

QUEER SECULARITY

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WHAT CAN “CRITICAL secularism studies” (Kemerli 2019) offer to queer studies and vice versa? This contribution to a queer vocabulary for the 2020s is a critique of queer secularity and its accompanying queer collusions with (Western) modalities of secularism, namely how it upholds secular modes of being as normative queer subjecthood. If we are to seriously undertake queer studies’ project of queerness-as-approach, a political positioning which interrogates normativities (Browne and Nash 2016) rather than a narrow focus on sexual and gender identities, how can this project challenge the normativity of Western secular ideals? Can queer theory confront the workings of secularity in homonormativity and its resulting homonationalist deployments? How can critical secularism studies contend with the instrumentalisation of queerness in the name of secularism? I pose these questions with Jasbir Puar’s discussion of queer secularity in mind, a concept discussed in *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007) as illustrative of Western Sexual Exceptionalism.

“Western Sexual Exceptionalism” (Puar 2007) is a particular formation of exceptionalism that frames the West as exceptionally tolerant to homosexuality in comparison to the Rest of The World. Its work is two-fold: the West is situated as permissive (indeed, welcoming) of LGBTQI+ identity, practices, and community, and the “West’s Others” (Hall 2011) are seen as lagging behind in resisting these rights via their (allegedly inherent) sexual repression and attendant homophobia. This exceptionalism functions in locating the homophobia

outside of liberal modernity, whether it be external to the borders of Western nation-states or within the West's recalcitrant "internal others" (Hall 2011).

This taken-for-grantedness of sexual liberation and freedoms within the West operates through a historical amnesia over modernity as inherently a colonial, racist project (Wynter 2003). As Che Gossett (2016) argues, the instrumentalisation of sexuality (and gender) erases "how sexual difference itself has been weaponised as an instrument of antiblack and colonial power and of white sovereign embodiment." Secularism, as a cornerstone of modernity, is no less culpable in modernity's grisly origins.

Critical secularism studies is foremost an intellectual project that challenges the notion of secularism as a neutral separation of church and state. It confronts (in particular Western modalities of) secularism as a mode of governance that "has historically entailed the regulation and reformation of religious beliefs, doctrines, and practices to yield a particular normative conception of religion (that is largely Protestant Christian in its contours)" rather than its separation from the state (Mahmood 2013, 87). In *Is Critique Secular*, Saba Mahmood (2013) argues against viewing the tenets of secular liberal democracy, such as freedom of religion and speech, as neutral goods. Rather, they are products of distinct historical, political trajectories, and produce normative conceptions regarding religion, its relation to subjectivity and citizenship, and its rightful position within the public/private binary. Indeed, critical secularism studies argues that the notion of religion, and which religions are subject to regulation by the state and which are seen as neutral (namely Protestant Christianity), is precisely how secularism historically has been, and continues to be, a function of power.

Scholars such as Saba Mahmood and Joan Scott, who have analysed secularism's instrumentalisation of gender and race, argue that Christianity not only "inheres in the discourse of secularism" but that, historically, it has also been positioned specifically in opposition to Islam, such that:

[T]here is a tradition of pointing to Arabs and Muslims as the others of IndoEuropean Aryans that long antedates this recent history and that is tied to the articulation of the identity of Western nations and their colonial outreach. (Scott 2018, 19)

Western secularism has historically deployed oppositions of (White European) self and (racialised, colonised, frequently Muslim) “Other” to cement its own authority, which is a familiar and function of modernity and Western exceptionality. As such, imperialism is constitutive of the Western and European history of secularism: these normative conceptions mask how hegemonic modes of secularism have been implicated in coloniality while propagating racialised and colonial binaries between the West’s notion of itself and the non-Christian, foreign, usually Muslim, “Other.”

This problematisation of secularism and its entanglement with orientalism and imperialism is not meant to be an argument for cultural relativism. This is often the rebuttal put forward against critical secularism studies, which is not to say that the field itself is above critique. However, reading the problematisation of secularism as an argument for cultural relativism is a fundamental misunderstanding of the proposition at hand: by challenging the universalist and apolitical claims of secularism, critical secularism does not propose a complete dismissal of secularism or a culturally relativist understanding of the secularism versus religion binary. Rather, its aims to historicise and disrupt this binary itself, it is to:

show how the religious and the secular are not so much immutable essences or opposed ideologies as they are concepts that gain a particular salience with the emergence of the modern state and attendant politics – concepts that are, furthermore, interdependent and necessarily linked in their mutual transformation and historical emergence. (Mahmood 2013, 64).

Within this frame, Islam continues to be positioned as the discursive opponent of secularism. The ostensible struggle between the two con-

tinues through “secularism discourse’s insistence on gender equality today and its antiIslamic stance” (Scott 2018, 21). Coloniality operates through creating oppositions that deploy gender, race, sexuality, and class to assert a familiar dichotomised narrative regarding the West and its “Others” (McClintock 1995). However, this (sexual) exceptionalism and its uses of secularism are by no means limited to Islam and Muslims and can be seen with how “Africa” (the whole continent!) is constructed as exceptionally homophobic, even in its Christian manifestations (Awondo et al. 2012; Matebeni 2014; Nyanzi 2015; Rao 2014a). As such, secularism is a familiar modality of Western exceptionalism, whether or not it deploys sexuality, and whether or not it is directed towards Islam.

Still, queer of colour critique has spent much intellectual labour to critique how Western sexual exceptionalism and its specifically secular deployments are disproportionately directed towards Islam and its followers (Puar 2007; El-Tayeb 2011; Haritaworn 2015). Fatima El-Tayeb (2011, 86), for example, analyses how in what she calls “postnational Europe” both straight and queer Muslims fail to adhere to the norms of modern Western identity and ideals through a “repressive mode of heterosexuality” and being “culturally stuck in the age of shame” respectively. Marginal Muslim subjectivities, i.e. Muslim women and queers, are used to reaffirm an oppositional binary of secularism versus Islam. Puar (2007, 13) formulates “queer secularity” as a normative expectation of queer subjects which “demands a particular transgression of norms, religious norms that are understood to otherwise bind that subject to an especially egregious interdictory religious frame.” Queer secularity, as Puar argues, is particularly fixated on and directed towards Islam and positioning queerness and Islamic religiosity as incompatible. Inherent in this demand for transgression is the assumption that the secular self is the only possible way to be successfully *liberal* and *liberated*, whereby secularity is exceptionally amiable to queer subjecthood in comparison to religious modes of being.

It is in this understanding of secularism that an interrogation of queer secularity becomes urgent. Rahul Rao’s (2014b, 200–1) deliberation over the relationship between the “queer question” and the “woman question,”

and how “contemporary queer questions [...] are haunted by the past of the Woman Question, even as they are uncannily prefigured by it” is especially apt in understanding how queer secularity is foreshadowed by the aforementioned gendered histories. Confronting queer secularity, then, is neither a substitution of “women” and “queers” in an analysis of secularity’s culpability in Western Sexual Exceptionalism, nor a positioning of women and queers as mutually exclusive, but rather an interrogation of how “both sets of questions have had mutually disruptive effects” (Rao 2014b).

If queer studies must reckon with how some queers are increasingly assimilated into proper normative citizenship, how ought it confront the secular contours of these exclusions produced in the process? My own research is invested in exposing queer secularity as it operates in relation to queer Muslims. Western modalities of secularism reify a binary between cultural or “secular” Muslims and practising Muslims, whereby the former is understood as more assimilable to normative liberal citizenship. How does queer secularity function in tandem with histories of the West’s subjectification of Muslims? What are the queer iterations of these secular projects and how do queer Muslims confront them?

If (certain) religiosity continues to be framed as irreconcilable with modernity, how may queer theory further push this analysis of its transgressions? In turn, how can critical secularism studies contend with the increasing instrumentalisation of queer subjectivities and queer collusions? Moreover, what mutually disruptive effects may queer studies and critical secularism studies have for each other? In the 2020s, queer studies must study and confront secularity as a modality of power – especially when it is weaponised in the service of gendered, sexualised and racialised exceptionalisms.

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