

# Critique as Care

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Saba Mahmood begins the acknowledgments in *Politics of Piety* by thanking her mentors and teachers. Talal Asad's thinking, she writes, permeates "practically every page of this book: there is no greater gift that a scholar can bestow. . . . If I am successful in re-creating even a modicum of the acumen and courage that Talal's work represents, I will be happy." Jane Collier, she continues, "has extended to me both her intellect and her labor through practically every phase of this project. . . . This is a debt that I can never hope to repay except perhaps by extending to my own students the same generosity that Jane has offered me."<sup>1</sup> Rereading these words now, I am struck by how what Saba valued in her mentors mirrored her own life as a scholar and teacher, how her work exemplified both incredible acumen and uncommon courage, how she extended an extraordinary generosity to her students, how much her thinking permeates our own.

For as much as she was a brilliant scholar, Saba was an equally brilliant teacher, and in writing this essay, I was moved to read what some of her students had to say about her in their own acknowledgments. Noah Salomon calls Saba "both a loyal supporter and an unfailing critic throughout [his] academic career."<sup>2</sup> Michael Allan writes that Saba "provided [him] a generous form of interlocution at once compassionate and critical."<sup>3</sup> Their words echo my own: "her intellectual rigor," I write, and by that I meant her unwavering critique, was "consistently matched by her care for me."<sup>4</sup> It is unsurprising that we all invoke critique: Saba was a notoriously critical reader and advisor. Equally unsurprising is that we also invoke support, compassion, and care: Saba took remarkably good care of us, not just as scholars, but also as people. She counseled me in matters professional and personal, delighted in my successes, reassured me in my moments of sadness and fear. Indeed, though as an anxious graduate student it took me years to realize this, for Saba, critique was a form of care, perhaps the highest, most ethical form of care. And much of her work

as a teacher involved cultivating—through the practice of critique as care—that same critical-caring sensibility in her students.

With this notion of critique as care, I am pushing against a distinction between critique and care that I notice hardening in how my colleagues and graduate students approach anthropology, a distinction inspired by Bruno Latour's essay "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" There, Latour distinguishes between the ostensibly haughty, self-satisfied work of critique that "has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies,"<sup>5</sup> and a different kind of work "whose import. . . will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care."<sup>6</sup> In this new dispensation, critique entails denunciation, destruction, and the foreclosure of livable futures; what we need instead, we are told, especially as the planet hurtles toward all kinds of species extinctions, is an ethics and politics of care.<sup>7</sup>

Saba refused this ungenerous understanding of critique. For her, critique was a practice of care for others and for the world. Critique entailed a disciplined commitment to her students. In rereading *Politics of Piety*, I am struck by how much pedagogy as an ethical practice—a key theme in the book—was central to the relationships Saba cultivated with her students, and to the relationship we cultivated with her (and with ourselves). One passage in particular stands out: "We might consider the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the often painful regime of disciplinary practice, as well as to hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability—the requisite agency—to play the instrument with mastery."<sup>8</sup> I do not mean to posit an equivalence between the mosque movement participants and Saba's students. After all, Saba was adamant about the importance of specificity in thinking through ethics and subjects. Still, the passage resonates with me. It does so because of how carefully Saba approached her role as a teacher. She had a very particular style: rigorous, demanding, commanding, and fully engaged. She never turned off, and she didn't let you, either. Critique was therefore both her own practice as a teacher and scholar and the modality through which she disciplined us and, in so doing, enabled us to become teachers and scholars in our own right, to practice critique as care for others and for the world.

If for Saba pedagogy was a relationship and an ethical practice of care for others, it made learning an ethical practice of care for the self, since "the care of the self . . . implies a relationship with the other insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you."<sup>9</sup> Saba critically engaged with our work and our thinking, insisting on humility and uncertainty in our approach to the world. For her, as for Foucault, critique was "a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our surest ways of knowing," "expos[ing] the limits of [our] epistemological horizon [and] making the contours of the horizon appear, as it were, for the first time."<sup>10</sup> Thus to work with Saba was to undertake a process of self-transformation as we

grasped for those horizons and tried to see and hear and know the world otherwise. By constantly questioning our analysis, Saba trained us always to go beyond initial assumptions and narratives offered by anthropological and social theory that take the ground of the secular as a given. As her teachers taught her, she taught us “to stay with a problem, to dwell on its multiple complexities, to push against one’s own inadequacies of comprehension, and, moreover, to savor the slow process of discovery.”<sup>11</sup> And in so doing, in destabilizing the world in which we lived, in training us to think critically about everything, and then to think some more, she enabled us to tell new stories about the world and how we might live in it more carefully and generously.<sup>12</sup>

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If critique as care means subjecting our ideas, assumptions, and commitments about the world to constant scrutiny, if it means making us more open to others and less certain of ourselves, then Saba modeled the way. The preface to *Politics of Piety* is remarkable for the deeply personal story Saba tells of her own intellectual and political undoing as a result of her fieldwork with pious Muslim women in Cairo, Egypt. She writes of the “profound sense of dissatisfaction” she feels about her ability, as well as the ability of those secular leftist progressives she has “shared a long trajectory of political struggle with, to understand how . . . the language of Islam has come to apprehend the aspirations of so many people around the Muslim world.” “This self-questioning,” she continues, does not mean she has stopped struggling against injustice, but it does mean “that a certain amount of self-scrutiny and skepticism is essential regarding the certainty of [her] own political commitments, when trying to understand the lives of others who do not necessarily share these commitments.”<sup>13</sup> This approach to the mosque movement is neither an apologetics nor an act of self-assured charity; it is an ethics of critique as care, an ethics that requires one to consistently parochialize one’s own analytical and political certitudes, even those certitudes that have “provided the bedrock of [one’s] personal existence.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Saba engaged with and was taken up by multiple fields, this approach strikes me as fundamentally anthropological. It is fieldwork that destabilizes the bedrock of Saba’s personal existence: “Enmeshed within the thick texture of the lives of the mosque participants, women whose practices I had found objectionable, to put it mildly, at the outset of my fieldwork,” previous political and intellectual certainties “came to dissolve before my eyes.”<sup>15</sup> Anthropology is often understood as a practice of translation, but translation here does not simply make strange worlds familiar, in a process Asad calls domestication. Rather, according to Asad, “in translation, we ought to be bringing things into our language even though they cause a *scandal*. Now, one can respond to scandal in two ways: either one can throw

out the offending idea or one can think about what it is that produces the horror” and, in so doing, “rethink some of our own traditional categories and concepts.”<sup>16</sup> For Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, following Walter Benjamin, “translation is always a betrayal. . . . Good translation succeeds at allowing foreign concepts to deform and subvert the conceptual apparatus of the translator.”<sup>17</sup> Saba explicitly takes up the matter of translation in *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*: anthropology, she writes there, entails not so much “understanding” an other but, instead, “juxtaposing the constitutive concepts and practices of one form of life against [those of] another in order to ask a different set of questions, to decenter and rethink the normative frameworks by which we have come to apprehend life.”<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, destabilizing and decentering are not ends in themselves; rather, they are premised on the historico-political fact of unequal languages,<sup>19</sup> on the asymmetrical structure of anthropology as a discipline, and on its place within what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls the broader geography of management and imagination that is the West.<sup>20</sup> Thus the intellectual and political undoing that motivates Saba’s critical project is not a solipsistic, self-contained ethics. Rather, as Saba writes in the epilogue to *Politics of Piety*, it is grounded in the historico-political context in which we live, in which “North Atlantic geopolitical interests. . . have long made [the Middle East] a primary site for the exercise of Western power, and thus for the deployment of the secular-liberal discourses through which that power often operates.”<sup>21</sup> In this context, she asks, “Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that ‘unenlightened’ women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully comprehend the forms of life that I [as a secular-progressive feminist] want so passionately to remake?”<sup>22</sup> Critique here—both self-critique and the critique of the power and normativity of secularism—is a necessary practice of care for the world, and vital to any project for political justice.<sup>23</sup> And, presaging criticism of her work as too far removed from the grim realities of Egyptian secularists’ struggles against Islamism, she notes explicitly that she could not have done this work of critique—undertaken this “labor of thought”—had she “remained within the familiar grounds of Pakistan.”<sup>24</sup> However, given that she begins the book with Pakistan—“Even though this book is about Islamist politics in Egypt, its genesis owes to a set of puzzles I inherited from my involvement in progressive left politics in Pakistan”<sup>25</sup>—and given that she planned to return to Pakistan for her third book, one can safely assume that she would have welcomed a similar labor of thought, of destabilization, of critique, with regard to Pakistan, too.

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I do not know much about the Pakistan project, but, from other students’ memories of Saba’s final seminars, it concerned hope and futures.<sup>26</sup> This makes sense to me. For

Saba, her piercing critique of secularism was always in the service of hope, of care, of repair. As she writes in *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, “To critique a particular normative regime is not to reject or condemn it; rather, by analyzing its regulatory and productive dimensions, one only deprives it of innocence and neutrality so as to craft, perhaps, a different future.”<sup>27</sup> That “perhaps” is key: her critical analysis was not meant to posit, self-assuredly, a clear future, but to chip away at the present, to bring the glimmer of a different, more just, more livable world into view. Indeed, the final paragraph of that book, which comes after a relentless, piercing critique of political secularism and the impossible position in which it puts religious minorities, offers such a glimmer: “The ideal of interfaith equality might require not the bracketing of religious differences but their ethical thematization as a necessary risk when the conceptual and political resources of the state have proved inadequate to the challenge this ideal sets before us.”<sup>28</sup> Saba does not elaborate on what she means by ethical thematization, so I want to take a moment to try to work through the relationship between the sense of possibility that this last line evokes and her critical interrogation of secularism that comprised the bulk of her writing and thinking.

With the idea of ethical thematization, Samera Esmeir writes, Saba seems to suggest that the “juridico-political language of political secularism is not the only mode of thought available to communities who live in difference.”<sup>29</sup> This distinction between ethics and the juridico-political state returns us to a schema Saba identified in “Religious Reason and Secular Affect,” an essay on the Danish cartoons affair, and her concerns about “the costs entailed in turning to the law or the state to settle such a controversy.”<sup>30</sup> “For anyone interested in fostering greater understanding across lines of religious difference,” she continues, “it would be important to turn not so much to the law as to the thick texture and traditions of ethical and intersubjective norms that provide the substrate for legal arguments.”<sup>31</sup>

What is the relationship of secularism and secularity to these thick textures and traditions of ethical and intersubjective norms, to the ethical thematization of religious difference? As Esmeir notes, the final chapter of *Religious Difference* shows that “political secularism did not achieve the totality to which it aspires,” and that the “temporality of secularism does not only comprise the linear and deeply historicist temporalities of political secularism and secularity” but is also “joined by less thematized possibilities and struggles that do not belong to it, but offer a glimpse into other ways of living with difference.”<sup>32</sup> I would add to Esmeir’s reading that Saba also seems to suggest that secularity itself—as a substrate or ethos, distinct from political secularism—might enable the kind of ethical thematization of religious difference that Saba has in mind. On the penultimate page of *Religious Difference*, she writes: “Can secularity—as a substrate of ethical sensibilities, attitudes, and dispositions—provide the resources for a critical practice that does not privilege the agency of the state? What kind of productive relations might such a critical practice open up between religious majorities and minorities. . . ?”<sup>33</sup>

Earlier in the book, Saba distinguishes between political secularism, which pertains “to the modern state’s relationship to, and regulation of, religion,” and secularity, defined as “the set of concepts, norms, sensibilities, and dispositions that characterize secular societies and subjectivities.”<sup>34</sup> The book’s last two pages revisit that distinction and seem to open up a productive tension between those two phenomena. This distinction—and the tension—between political secularism and secularity is similar to one made by Talal Asad between “*democracy as a state system*” and “*democratic sensibility as an ethos* (whether ‘religious’ or ‘secular’).”<sup>35</sup> Asad contends that although democracy as a state system is “fundamentally *exclusive*,” a democratic ethos “tends toward greater *inclusivity*” and “involves the desire for mutual care, distress at the infliction of pain and indignity, [and] concern for truth more than for immutable subjective rights.”<sup>36</sup> Is Saba, then, positing the possibility of secularity as an ethos, not simply distinct from secularism as a legal and political system centered on the state, but also, at times, in tension with it? Might secularity provide a means—not the only one, certainly—toward the ethical thematization of religious difference, rather than its legal adjudication via the secular state that ostensibly transcends difference? I do not think there is a clear answer here. After all, her discussion of secularity in these terms is posed as a question: “*Can secularity—as a substrate of ethical sensibilities, attitudes, and dispositions—provide the resources for a critical practice that does not privilege the agency of the state?*”<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, I want to follow a footnote from *Religious Difference* in which Saba refers to an exchange between John Lardas Modern and Michael Warner that, she writes, “provides an insightful discussion of how secularity and political secularism are related.”<sup>38</sup> In that exchange, Modern contends that “secularity, political secularism, and ethical secularism swirl together in a seemingly unfathomable mix, which is to say at the level of the historical actor and historian alike,” and that, as a consequence, we must tack “back and forth between an appreciation for the excess of systems and the necessary work of systematization.”<sup>39</sup>

I may be misreading her, but I find Saba’s gesture toward ethical thematization in the final line of *Religious Difference* to be a gesture to excess, to that which swerves and weaves—or simply exists or endures—beyond the systemizing reach of secularism. I find it to be a gesture of possibility—and perhaps of possibility beyond our epistemological horizons—opened up by a critical understanding of secularism and secularity.<sup>40</sup> In his own remembrance of Saba, her student Basit Iqbal recalls reading Anthony Marra’s *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* for a seminar that she taught during the last year of her life. In a note to Iqbal about the novel, Saba writes: “I have never been so stunned by a piece of writing in quite the same way. It made me realize the paucity of social scientific/analytical writing and the immensity of the human relations we so inadequately gesture to.” The seminar, Iqbal continues, was about “how hope is constructed in time, through the very events that were

meant to jettison that hope, through the fabric of relationships that endure the disaster, without the lure of transcending the present. . . . She taught this in her last year; this is what I will remember.”<sup>41</sup>

I wish I could have taken that seminar with her, to fully grasp the trajectory of Saba’s thinking, of her scholarship, of her life. That sense of hope—of critique in the service of a livable future, of critique as care—was always present, but my sense is that it was able to emerge more fully after the critical work of *Politics of Piety* and *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* was done. And I imagine that the hope she conjured, the future she envisioned, was a modest one—“to craft, *perhaps*, a different future,”<sup>42</sup> as she put it—one that entailed risk, but a “necessary risk” in the face of what the world currently holds, namely: “mass catastrophic death.”<sup>43</sup> And yet, while I wish I could have learned with her again during this new trajectory, I know that in many ways I will. Saba was, after all, a teacher. And I look forward to reading the work of the next generation of students whom she taught. I imagine that her thinking—critical, hopeful—will permeate theirs, as it does mine. There is no greater gift she could have bestowed on us.

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#### Notes

1. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xiii.
2. Salomon, *For Love of the Prophet*, xiv.
3. Allan, *In the Shadow*, viii.
4. Fernando, *Republic Unsettled*, vii.
5. Latour, “Why Has Critique,” 231.
6. Latour, “Why Has Critique,” 232.
7. María Puig de la Bellacasa is less willing than Latour to dismiss critique entirely, but her otherwise masterful *Matters of Care*, which closely engages with and builds on Latour’s work, does not do enough to destabilize his understanding of critique as opposed to care.
8. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 29.
9. Foucault, “Ethics,” 287.

10. Butler, "What Is Critique?" Together with Mahmood, Judith Butler, Talal Asad, and Wendy Brown, of course, take up the question of critique in depth in *Is Critique Secular?*
11. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xiii.
12. Thus, in *For Love of the Prophet*, Noah Salomon draws on his work in Sudan to think politics otherwise; in *Given to the Goddess*, Lucinda Ramberg reconsiders conventional notions of economic and sexual freedom and bondage; in *In the Shadow of World Literature*, Michael Allan provincializes what we mean by literature and reading; in *The Reckoning of Pluralism*, Kabir Tambar examines non-secular modes of historicizing; and in *Divorcing Traditions*, Katherine Lemons reassesses "religious" and "secular" law in postcolonial India. All of these works not only provincialize the grounding concepts and norms of secularity, but, in so doing, make room for other stories, other lives, to emerge as valuable to think and live.
13. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xi.
14. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xii.
15. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 198.
16. Scott, "Trouble of Thinking," 275; emphasis in original.
17. Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, 87.
18. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 23–24.
19. See Asad, "Concept of Cultural Translation."
20. See Trouillot, *Global Transformations*.
21. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 191.
22. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 197–98.
23. It's worth asking after the historico-political context of Latour's dismissal of critique. References—uncritical references—to 9/11 and Islamic terrorism abound in the very same essay in which Latour refers to critics as "dangerous extremists" and "critical barbarians" (Latour, "Why Has Critique," 227, 242). This in itself invites the kind of symptomatic reading Latour so disdains.
24. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, xii.
25. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, ix.
26. See Allan, "Reading with Saba"; Eldridge, "Saba Mahmood"; Iqbal, "Saba Mahmood"; and Odabaei, "Saba Mahmood."
27. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 21.
28. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 213.
29. Esmeir, "Equality Time."
30. Mahmood, "Religious Reason," 71. This schema seems to draw on Foucault's distinction between the subject of law and the subject of ethics. According to Foucault, "in the political thought of the nineteenth century—and perhaps one should go back even farther, to Rousseau and Hobbes—the political subject was conceived of essentially as a subject of law. . . . [I]t seems to me that contemporary political thought allows very little room for the question of the ethical subject." Foucault, "Ethics," 294. Later, Foucault writes: "If you try to analyze power not on the basis of freedom, strategies, and governmentality, but on the basis of the political institution, you can only conceive of the subject as a subject of law. . . . On the other hand, I believe that the concept of governmentality makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others—which constitutes the very stuff of ethics" (300). It could be fruitful to think about this passage in light of Saba's seeming distinction between secularity—which offers an ethical substrate of critical practice beyond the state—and political secularism.



31. Mahmood, "Religious Reason," 89.
32. Esmeir, "Equality Time."
33. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 212.
34. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 3.
35. Asad, "Thinking About Religious Belief," 56; emphasis in original.
36. Asad, "Thinking About Religious Belief," 56; emphasis in original.
37. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 212; emphasis added. It's also worth noting that for Asad, it is the political system that may undermine the ethos, not the other way around (as Saba seems to suggest): "My point is not to make an invidious comparison between sensibility and political systems, nor to insist that the two are finally incompatible. I simply ask whether the latter [democracy as a state system] undermines the former [democratic sensibility as an ethos]—and if it does, then to what extent?" (Asad, "Thinking About Religious Belief," 56). At the same time, his discussion concerns the way that the 2011 Egyptian revolution brought together "a variety of social elements—Muslims and Christians, Islamists and secular liberals, men and women, professionals and labor unionists" (55)—as a community held together by a democratic ethos. That is to say, that democratic ethos produced a politics un-beholden to and un-encompassed by the liberal-democratic nation-state and—at least temporarily—overcame it.
38. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 3n4. The exchange concerns Modern, *Secularism*.
39. Modern, "Confused Parchments."
40. Butler on Foucault is helpful once again: "The critic thus has a double task, to show how knowledge and power work to constitute a more or less systematic way of ordering the world with its own 'conditions of acceptability of a system,' but also 'to follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence.' So not only is it necessary to isolate and identify the peculiar nexus of power and knowledge that gives rise to the field of intelligible things, but also to track the way in which that field meets its breaking point, the moments of its discontinuities, the sites where it fails to constitute the intelligibility for which it stands." See Butler, "What Is Critique?"
41. Iqbal, "Saba Mahmood."
42. Mahmood, *Religious Difference*, 21.
43. Mahmood, "Humanism," 2.

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