Searching for the Legitimate Secular
Löwith, Blumenberg, Asad

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Max Weber opens *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* with the kind of question that we might pause at or pass over, but which goes the heart of postcolonial anxieties that have taken on fresh urgency a hundred years after he wrote it.

A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having universal significance and value.¹

Today, as North Atlantic states (and the United States most enthusiastically) have taken on the project of exporting political principles throughout the world, both passively through international universities and violently through preemptive warfare, Weber’s comparative question mixed with self-aware arrogance certainly asks of us how we got the right. Looking out over a world divided between former colonies and former colonizers, connected by lines of communication opened by academic, economic, and political colonial institutions, we at least have an opportunity to reflect on the effect of similar exportation in the past. At the same time, colony has always been a mirror for colonizer. In the colony, consequently, we can begin to test and discover what of ours is, as Weber puts it, is of “universal significance” and what is only particular.

High on the list of Western exports lately is the modern state and its accompanying understanding of social-political progress,² esteem for science, along with the concept of and separation from “religion.” Today it is are phrased against the backdrop of Islamist terrorism.

Even while modernity itself has been marked and packaged for export, theoretical discussions

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² In this essay I am a little sloppy with terms like modernity, progress, secularization, secular, secularism, etc. Each other authors I deal with understands these a little differently, though all, in all, share a family resemblance, and it is this family, broadly, that I refer to with such terms.
about what it actually is have been mainly limited to its North Atlantic provenance and meaning
in that context. Peter Berger and José Casanova both limited their studies self-consciously to the
Christian (or post-Christian) world. In Germany, Karl Löwith (Meaning in History) and Hans
Blumenberg (The Legitimacy of the Modern Age), whose dispute is the focus of this essay, did
the same. Even Blumenberg, trying to assert the modernity’s “legitimate” independence from
Christendom, assumes that “the modern age is unthinkable without the Christianity that went
before it.”³ If this is true, what does it mean when the modern secular is talked about in India⁴ or
Egypt?

It is in these terms that Talal Asad’s work becomes a significant contribution to the
secularization discussion, if only because at times he bothers to look beyond the North Atlantic
and theorize accordingly. Asad agrees that modernity has a distinctive pedigree in the discontents
of Christendom while also observing the occurrence of things much like it, even which take the
same name, in places elsewhere.

Characteristically, Blumenberg phrases the question of modernity (and his dispute with
Löwith) in an elusive yet intriguing way, with the language of legitimacy. Though the term is
Blumeberg’s he is describing a criterion established by Löwith. Through his genealogy of ideas,
Löwith argues that the critical idea of modern progress is a “fulfillment” of the Christian
eschatological pattern, with Hegel’s philosophy of history as its critical vehicle.⁵ The break from
Christianity that modernity claims to be has actually never happened. As Blumenberg describes


⁴ See Rajeev Bhargava (ed.), Secularism and Its Critics, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998; published in
India, featuring Indian and Western authors.

Löwith’s position, “the modern age is supposed to be legitimized precisely as the product of secularization.”

The present state of modernity, Löwith concludes, is an illegitimate one. Limiting the possible sources of modern thinking to Christianity and ancient Greece, he concludes that it is faithful to neither. Writing within a decade of the fall of Nazism, he finds that modern history has seen “evils which are the fruit of too much good will and of a mistaken Christianity that confounds the fundamental distinction between redemptive events and profane happenings.”

Modernity as such is a faulty derivation built on false consciousness, an unstable tension between Christian eschatology and Hellenic rationality that needs to recognize the real persistence of the Christian age. Löwith’s program, in Blumenberg’s terms: the cultural legitimacy of the secular West depends on being attentive to this debt. The question of secular elsewheres, though, remains unanswered.

Framed as a competing history of ideas, Blumenberg in effect describes Löwith’s search for legitimacy and undermines it. The account he gives for modernity’s emergence traces the rise of scientific ways of knowing, with particular interest in Copernican astronomy. His thrust is that secular progress is a paradigm wholly different from Christian eschatology, a “new quality of consciousness” grounded in historical “self-assertion” by people and the experience of technology. People make history, not God or the Hegelian, providential Geist. Secular progress is autonomous onto itself in a way Christian eschatology never could be.

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6 Blumenberg, 29.
7 Löwith, 203.
8 Blumenberg, 138-139.
The idea of progress is precisely not a mere watered-down form of judgment or revolution; it is rather the continuous self-justification of the present, by means of the future that it gives itself, before the past, with which it compares itself.9

The consequence of Blumenberg’s *Legitimacy* is the undoing of the problem of legitimacy as Löwith had phrased it. He shows that modernity, by its nature, doesn’t bother to look for legitimacy outside of itself, either to transcendent God or the theologies that preceded it.

Blumenberg’s argument opens the door for work like Talal Asad’s. Though much of his writing on the secular does focus on its emergence as a concept in the Christian world, he adds to it the dimension of worlds beyond it. Just as Blumenberg saw the sources of science in Galileo’s discovery of “the ‘plurality’ of worlds,”10 Asad recognizes that even North Atlantic secularization occurred in interaction with (and reaction against) a plurality of cultures, both within the secularizing states and without. All those cultures, too, were somehow affected, and they can develop features of the secular that are justified in terms far-removed from Christianity. Asad, in part, confirms Blumenberg.

The all important issue of a “break” between modernity and medieval Christendom that concerns Löwith and Blumenberg so much does not come to a clear answer for Asad. The secular “is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it … nor a simple break from it.”11 This ambiguity points to the character of the “secular” for Asad, and of “religion,” for that matter. Both are not essential realities but discourses that have emerged in history, particularly in

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9 Ibid., 32.

10 Ibid., 373.

11 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, 2003), 25. In *Genealogies of Religion*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993), 19, he adopts a narrative of Löwith combined with Blumenberg, though not Löwith’s conclusions about continuity: “It was in Europe's eighteenth century that the older, Christian attitudes toward historical time (salvational expectation) were combined with the newer, secular practices (rational prediction) to give us our modern idea of progress.”
reference to the categories of citizenship in the modern state. Rather than offering legitimacy, history deconstructs them.

The final chapter of *Formations of the Secular* is a study of legal reform in 19th and 20th century Egypt. He chronicles the adaptation of European legal systems by the Egyptian state in its process of nation-building and self-conscious secularizing. The content of these reforms was clearly of North Atlantic provenance—Arabic translations of the Napoleonic Code formed much of their basis. Colonizing threats, as well as partnerships, contributed to their urgency. At the same time, though, Egyptian scholars and politicians justified modernizing reforms in terms of Islamic law and historical precedent, much the same as Löwith (and Harvey Cox et al.) justify them in terms of a Christian immanent fulfillment. By putting it in these terms, he observes, they manipulate the meaning and telos of the modern altogether.

Asad would take Blumenberg’s undermining of the legitimacy discourse a step further. Repeatedly, he talks about the rise of the secular in a circuitous way, in terms of its social structural preconditions and consequences: “I tried to look at aspects of shari’a reform as both the precondition and the consequence of secular processes of power.” Though there is something frustrating about the irresolution in this language, I find that it has a point. In the cross-cultural context, where terms mean many things and categories don’t map easily, modernity may and should be said to exist, but we cannot be quite sure what it means. It discovers itself. The Germans, working in a shared and bounded conversation, could talk about justification and legitimacy in one way, but postcolonial Egypt had to do it differently. If the

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13 Asad, *Formations*, 213, 237.

14 Ibid., 256.
Germans were to look outside of their own context, or to discover the “plurality of [narrative-making] worlds” within it, the appeal of a monolithic narrative would break down.

I can suggest two contributions that this reading of Asad ultimately makes to the discussion between Löwith and Blumenberg. First, legitimacy of modernity either through history or self-justification is not meaningful in a cross-cultural context. There are too many competing narratives. The second follows on the first: because modernity is so multifarious, it cannot be usefully identified as a political end in itself. Instead, more specific elements within it are far more meaningful to talk about. We can recall, for instance, José Casanova’s useful division of secularization theory between decline, privatization, and differentiation.15 Asad for instance, though he is critical of Casanova, recognizes this (as we should) to be “an obvious advance in the debate.”16 Cross-culturally, we need to be as specific as possible.

I mean this reading finally to reflect on political discourse in the age of unilateral “nation-building” efforts and ideological exportation. “Secularization,” as we think we know it, belongs to the collection of processes that some North Atlantic governments have in mind for the developing world. In such terms, this is a mistake. We can offer our documents, our principles, and even our particular legitimizations of them. But we can’t expect the result to look like us or come about as we have. Where it has occurred, secularization has consisted of numerous sub-processes in different countries and communities. One legitimacy will not be another’s.

Secularization is a narrative, a story, and even if elements of it might have “universal

15 José Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World (University of Chicago Press, 1994). See also the exchange between Casanova and Asad in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind (eds.), Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors (Stanford, 2006).

significance” of some kind, every people has a right and responsibility to make their own story. We can’t make it for them.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{17} Incidentally, Asad’s discussion on the anthropology of religion in the Introduction to \textit{Genealogies} centers around the question of history-making and agency.