time’ (Butler), and to promote new ways of thinking ‘in spite of the times’ (Braidotti).

These three significant interventions, like Asad’s, puncture any residua...
outwards towards ‘inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces’, without thereby compelling us to take these interfaces in an absolutely religious or absolutely non-religious way (Braidotti, 2008: 16). This is suggestive, but Braidotti’s call to move beyond the goal of producing ‘counter-subjectivities’, towards a vitalist ‘practice of affirmation’ and the nurturing of ‘generous bonds’ (2008: 15–18), is more easily issued than answered. Appearing to endorse without hesitation the ‘creative potential’ that surges through the very pores of being, we soon learn that such generous receptivity has definite limits. ‘Classical’ vitalism, for example, stands in Braidotti’s eyes as tainted by fascist political connotations (2008: 13), and if her positive sense of creating ‘multiple modes of interaction with heterogeneous others’ certainly applies to Muslims, it does not appear to extend – but why not? – to the Pope’s sort of religious heterogeneity. Nor does sympathy for the passions and surges inherent in lived realities manage to encompass such vital forces as the heterosexual family, masculine competitiveness or violent conflict. The point here would be, first, that no perspective of value, even one as apparently open-endedly appreciative as vitalism, lacks its exclusionary clauses and slanted motives; and, second, that if vitalism loses sight of these constraints, its otherwise refreshing, cultivated open-ness quickly turns into something like its opposite – surreptitiously selective moralizing.

A similar objection can be registered in relation to Braidotti’s invocation of the importance of the ‘inhuman’ and the ‘posthuman’ as inner dimensions of our worldly apprehension, rather than left, as they traditionally have been, as mere exteriorities. Again there are connotations of non-discriminatory apprehension in play here that can be highly misleading, because we are almost certainly not talking about, say, the positivity of nuclear weapons systems, computer crash, Hurricane Katrina, or virus-spreading. Such generic doubts about the extent of the wholehearted embrace that is summoned up in vitalist phraseology can be supplemented with specific questions related to Braidotti’s presentation of neo-vitalism as the appropriate way to develop non-secular understanding. For example, she seems to take it for granted that secularists cannot be ‘spiritual’; that spirituality intrinsically belongs, as it were, to the religious side of things. She therefore presents the vitalist ‘sense of belonging to the world as a process of perpetual becoming’ as something that, in the nature of the case, secularists will struggle to achieve (2008: 13). But why exactly should experiences of cosmic awe, inner transformation, intimations of the sublime and so forth, be uniquely associated with religious revelation rather than humanist-naturalist sensibilities? Countless powerful responses and heightened moments, after all, can be found in our lived practices of science, adventure, sport, parenthood and art, and they can be cultivated into practices of the self that require no reference whatever to purportedly divine/transcendent influences, entities or qualities. Indeed, just such an avowedly secularist reclaiming of ‘spirituality’ appears to be gaining considerable momentum today.
At this juncture we encounter the proposition that, because there is a demonstrable element of ‘non-rational’ faith in contemporary secular humanisms, these outlooks, once again, represent a religious rather than a secular sensibility. This is certainly what Braidotti tends to imply. But the equation is neither accurate nor perspicuous. As Asad convincingly maintains, secular projects ‘embrace a distinctive politics . . . they presuppose a different kind of morality . . . and they regard suffering as entirely subjective and accidental’ (2003: 61). So even if we wish to attribute to secularism a certain redemptive vision, this is importantly different in structure and allegiance from, for example, the Christian notion of redemption. More generally, there is simply no place in secularism for a theological notion of evil, without which major religions make little sense (Asad, 2003: 61). Extending these reservations, we can point out that the idea that humanistic naturalism or naturalistic humanism involves a strict and exclusive rationalism is now hopelessly tired and a poor source of criticism. Humanist ‘faith’ for its part is more a matter of straightforward hope for something better rather than anything to do with devotion or salvation. And, finally, concepts of persons and projects couched within secular outlooks differ decisively even from the major religious humanisms, because the latter require that all human virtues are ultimately a matter of God’s love and God’s will.

It is intellectually negligent to occlude these specificities, even if we seek – as we should – to pursue productive and harmonious political alliances between people of faith and progressive unbelievers. Now the response may come back that there is more continuity between Christian monotheism and Western radical humanism than ‘atheists’ can admit, partly because, historically and conceptually, secular progressivism leans on images of human purpose and destiny coming out of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This rejoinder is forceful, but again we must be careful not to indulge a lazy ‘genetic fallacy’ here: all ideas partake of whatever context brings them into being, without them being forever destined to be determined by that formative context. It would seem particularly incumbent upon neo-vitalists to respect this law of creative emergence.

Perhaps the central observation to make is that neo-vitalists like Braidotti and Connolly are not nearly as anti-secular, nor even as obviously post-secular, as they sometimes make out. Braidotti for example advocates ‘immanent, not transcendental theory’, and a firmly ‘materialist’ version of ‘philosophical monism. The last thing she wants, in fact, is a ‘secularized version of theological concepts’ (2008: 13). But this consideration deserves to be issued unapologetically as an invitation to better, more consistent and attractive secular concept- and value-formation, not taken as an injunction to collapse secularism into religion within a rhetoric that aims to free the latter from the stony crippling gaze of the former.

Connolly, for his part, eventually gets round to acknowledging that his stance, far from underwriting religious piety, or even establishing parity between religious and non-religious mentalities, is better understood as
‘ironic evangelical atheism’, signalling only a ‘nontheistic gratitude for the . . . plurivocity of being’ (1999: 159). As one reviewer on an Islamicist web journal correctly observed, the outlook that Connolly summons up here, and his consistently agonistic posture more generally, are ‘only intelligible within a secularist worldview’. Above all, he ‘does not deliver a single confessional reflection’, and exudes merely ‘a dogmatic claim of uncertainty’ that genuine believers could only experience as disingenuous.1 This verdict seems reasonable in view of Connolly’s misleading advocacy of pluralism as something that should be equally appealing to religious believers and political nontheists who wish to cultivate a wholehearted ‘belief in this world’ (2006: 89). Even if the latter sentiment is shared and can lead to valuable solidarities, the grounds of the shared sentiment are different in each case. The suggestion that what secularists and religious people most have in common is ‘belief’ thus remains contrived. Similarly, it is tendentious for Connolly to present Spinoza, standing at the head of the ‘minor European tradition’ that Connolly urges us to support, as a profound source of rapprochement between religious faith and secular-materialist understanding (Connolly, 2006). As Jonathan Israel has recently reminded us, Spinoza was the first philosopher of the Radical Enlightenment tradition because he created ‘a sharper opposition than the rest between philosophy and theology’, forging the ‘basic metaphysical groundplan’ for ‘exclusively secular moral values’ (2010: 2, 241).

Anti-historicism: Butler, Chakrabarty

There are common threads that connect Judith Butler’s critique of secular time with the arguments of Braidotti and Connolly, but she (Butler) has no particular brief for neo-vitalist philosophy. Rather, she focuses on the way in which notions of freedom progressing over time sanction racist coercion against ‘backward’ and ‘not yet arrived’ cultural difference, actively prohibiting the legitimate expression of ‘traditional religious beliefs’. Secular figures of the one time, homogeneous time, mature time, this time, Butler argues, ignore the many times that are in play, the complex ‘intersections of histories’ that characterize our multiple modernities. Secular time, by contrast, has served as nothing other than ‘state discourse’, though perhaps not in an ‘unalloyed’ secular way, given that it is laced through by background religious apologetics – Catholic in the case of France, Protestant elsewhere – which conspire to exclude and prohibit the ‘norms of Islamic community’ in particular (Butler, 2008: 1–2, 12–13, 18).

For all the political force of Butler’s analysis – it supports the acutely anti-statist leanings of Talal Asad’s project – her theoretical canvas, like those of Connolly and Braidotti, is traversed by snags and contraflows. To open this point out, we can consider how similar arguments have been developed within postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory, we should note initially, has managed to move on from its self-declared ‘impasse’ around the mid 1990s (Moore-Gilbert, 1997: 186; Young, 1995: 163) partly by becoming
more frankly postsecularist in direction and content, one expression of which takes the form of a sustained critique of Eurocentric historicism. Thus, Derridean postcolonialist Ananda Abeysekara asserts: ‘if we are to counter this prior notion of secularism, we ought to abandon thinking of secularism as a site in which religion remains located in a traditional past from which a de-divinized modernity has liberated itself’ (2008: 177). Not only must pre-modern ‘religious’ understandings be rescued from the condescension of explanatory modernism, the idea that modernity itself has in fact been ‘de-divinized’ must be contested, along with the related assumption that ostensibly de-divinized discourses are ‘liberated’. In this way postcolonialism and postsecularism have become intermingled, spelling double disaster, apparently, for secularist renderings of social analysis.

Reservations can quickly be lodged, however, some of them rehearsing aspects of the ‘rationality and relativism’ debates of earlier decades (e.g. Hollis and Lukes, 1982). One point is that having a ‘rational’ perspective on other cultures and societies means that we want to explain how they work. Now, while it is probably true that a ‘secular’ sense of explanation will be thought to over-ride the values and categories of other cultures for present cognitive purposes, this does not mean that those values and categories are (necessarily) anything other than valid, reasonable and rational for the varied purposes of their proponents and mediators. It is also worth establishing conclusively that, in the modern present itself, while a scientific outlook must at certain junctures undermine certain sorts of ‘fundamentalist’ religious visions of the world, rationalistic explanations are themselves necessarily limited in scope, and are always changing in substance. So there is still room for serious common dialogue between those committed to religious beliefs and those who are not. Yet perhaps, in the end, the issue is intractable. If postcolonialism really is anti-secularist, rather than intra-secularist in analytical modality, and if the postsecular proposal is to effect a complete bracketing out of the concept of modernity, along with the obliteration of any link in principle between modernist categories and societal liberation, then deadlock may well have been reached. In that case, we might just have to take a stand, one way or the other, with people like Abeysekara going down one track, and others, like Edward Said, going down another. In his last book, Said urged that: ‘it must be a major part of the humanistic vocation to keep a fully rounded secular perspective’ (2004: 51).

To see once more whether these divergences can be more satisfactorily handled, let us turn to the formulations of Dipesh Chakrabarty, heavily relied upon by Abeysekara and many others, and the theorist who provides perhaps the fullest airing of the anti-historicist angle that is also taken up by Judith Butler. In his book Provincializing Europe, Chakrabarty makes it clear that he has no interest in engaging in ‘postcolonial revenge’, by gratuitously rubbing Eurocentric traditions of thought. Postcolonial theorists, after all, have themselves been definitively influenced by those traditions. In particular, Chakrabarty accepts that the concern with a common human
future characterized by social justice — a veritable ‘condition of political modernity’ that is entirely shared by postcolonialism — is unthinkable except through conceptual schemas ‘forged in eighteenth-century Europe’ and still definitive of modern secular social science (2000: 4–5). But he does argue that those theories, traditions, and conceptual schemas, while ‘indispensable’, are also ‘inadequate’ (2000: 6, 16, 88, 254). And they are inadequate because they are historicist.

Historicism in this conception involves the assumption that all events, agencies, and societies exist in the same temporality, a ‘homogeneous’ space that is treated as a ‘natural’ mode of existence. With history naturalized in this way, all forms of social practice and consciousness can be laid out according to the same temporal parameters, reflecting a singular ontological status, such that their differential features and relations can be expressed through an encompassing totality of pasts undergone and possibilities opened up. This analytic shows the influence of modern science on social and historical thinking, and historical sociology is one discourse that would seem compelled to operate under some such guidelines. But Chakrabarty’s suggestion is that, even if we feel the force of that compulsion, the ‘naturalization’ of history and its ontology should be resisted, partly because they entail a teleological political imperialism in which the past is necessarily tied to a modern/modernist present and future, whose privileged origin and source of dissemination is the West. A conceptual register in which society develops and spreads to other places over time thus becomes intrinsically bound up with the condescending, racist politics of the ‘not-yet’, whether this takes the form of Mill’s withholding of India’s right to liberal self-government, or Hobsbawm’s notion that peasant consciousness, being ‘pre-modern’, is also ‘pre-political’ (Chakrabarty, 2000: 6–13).

Chakrabarty accepts that postcolonial scholars, too, gloss radical cultural differences and incommensurable temporalities in terms that are ultimately developmental-modernist. This happens, for example, when religiously motivated peasant mobilization is re-described as a matter of ‘power and resistance’, or when the worship of tools and machinery is treated as just one instance of capital’s subsumption of ‘real’ labour, or when the perception of active spirits within a servile community is translated in terms of their ‘logic of ritual practice’. Chakrabarty’s own previous work, he grants, committed similar errors, not sufficiently escaping from the clutches of ‘sociological’ comprehension. But the latter, he thinks – as does Asad – severely curtails the witnessing and affirmation of ‘irreducible plurality’ (2000: 16, 78, 81). Instead, Chakrabarty advocates enhanced receptivity, such that radically different ontologies, the validity of which we cannot unilaterally decide, are nevertheless generously entertained. Gods, spirits and other supernatural entities are, in that light, to be regarded as agents in ‘pre-modern’ lives and practices, and certainly not the sort of thing to be reconstituted as ‘social facts’ by dint of the modernist prioritization of the social over the divine. Gods and spirits, to put it another way, are ‘co-eval’
with the human (2000: 16, 74–6). Second, he argues that we need to develop a new politics of ‘translation’, such that different sorts of cultural phenomena, belief and experience do not have to pass through some neutral, superior set of terms designed, in fact, to establish the subordination of these phenomena to alien (secular) norms (2000: Ch. 2). Rather, ontological differences need to be directly ‘bartered’ with one another to make provisional sense. Third, we need to produce ‘conjoined and disjunctive genealogies’ that do justice to the ‘permanent tension’ between different temporalities, and different futurities too (2000: 254–5).

The following critical notes can be made on Chakrabarty’s sophisticated case.

1. Despite appearances, Chakrabarty’s predominant intellectual mood is ambivalence rather than outright pluralism. He engages in anti-sociology and anti-historicism not because he thinks these modes should or even can be abandoned, but just as an ethical matter of giving other possibilities some breathing space. Yet such ambivalence, whatever its ethical merits, cannot stand as decisive argumentation. Above all, the contention that analytical historicism is forever condemned to be concomitant with the teleological political moralism of the ‘not yet’ seems wholly assertive, sustained largely by fiat.

2. Ambivalence reigns partly because rigorous pluralism with regard to ontologies and faiths is well-nigh impossible to sustain. Once inside the historicist frame (as Chakrabarty accepts we are), there can be no ‘multiple temporalities’ in any strict or literal sense. As Roberto Unger insists in relation to this, there is too much that we now know and feel for us to be infinitely hospitable to ontological difference. We therefore have to accept, ‘to the hilt’, the utter historicity of things – ourselves as ‘dying organisms’, our societies and ideas, indeed nature itself, and even nature’s laws (Unger, 2007: 78). This does not mean that people today, never mind in ‘pre-modern’ societies, cannot be imagined as living their lives in different and multiple times, and certainly to deny that they imagine this, or to deny that this matters to them, would be absurd. All the same, by all the criteria of comprehension available to us, they are not living in a different time and in a different world. At any rate, Chakrabarty never brings himself to the point of overturning this basically historicist, materialist view of things. So, gods and spirits can certainly be conceived as ‘co-eval’ with humans, not least because many humans themselves think in this way, and then act on that basis. But what motivates us here is respect for, and engrossing interest in, people and their diverse reasons; nothing follows concerning the ultimate validity of those reasons, nor are we somehow mistaken in seeking to reach an objective view of their situation and claims, even if that only constitutes one aspect of understanding. From that point of view, Chakrabarty cannot legislate against the thought that, even if we must genuinely seek to appreciate those powerful systems of representation and ethics according to which gods and spirits are agents in the world, gods and spirits are not in fact agents in the world.

3. The argument that the work of translation between different schemas should take the form of ‘barter’ rather than ‘generalized exchange’ is intriguing,
triggering wider considerations about the homologies that might hold between different types of understanding and the logic of the social formations in which they are embedded (a very modernist and ‘sociological’ sense of homology, of course). But Chakrabarty’s statement (2000: 84–5) that what is going on in ‘bartered’ translations – the example he gives is that between Hindu and Islamic deities – is a ‘natural’ case of ‘singularities trading with singularities’ seems either cryptic or dubious. Such translations, being only ever approximate, operate solely on the basis of shared background generalities – notions of the sacred, the most holy, devotion, the light, divine love and justice, and so on. They may well be treated as absolute singularities in particular cultures, but this does not mean that they cannot be taken as instances of more general phenomena and categories. If cultural ideas and entities were totally singular, they would not be even roughly translatable. Chakrabarty’s appreciation of singularity and ontic difference, then, cannot be insulated from the sort of ‘sociological’ mediations that he wants to hold off. And, in any case, the impulse to seek to recover the irreducibility of cultural singularities is surely itself the hallmark of a certain kind of reflexive modernism.

4. Chakrabarty’s whole problematic, in fact, revolves around a general philosophical problem that cannot simply be a matter of Eurocentrism or secularist distortion per se, because, as he allows, it reflects a deep ‘fault line’ within the European tradition itself (2000: 18). This is the problem of the relation between knowing subject and observed object, abstraction and the concrete world, theory and lived experience, the universal and the local. And the point is raised that between spare generalization and the teeming singularities of mind and being that it transposes, a certain violence is committed. There is thus, Chakrabarty suggests, nothing less than a ‘scandal’ in every secular, historicizing assimilation of worlds in which gods and spirits are agents into the modern ‘imperious, all-embracing code’ (2000: 89–93). But it is not clear what the specifically postcolonial, postsecular force of this observation is. Arguably, the ‘scandal’ of abstraction applies not only to assimilations of the religious pre-modern, but also to the analytical representation of the thoughts and motivations of, for example, contemporary teenagers, mothers, gamblers, killers and lovers. And it is not really a ‘scandal’ at all, because as Chakrabarty himself again fully understands, using abstraction as a route to intelligibility is both unavoidable and desirable, provided that the line between analytical apparatuses and their objects (for example ‘premodern superstition’) does not get ‘overdrawn’ (2000: 238). But this is by no means synonymous with Chakrabarty’s further gloss that analytical thought gives us no better penetration than everyday understanding into the deeper workings of things, a sentiment that borders on obscurantism (2000: 239). If it is true and important that experience and its modes are never fully ‘captured’ in terms of generalized concepts and explanations, still the idea that somewhere beneath and beyond the reaches of analytical reason a deep, mute, mysterious truth exists, glimpsed only through intuition and revelation, is a romanticist fantasy.

5. The metaphysical issue around theorizing experience, in other words, concerns a necessary modal disjunction between what is analysed and the act of
analysis, and this is something that applies to all modes of analysis; it is not restricted to scientific forms of understanding, as Chakrabarty mistakenly implies. Thus, we are no less ‘distant’, modally speaking, from our object of thought just because we seek to provide a ‘loving grasp of detail in search of the diversity of human lifeworlds’ (2000: 18). Despite their subject-friendly and experience-near connotations, hermeneutical terms such as ‘lifeworld’, ‘cultural diversity’, and ‘singular ontology’ as used by postcolonialist and post-secular theorists are no less primarily theoretical, and therefore no less distanced from their object of enquiry, than ‘scientistic’ rubrics. All are part of the ‘analyticity’ that Chakrabarty seeks to problematize yet cannot expel from his own thinking.

The point of engaging with Chakrabarty was twofold: to indicate that his genre of postcolonial postsecularism, while it raises difficult issues for mainstream social thinking, is far from stable or convincing; and also to situate Judith Butler’s article on torture and secular time within the metatheoretical space of Chakrabarty-style anti-historicism. Thus, Butler steadily conveys that there are utterly indissociable connections – ‘historical, rhetorical and logical alliances’ (2008: 19) – between modernity, state violence, ‘cultural assaults on Islam’ and secular time; connections that result, almost inevitably, in all sorts of politically awful consequences. At the same time, Butler also accepts that even such powerfully fused associations are finally contingent. Moreover, she is well aware of the dangers of resorting to ‘cultural wholism’ in these matters, such that the characteristic fusions of different times and cultures are held to be so completely ontologically distinct that each has to be ‘conceived as self-sufficient’ (2008: 1). Yet, if separatist cultural wholism is deemed inappropriate, then there can be nothing wrong in principle with a broadly secular view of the times that, today, we all inescapably share. The situation, in that case, is not one of radically incommensurable historicities, all jaggedly juxtaposed, but rather a matter of complex pluralistic integration, requiring some kind of overarching – and philosophically realist – conspectus. To take a familiar example, talk of ‘multiple modernities’ enables important and unsettling differences to be registered, but that signature phrase makes no conceptual sense except by reference to some putative generalized, developmental commonality.

As with the other thinkers I have discussed, and in spite of the consistently anti-secular cast of her argument, Butler is not finally disavowing secularism as such. Her onslaught against hegemonic global violence does imply that secular values are uniformly hollow and dangerous, yet overall it is the ‘uses’ to which they are put that are considered damnable (Butler, 2008: 3). Analytically, the recommendation is not to ditch secularism tout court, but to reject any version whereby it is assumed to ‘succeed religion sequentially’ and wherever secular politics seeks directly to enact this. So Butler’s suggested corrective to the narrow secular picture remains itself a variant of secularism, one that ‘reanimates religion as part of [secularisms]
ideas of culture and civilization’ (2008: 14). But here something else arises. Given the severe drubbing of all dominant forms of secularist (plus Catholic) politics that Butler metes out in her polemic, and given her overriding concern not to alienate (selected) religious minorities, it is not clear that her amended secular position possesses sufficient independent ethical drive genuinely to reanimate political life. This is because, rather than offering any new or re-vamped first-order political horizon, Butler appears to be recommending an essentially second-order, facilitative conception of political and normative negotiation, geared to establishing ‘a discursive matrix for the articulation and disputation of values, and a field of contestation’ (2008: 13). In other words, what is of primary concern is registering the fact and value of contestation itself, not striving to decide or blend the merits of whatever is being contested. In that sense, Butler’s discursivist political inclinations, however radical in articulation and intent, look rather standardly liberal. A properly pluralistic democracy, it is implied, does not require or demand ‘thick’ values of its own, only the relatively ‘thin’ value that those committed to thicker and different cultural values, whether taking their place within formally liberal societies, or subject to the external actions of formally liberal states, should not suffer harm on account of them. While this perspective of deliberative multiculturalist intermediation is undoubtedly valuable, it both harbours a certain internal normative tension (thick values are all right for some, but not for others, and certainly not for us) and it casts aspersions on the urgent need to develop, for our times, a more substantive, if inevitably qualified, universalistic horizon for radical politics.

Conclusion

In this article, I have been analysing the typical themes and problems that underlie the rapid development of postsecularist perspectives on theory, culture and politics. Focusing on three contemporary articulations of postsecularism, I flagged up the priority, within them, of establishing a relationship of tight mutual entailment between the epistemological and the political dimensions of secularist understanding. But the claims of postsecular discourse in that regard, and its alternative motifs, together with its predominantly anti-secular rhetoric, were found to be unconvincing. Whether the preferred meta-theoretical outlook is genealogical (Asad), neo-vitalist (Braidotti, Connolly) or postcolonially anti-historicist (Chakrabarty, Butler), each of these platforms swings between a reductionist treatment of secularism and more carefully modulated formulations which check, rather than confirm, the drift of the dismissive posture. Indeed, the conceptual resources and manoeuvres of postsecular thinking remain, in their way, as recognizably secularist as the theoretical figurations in question. The more directly political aspect of critique was not the main focus of my appraisal, but I briefly suggested that, in that dimension too, it is more accurate, as well as normatively important, to position postsecularism
as *intra-*secular rather than *anti-*secular. This is not to deny that some post-secular authors might be sympathetic to a ‘revival of religion’ at the level of general cultural and political theory, nor to take it for granted that they will be unsuccessful in turning back the broadly secular habit of critical thought. But, on the whole, the postsecular turn is about exploring ways of thinking and acting that are (inclusively and modestly) secular. The problem is that important matters of theory and political principle are foreclosed rather than advanced when modest, inclusive secularism is affirmed solely in dire opposition to oppressive, exclusive secularism.

Note

References


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