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Critical Response

I

A Response to Talal Asad's "Reflections on Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism"

Aamir R. Mufti

As far back as *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad's work has pioneered a turn in anthropology, which was historically a knowledge practice of the "advanced" industrialized world concerned with "primitive" societies, towards a consideration of aspects of culture and society in the West itself. In recent years, this turn has become even more pronounced, so that, for instance, even his book of lectures on jihadist suicide bombing is really a study of liberal Western discourse on suicide bombing and contemporary terrorism more broadly.¹ But this turn has not taken the form of applying preexisting anthropological methods to industrialized societies, as was the case with what was once called urban anthropology. In Asad's case, the method of this turn has largely taken the form of what, following Michel Foucault, he has called genealogy, a critical-historical uncovering of concealed meanings and functions in individual concepts and motifs that are in Asad's view indispensable to modern and liberal ways of thinking, feeling, and being.

For readers acquainted with the concerns, method, and style of Asad's writings, the relationship his essay "Reflections On Violence, Law, and Humanitarianism" (*Critical Inquiry* 41 [Winter 2015]: 390–427) establishes

1. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993); *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif., 2003); and *On Suicide Bombing* (New York, 2007).

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between humanitarianism and law and violence delivers in familiar ways: his distinct version of genealogy, the notion of a monolithic “liberal” sociocultural and political order that appears to be interchangeable with a cultural-civilizational idea of the modern West and with modernity as such, and a relentless pursuit of what he calls stories, supposedly dominant or even hegemonic accounts of historical transformations that seem to legitimate this order in various ways. In fact liberalism (or the West) appears mostly as a story or rather a compilation of stories, all of them essentially equivalent to each other even though focused on different objects or, in narratological terms, characters. Alternatively, they could all be seen as versions of a broader master story of a historical nature.

The essay is thick with phrases and sentences that insinuate the existence of such stories. To cite just a few examples from a few paragraphs near the beginning of the essay: “the story of the birth of universal benevolence”; “the assumption in narratives about the elimination of human suffering”; “the conditions of benevolence are more complicated than this story would suggest”; “so we are often told”; “this is one familiar account”; “so there is a more complicated story”; and “the story of humanism” (pp. 391, 392, 395, 397). Specifically, we might say that these stories—a myriad of smaller and more discreet stories that are in essence instantiations of this single overarching story—concern the very emergence of this liberalism, or liberalism as the modern West, in the transformation of some traditional order, often unspecified. In this picture, the liberal order (or the West) appears as a series of stories about its own emergence. Or, at the very least, what seems to be called for in a critical analysis of the liberal order is the exposing of these stories *as* stories. But in the end Asad seems ambivalent about whether the task is to expose the storytelling as such or to tell *better* stories.

It is a far ranging and hugely ambitious essay, pointing in numerous directions that have had to be left unpursued given its scope as an essay, and the implications of various aspects of its arguments have to be mostly surmised, so these remarks must of necessity be of a certain provisional and even merely interrogatory nature. And a more comprehensive assessment of Asad’s complex and enormously influential work would not be possible in the space I have been allotted here. Horror, benevolence, suffering, humanitarianism, sympathy, legitimate and illegitimate violence,

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barbarism and civilization, military intervention, just and unjust wars, sovereignty, humanism, and the human (being)—these are some (though by no means all) of the notions, themes, memes, and “narratemes” among which the essay moves. The core concern seems to be a critique of humanitarianism or, to be more precise, humanitarianism as charter for military intervention, but the critique also takes in what it thus views as a consequently contaminated concept of humanity as such. But here too we sense an ambivalence. The essay seems to vacillate between the urge to expose the *hypocrisy* or mendacity of power in its use of humanitarianism as charter for invasion and domination, a critique that might still leave a (liberal) concept of the human intact, and a drive to expose a deeper, constitutive, and unredeemable involvement of the very concept of the human (and in particular, the suffering human) in the violence of geopolitical power. Repeatedly, though not consistently, Asad’s essay reaches for this sense of a deeper crisis of the modern concept of the human and its wider constellation rather than its (cynical, partial, and hypocritical) manipulation by power. But whether or not he subscribes to any version of the posthuman paradigm currently in vogue remains utterly unclear.

These “narratives” concerning a benevolent and humanitarian modernity are viewed by Asad, needless to say, as *progress* stories, marking the emergence and development of the liberal order and the types of social life and social relationships it makes possible as representing a series of distinct and decisive improvements upon the forms that preceded them or that lie (still) outside their purview, improvements both in a formal and a moral sense. But what could lie outside the scope of so encompassing a formation as Asad’s liberal order, which, as I have noted, seems often to be equivalent to and coextensive with modernity as such? This, Asad tells us, is the space of “savages,” “barbarians,” and “primitives.” For “moderns,” as he calls them, believe that, unlike themselves, “barbarians . . . are strictly speaking not *persons* on whom legal or moral responsibility can be affixed” (p. 413; my emphasis). This is the universe of (human?) beings who, for one reason or another, have not internalized this corpus of (liberal, modern, Western) stories, for whom they have not become transparent accounts of the state of the world. And in his writings (as in this essay) Asad typically goes to the Islamic world—political Islamism, Saudi structures of governance, “traditional” gender relations in Afghanistan, even suicide bombing—for his exempla of liberalism’s others. And if some practice can be characterized as “traditional,” that is, sanctioned by a recognizable form of authority indigenous to the society in question, then it is to be understood as by definition outside the purview of liberalism (as progress stories), and consequently beyond the scope of (“our”) critique. This appears to be the

traditional form of anthropological relativism, which arose with the establishment of the modern discipline early in the previous century in the work of such figures as Franz Boas, Alfred Kroeber, Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard—Asad was a student of the latter—even as it has focused on the processes of colonial domination that colonial anthropological practices had typically bracketed off or made invisible.

In order to understand this aspect of Asad's project somewhat better, let us look more closely at one brief passage:

The new ideal of humanitarianism applies in principle not simply to physical protection against massacres but to any violation of human life considered broadly as a sacred essence, as the subject of a human right. It can therefore apply to the traditional status of women in occupied Afghanistan that is perceived as a violation of women's human rights, and the military presence of NATO in Afghanistan is, in part, justified as an attempt to restore them. [P. 409]

Quite correctly, Asad seeks to highlight the ease with which the language of women's rights in the global North could be used to justify the unleashing of a massive war in Afghanistan. What Asad does not note is the interesting fact that this motif of saving Muslim women did not carry the same weight in the conduct of the war in Iraq, perhaps because the Baathist regime it toppled was itself associated with the not insignificant transformation of women's place in society, for instance, by the promotion of education. The attempts of variously progressive and secular (including, of course, communist) governments to achieve the same goals in Afghanistan could, on the contrary, be completely erased from public memory, overwhelmed, in the traumatized post-9/11 imagination in the US in particular, by the equation of the practices sanctioned by the Taliban worldview with Afghan society as a whole under the sign of Islam as such. In any case, Asad gestures here towards a real problem for the feminist movement in our times in both the North and the global periphery, as its language becomes so easily available to the humanitarian claims of imperial violence. And this is of course now an old question, thoroughly explored for instance by Indian feminist scholars in studies of the *sati* or widow self-immolation debates in the British Empire. "White men [are] saving brown women from brown men"²: this well-known formula of Gayatri Spivak's—which describes a sort of primal scene of the constitution of the imperial subject precisely in

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York, 2010), p. 269.

the involvement of humanitarianism in colonial (race and gender) relations—would thus perhaps have to be rendered in the contemporary moment as “Euro-American (that is, ‘white’ and ‘Judeo-Christian’) men are saving Muslim women from Muslim men,” a sign, if we need another at this late stage, of the racialization of Islam in our times.³

But we would be remiss not to ask what exactly the epistemological status of “women in occupied Afghanistan” is in Asad’s passage, difficult though it is to determine with any degree of certainty due to its cursory appearance. What does it mean to relegate the highly contentious and violent politics of gender in Afghan society, which have even been subjected to cold war rivalries in recent decades, to the realm of the “traditional” as such? Would such a framework allow us to perceive “gender” as marking a cleavage in Afghan society? It is hard to see what place there could be in such an analysis for an Afghan feminist politics, let alone for forms of solidarity with it from other social locations around the world. Could it be possible that this collective constitutes as much of an object/other for it (though differently so) as it is for the discourse of (liberal) humanitarianism? Throughout the essay, as in much of Asad’s writing, one gets the sense that there are only these two sociocultural realities (and modes of thinking) in the world: the liberal-secular-modern (which is imperialist in its worldly career) and those “traditional” forms that have somehow escaped its hold. A mode of analysis of Afghan society and culture that is as scrupulous in its critique of the logics of imperial violence as in its approach to institutionalized (and traditionalized) forms of violence against women in Afghan society seems inconceivable in these terms. Asad’s essay thus perhaps contains the gesture that elsewhere I have called *ethnographic philanthropy*. I view the ethnographic mode as widely disseminated and practiced in the contemporary world for the representation (of the life-world) of the (socially distant) other *that exempts the other from the demand for self-critique* that is constitutive of the self.⁴ This is a quintessentially *liberal* gesture in the global North, elaborated in detail at the threshold of the postcolonial era by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*.⁵

Is the world of Islam and Muslims, to say nothing of political Islamism in particular, really so far removed from the world Asad defines for its

3. The classic work is Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley, 1998). Joseph A. Massad has brought the language of gay rights within the purview of this critique in his important study, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago, 2007).

4. For a more detailed discussion, see Aamir R. Mufti, “Why I Am Not a Postsecularist,” *Boundary 2* 40 (Spring 2013): 7–19.

5. See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Weightman and Doreen Weightman (New York, 1974).

“liberal” features that it has no room or discursive need for precisely the notion of the human and of human suffering that he relegates exclusively to the latter? Michael Walzer and his ilk are not the only theorists of legitimate violence and just war; so are Osama Bin Laden and his ilk. One classic work in this context is *Al-Jihād fī al-Islām* (Jihad in Islam, 1930) by Abulala Maududi (Abū al-A‘lā Maudūdī), the Indian (and later Pakistani) founder of the first political Islamist organization in the world. It is widely drawn upon, referred to, and extracted from in the widespread contemporary discussion in the Muslim world of the right to respond to imperial violence, in part reaching the contemporary discussion through Maududi’s appropriation by the early thinkers of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, especially Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. Maududi’s work, written at the age of twenty-three, is a remarkable historical and comparative study, juxtaposing the Islamic doctrines on just war (that is, jihad) with those in Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, and Christian sources and delineating their emergence out of extant practices in Byzantium and Persia. In outlining the distinctly Islamic doctrines that produce a concept of jihad, Maududi has no problem with comparing these to the discourse on just war in other religious and civilizational traditions. And Bin Laden routinely called for a war crimes trial of Kofi Annan for his subservience to the Clinton White House in going along with the brutal sanctions regime against Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, which created a humanitarian crisis in that country on a catastrophic scale. My point here is not that we are all moderns in the same way or that the continuous expansion of the bourgeois order does not take place in an uneven and asymmetrical manner. On the contrary; I am largely convinced, for instance, by Ranajit Guha’s refashioning of the traditional Marxist notion, which originated with Leon Trotsky, of the uneven and combined development of capital. But can we really view the social distance between the worlds inhabited by Muslims today and the worlds of the “moderns” with the notions of cultural relativism once applied by colonial anthropologists to small-scale societies in their supposed isolation from world historical forces?

An invariant feature of varieties of antimodernism, however divergent their contents, is a tendency to make equivalent all of modernity’s others or at least equidistant from the latter. This takes an extreme form in the varieties of so-called perennialist thinking that were in vogue in the early decades of the twentieth century from France and Italy to India and Ceylon.⁶ But it can also be at work to varying degrees in many of the postsecu-

6. See, for instance, Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2004), which traces strains of

larist tendencies in the contemporary humanistic disciplines. But perhaps a final question we might direct at Asad's essay and discourse more broadly concerns its *own* reliance on the liberal and modern discourse it seems to disavow and disown. Another symptomatic passage will be of help here: "it is in the name of humanity that the modern project of humanitarianism intervenes in the lives of other beings to protect, help, or improve them" (p. 395). Thus in his critique of the concept of the human for its inherent complicity in the humanitarian violence of imperialism, Asad himself seems to need a concept of the human being, but seemingly embarrassed by this need, the sentence itself makes this (unavoidable) "human" invisible, leaving just "beings." And if, despite all his skepticism in this regard, he nevertheless needs a (bracketed and half-concealed) concept of the human, could a similarly concealed concept of humanitarianism be at work here as well? For Asad's project seems to imply a call to reduce the suffering of those who are made to suffer in the name of having their suffering reduced. And if this is the case with Asad's critique with respect to the human, then what in turn is its relation to the "virtue" of "universal benevolence" he attributes to those whom he calls "modern" (p. 391)? In my view, Asad's discourse, try as it might to disavow it, is based upon precisely this decidedly liberal gesture of benevolence toward the other, taking here the form of ethnographic philanthropy, that is, absolving the other—Muslims, Islam, Afghan society—of precisely the demand for self-critique that it directs at the self (namely, Western society).

perennialism in a range of thinkers and locales across the global map of the early twentieth century.