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Introduction: The Anthropological Skepticism of Talal Asad

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For more than three decades, Talal Asad has been engaged in a distinctive critical exploration of the conceptual assumptions that govern the West's knowledges—especially its disciplinary and disciplining knowledges—of the non-Western world. The investigations that comprise this by no means concluded intellectual project have of course been varied in the objects and topics taken up for inquiry, but they have all been characterized, we suggest, by a profoundly questioning attitude, an attitude of *skepticism.* Asad's skepticism—articulated largely (though not exclusively) in relation to anthropological claims—has been directed toward systematically throwing doubt on Enlightenment reason's pretensions to the truth about the reasons of non-European traditions. This is not to make out Asad to be a mere subverter of the desire for positive knowledge. Rather his impulse is guided, we think, by the Wittgensteinian dictum that whether a proposition turns out to be true or false depends on what is made to *count* as its determinants or criteria; it will depend on the language-game in which it is employed.[1] And language-games, for Asad, are historical and political and therefore *ideological* matters potentially warranting deconstructive as well as reconstructive investigation.

I

Adumbrations of this intellectual stance of skepticism can already be discerned in the manner in which Asad entered the anthropological upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s. As is well known, these were years in which the British social anthropological establishment (in which Asad was trained and in which he spent the first two decades of his academic life, largely at the University of Hull) was coming under attack for its alleged role in the administrative functioning and ideological legitimization of the British colonial enterprise. Indeed, in some Left quarters anthropology was being criticized as the very "handmaiden" of colonial subjection and its practitioners reviled for their racism (remember that Bronislaw Malinowski's diaries were published in 1967 and set off a mini-scandal in the discipline of which he was a revered founder).[2] While sympathetic to the anticolonial rejection of anthropology's hubristic will-to-omniscient-knowledge, however, Asad very early articulated a doubt about the *register* and *direction* of this criticism. He doubted not only whether anthropology was as important to colonial rule as its detractors often alleged, but also whether the reactive and defensive moralizing posture of assertion and counterassertion was at all constructive. In interrogating the colonial question in anthropology, he urged, what is important is the *conceptual* structure of the discipline and the relation of this structure to the conditions of power in which the discipline realized itself as authoritative knowledge.

Take, for example, his first book, *The Kababish Arabs*, published in 1970 and no doubt little read today.[3] It is, in many ways, a very recognizable monograph in the British anthropological tradition. Its formal concern is an analytical description of the organization of power, authority, and consent among the Kababish of northern Sudan. Undoubtedly the colonial question haunts the book's concerns; however, Asad takes aim not at the supposed motivations of colonial anthropologists but at the *ideological* character of their dominant theoretical paradigm, namely functionalism.

In the colonial environment in which early social anthropologists encountered their primitive polities, and in the atmosphere of philosophical positivism surrounding the early development of social anthropology, it seemed appropriate and possible to take primitive political structures for granted and view them with detachment as aspects of identifiable "natural systems." Viewed functionally in re-

lation to a total natural system, political activity emerged primarily as a mode of maintaining the coherence or identity of a given society. If classic functionalism had not existed, it would have been necessary for anthropologists to invent it, for it enabled them to analyze primitive political systems without having to consider alternative political possibilities. The character of political domination remained unproblematic because it was part of the natural order of things.[4]

The passage is a characteristic one. The issue (and he makes it more explicit in a footnote)[5] that requires our attention is not the attitude of anthropologists toward their native informants (however reprehensible that may be) but the *ideological* conditions that give point and force to the *theoretical* apparatuses employed to describe and objectify them and their worlds.

Of course, the delineation of the problem of anthropology's relationship with colonialism was even more sharply articulated in Asad's edited volume, *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, published in 1973.[6] In many ways a landmark intervention, Asad sought in his framing introduction to redirect attention away from the anthropology-as-tool story toward the analysis of the ideological character of anthropological knowledge. Locating anthropology's crisis in the altered worldly conditions of decolonization following the Second World War, Asad urged that anthropologists remind themselves "that anthropology does not only apprehend the world in which it is located, but that the world also determines how it will apprehend it."[7] He noted the "curious refusal" of anthropologists to think seriously and critically about the unequal relation between the West and the Third World in which anthropology produces knowledge, and argued programmatically: "We must begin from the fact that the basic reality which made the pre-war social anthropology a feasible and effective enterprise was the power relationship between dominating (European) and dominated (non-European) cultures. We then need to ask ourselves how this relationship has affected the practical pre-conditions of social anthropology; the uses to which its knowledge was put; the theoretical treatment of particular topics; the mode of perceiving and objectifying alien societies; and the anthropologist's claim of political neutrality."[8]

This set of concerns was not necessarily shared by all the contributors to the volume, needless to say, but it was exemplified in the critical practice of Asad's own essay, "Two European Images of Non-European Rule."[9] A model instance of historicizing conceptual interrogation, it anticipated

by many years the later "postcolonial" theorization of the relation between power and disciplinary knowledge. Asad's doubt here concerned the unexamined contrast between the images of non-European political order constructed respectively by the functionalist anthropology of African societies and the orientalist study of Islamic societies. On the one hand, the functionalist anthropology of African societies stressed the *integrated* character of the political order and the *consensual* basis of political authority; on the other hand, orientalism emphasized *force* and *repression* on the part of Islamic leaders and *submission* and *indifference* on the part of the ruled. Asad's interest, however, was not merely these differences themselves, but their connection to the *historical formation* of their respective disciplines, one emerging after the advent of colonialism in the societies studied (African anthropology), and the other rooted in an older European experience (orientalism). In short, Asad was beginning to develop a skeptical mode of anthropological inquiry attuned to the ideological character of objectification and, therefore, the historical and political conditions of formation of the apparatuses of scholarly investigation. The rest of the 1970s were to see him engage this question variously in a number of remarkable essays.[10]

The 1980s, however, were a period of transitions for Asad—transitions in geographic and institutional location, and transitions in intellectual direction. In 1988 he relocated to the United States from Britain to take up a position in the Department of Anthropology at the Graduate Faculty of the New School for Social Research in New York. Although he would never be seamlessly integrated into either its professional or scholarly ethos, Asad would nevertheless now be more systematically part of the landscape of argument that constituted U.S. anthropology. In the 1980s that landscape was animated (*decentered*, in the jargon of the moment) by debates about power and representation that had entered the humanities and social sciences by way of the linguistic and poststructuralist turns. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, published in 1978, vividly brought together the themes of power/knowledge and the questioning of the West and helped to create the intellectual space for the revival (as well as *recharacterization*) of the *colonial* question. Within U.S. anthropology, the volume that most embodied the new theoretical self-consciousness was, of course, *Writing Culture*, edited by the cultural historian James Clifford and the anthropologist George Marcus, and published in 1986.[11] The essays that comprised this volume were diverse, but the project, so far at least as the editors were concerned, aimed at questioning the seeming naiveté of anthropological

representation, in particular bringing recent developments in literary analysis to bear on the conventions of ethnographic *writing*.

Asad, interestingly, was a contributor to this volume, though he stood at something of an angle to some of its central concerns with ethnography and textuality. It may be true that what ethnographers do is write, as Clifford and Marcus asserted, but is it the case that *ethnography* ought *necessarily* to be thought of as what anthropologists do? Asad has never assumed this relation between anthropology and ethnography—indeed, recently he has suggested that anthropology is best thought of as the comparative study of concepts across space and time.[12] Which is perhaps why, in his contribution to *Writing Culture*, he focused his attention on an explicitly *theoretical*—as opposed to an ethnographic—text, namely Ernest Gellner's famous essay, "Concepts and Society." "The Concept of Cultural Translation" is an essay that works through a number of moves that together expose the assumptions underlying Gellner's argument about translation and interpretation. In particular, Asad was interested in thinking about the tendency to understand "translation" as a practice involving "reading the implicit" into the enunciations of native informants; the translator/interpreter seems always able to discern or reveal meanings hidden from the native speakers themselves. Part of the problem with arguments such as Gellner's, Asad maintained, is that they systematically missed or obscured the *inequality* in the relations of power between the languages of Third World societies and the languages of Western societies. "My point," Asad argued, "is only that the process of cultural translation is enmeshed in conditions of power—professional, national, international. And among these conditions is the authority of ethnographers to uncover the implicit meanings of subordinate societies. Given that this is so, the interesting question for enquiry is not whether, and if so to what extent, anthropologists should be relativists or rationalists, critical or charitable, toward other cultures, but how power enters into the process of 'cultural translation,' seen both as a discursive and as a non-discursive practice."[13]

II

Since the 1980s, Asad has turned his attention more and more systematically to the study of religion—not merely to the study of *a* religion (Islam, Christianity), but to the question of what it means for a discipline

like anthropology to be engaged in the study of "religion" at all. The body of work to emerge from this inquiry will explore the various ways in which the historical shifts giving shape to the complexly interrelated categories of the secular and the religious have been decisive in the emergence of modern Europe and the modes of knowledge and power it deploys. Asad's entrance into this question takes place via an extended discussion of the notion of religion as found in the work of the noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz.[14] In a critique that constantly tacks between the historical and the conceptual, Asad carefully demonstrates how the universal definition of religion propounded by Geertz rests on a conceptual architecture deeply indebted to developments within early modern Christianity, and thus is of limited value in the analysis of other traditions. Importantly, the problem he identifies in Geertz's model is not simply its privileging of one religion (Christianity) at the expense of others, something that might be overcome by a careful elimination of its specifically Christian and eurocentric assumptions. Rather, the very idea of religion as a universal category of human experience owes directly to developments within seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theology, and specifically to the emergence of the concept of Natural Religion—namely, the idea that religion is a feature of all societies, evident in the universality of systems of belief, practices of worship, and codes of ethics. As Asad notes,

What appears to anthropologists today to be self-evident, namely that religion today is essentially a matter of symbolic meanings linked to ideas of general order (expressed through either or both rite and doctrine), that it has generic functions/features, and that it must not be confused with any of its particular historical or cultural forms, is in fact a view that has a specific Christian history. From being a concrete set of practical rules attached to specific processes of power and knowledge, religion has come to be abstracted and universalized. In this movement we have not merely an increase in religious toleration, certainly not merely a new scientific discovery, but the mutation of a concept and a range of social practices which is itself part of a wider change in the modern landscape of power and knowledge.[15]

Here again we see Asad's concern with the ideological location of anthropological knowledge, with the genealogy of the discipline's moral preferences. The various traditions that anthropologists call religions cannot be understood as cultural elaborations of a universal form of experience, a sui

generis category of human knowledge, but must be analyzed in their particularity, as the products of specific practices of discipline, authority, and power. In his attempt to delineate the contours of such an inquiry, Asad will find it increasingly necessary to engage religion's other, the secular, insomuch as it is this concept, and the practices and deployments of power that it has brought into play, that continues to anchor the modern interpretation of religion as a unique (and uniquely distorted) form of human understanding.

While Asad's engagement with Geertz's work centered on the latter's attempt to establish a universal definition of religion, his critique of Geertz's use of the notions of symbol and meaning had implications that extended well beyond any single author or area of inquiry. Against what at the time was a growing tendency within anthropology to understand culture as fundamentally textual—a "system of symbols," as Geertz put it, whose meaning it was the anthropologist's task to decipher—Asad insists that the meaning of symbols must be understood in relation to both the practical contexts within which those symbols function and the forms of social discipline by which certain readings are authorized and accomplished. When anthropologists or historians approach cultural phenomena as texts to be read, they are in a sense adopting the stance of modern theology, one that takes religion to be fundamentally about the affirmation of propositions expressed in symbolic form. "Can we know," Asad asks in this essay, "what [religious symbols] mean without regard to the social disciplines by which their correct reading is secured?"[16] It is precisely this disciplinary dimension that Asad foregrounds in two subsequent articles addressing the use of language and symbol within monastic programs geared to the formation of the virtues.[17] His concern in these pieces with the materiality of discourse, with attending to the practical contexts in which words are used, and particularly to the conditions of power, authority, and discipline by which practices (linguistic and otherwise) are learned and reproduced, anticipated poststructuralist emphases on the exteriority of language, on what Gumbrecht has referred to as "the totality of phenomena contributing to the constitution of meaning without being meaning themselves."[18]

In his concern with the overvaluing of consciousness within theories of human action, including Marxian theories based on a distinction between (material) force and (subjective) consent (or between "structure"

and "agency"), Asad has increasingly directed his attention to aspects of human embodiment, exploring some of the various ways that pain, emotion, embodied aptitude, and the senses connect with and structure traditional practices. As in his other work, he has eschewed programmatic understandings of the body in favor of a genealogical approach attentive to the way the corporeal is thematized and deployed within cultural practices. The somatic concepts he deploys in his approach to different historical problems—for instance, disciplined sensibility, pain, suffering, embodied aptitude, gesture—do not assume any one kind of body but, on the contrary, take the plurality of historical bodies as a necessary presupposition of genealogical analysis. In framing such questions of human embodiment, Asad will privilege an analytical style that resists the conventional schematic opposing discourse to that which lies outside it. Though given explicit elaboration at only a few junctures in his work, Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of tradition will provide Asad with a key conceptual device for thinking beyond the division of body and culture, so as to open up an inquiry into historically specific responses to the task of embodied existence.[19] In his essay, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," published in 1986, Asad had suggested that anthropologists approach Islam through the concept of a "discursive tradition": those discourses and practices of argumentation, conceptually articulated with an exemplary past and dependent on an interpretive engagement with a set of foundational texts, by which practitioners of a tradition distinguish correct actions from incorrect ones.[20] In his later writings, he increasingly comes to view this formulation as failing to adequately appreciate the embodied aspects of traditional action. His rethinking of this point bears the imprint of two authors in particular: Marcel Mauss, specifically his provocative essay on body techniques, with its conception of the body as a "technical instrument"—what Asad will gloss as a "developable means for achieving a range of human objectives"[21]—and Michel Foucault, whose genealogies of the diverse ways the "docile body" has been constructed by power had an obvious influence on Asad's approach to medieval Christian discipline.[22]

Asad continues to explore the theme of embodiment in his most recent book, *Formations of the Secular*, but compliments it with greater emphasis on those aspects of corporeality that constitute what might be called a generative friction within traditions—aspects such as pain, aging, and childbirth.[23] As in his earlier inquiries, it is the genealogy of modern pow-

er that orients the questions he poses in regard to both secularism and the corporal. Pain provides a strategic point of entry, due both to the way it resists containment within the binaries of mind/body (or culture/nature) and to the role a certain normative understanding of pain plays within modern conceptions of the human being. In chapters addressing such varied topics as human rights, sadomasochism, and torture, he explores secular-liberal sensibilities to pain as embedded within Western popular, legal, and administrative discourses, as well as the deployments of power such sensibilities serve to authorize. Asad shows that the commitment to prevent unnecessary pain and suffering that has served to define a modernist moral outlook does not give rise to a project aiming at their elimination, but rather to one geared to their regulation in accord with certain ideas of utility and proportionality. Thus the use of violence against domestic populations and foreign adversaries remains a key element of modern political technique but, exercised in accord with a utilitarian rationality, such practices frequently pass below the threshold of moral thematization and response. As elsewhere in his work, the argument here seeks to uncover the forms of violence authorized by the modern project of humanizing the world, of forcibly (and often violently) transforming both Western and non-Western societies on the basis of what are taken to be universal standards of acceptable and unacceptable suffering.

In attempting to open up a space for assessing the assumptions underlying such standards, Asad intersperses his analysis with examples of the way pain has been conceived of and lived in different cultural and historical sites. The sense of tradition that begins to emerge here (particularly in the chapter "Thinking about Agency and Pain") suggests a collection of temporally structured techniques by which human beings adjust to such existential bodily conditions, understood simultaneously as sources of friction on human designs and enabling instruments for distinct human goals. Pain and other dimensions of corporeality acquire their significance not only through the distinct cultural meanings assigned to them but also, and more importantly, by the economies of action they make possible: "What a subject experiences as painful, and how, are not simply mediated culturally and physically, *they are themselves modes of living a relationship*. The ability to live such relationships over time transforms pain from a passive experience into an active one, and thus defines one of the ways of living sanely in the world."[24] Bodies—disciplined, suffered, scrutinized, and dif-

ferentially invested with significance—constitute a structuring condition for action and moral agency. This approach diverges both from phenomenology, where cultural practices are analyzed in relation to a set of innate bodily orientations, and from an understanding of the body as a surface upon which culture inscribes different meanings. For Asad, language and the body are distinct, co-constituent elements of human life, whose complex imbrications cannot be reduced a priori to any structure of determinations but must be examined in their diversity and cultural specificity.

Finally, Asad's contribution to the theorization and analysis of contemporary Islam has been profound. Both in the above-mentioned article, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," and elsewhere in his writings, he has articulated a challenge to anthropologists and other scholars of Islam that remains an ineluctable point of reference for scholarship in the field. His interventions in this arena have been primarily through an engagement with a variety of anthropological and historical writings on Islam, an engagement in which he has sought to genealogically unpack many of the key concepts used in the description of Muslim societies. Here, as elsewhere in his work, Asad remains attentive not only to the work performed by such concepts within a text's analytical apparatus but also, and more importantly, to their historical embeddedness within modern forms of power, their authorizing function within projects of destruction and remaking. In an essay addressing the impact of secularizing reform in modern Egypt, for example, he explores how modern legal, moral, and political vocabularies created new spaces of (secular) action but were also inflected by sensibilities and embodied aptitudes rooted in traditions of Islam.[25] Key to this exploration is an argument that the secular be approached not simply in terms of the doctrinal separation of religious and political authority, but as a concept that has brought together sensibilities, knowledges, and behaviors in new and distinct ways.

In a set of more overtly political writings, Asad has applied his style of critical analysis to an examination of contemporary European discourse on the status of Muslim minorities in Europe. Key to this work has been an investigation of the way the categories of secular liberal society—from the idea of toleration to the discourses of assimilation and integration—constitute a barrier to the possibility of Muslims (and particularly those Muslims who view their religion as important to their politics) being accepted into and accommodated by the nations of Europe.

The essays comprising this volume take up diverse aspects of this remarkable body of work. While the specific themes and arguments addressed by the individual contributors range widely, the collection of essays cohere in a shared orientation of both critical engagement and productive extension. It is important to note that this is not a Festschrift, nor a celebratory farewell, but a series of engagements with a thinker whose work is in full spate but which deserves to be far better known and understood.