

Secular Bodies, Affects, and Emotions

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The symposium „Secular Bodies, Affects, and Emotions“ aimed at investigating embodied and emotional dimensions of secularity by studying ideas, institutions and practices that are labeled as secular. For this purpose, scholars from sociology, anthropology, history and religious studies made their way to the charming venue of Schloss Hohentübingen. This enriching disciplinary heterogeneity was one reason for different approaches to the omnipresent term „secular“. The constant usage of metaphors like „the water we swim in“¹, „the air we breathe“ or „chunks of ice“ expressed how challenging it is to put „the secular“ into concrete words and reflected the fluidity of the term. The common thread was a concept of the secular as something in relation, mostly in distinction, to the religious. The participants met the challenge of defining their object of study by always taking seriously the self-descriptions and attitudes of their interlocutors – be they soccer-fans, humanist celebrants or museum visitors.²

Opening the first section, „Feelings in Urban Spaces“, MARIAN BURCHARDT (Göttingen) and MARGRIERA (Barcelona) argued that debates in Catalonia about the regulation of full-face covering in public urban spaces are beyond the religious-secular dichotomy. Instead they read the argumentation of defenders of the „burka ban“ as part of the construction of an ideal public space with ideal users and „normal“ emotions. This space is seen as threatened by the confrontation with face covering, nudity, prostitution or begging, which all could provoke emotions like shame or fear. The speakers presented interpretations of the full-face veil from proponents of

the ban. They range from a symbol for a radicalized Islam and a self-chosen imprisonment to exclusion from the moral community and antisocial behavior, since it hinders mutual identification and access to intentions, moods and desires. By contrast, only the publicly visible face shall qualify as part of a Western, civilized culture.

CLAUDIA LIEBELT (Bayreuth) showed how specific forms of aesthetic body modification in an atmosphere of political polarization can be interpreted as political, secularist statements. She identified neighborhoods in Istanbul as secular spaces, in which consumption patterns and bodily appearance became markers of the degree of modernity and belonging of women. From this perspective, practices like nail painting or tattooing are expressions of reclaiming control over the own body. Liebelt also revealed how an emerging pious middle class and the promotion of conservative chic can disturb the image of a two-part Istanbul population, divided in liberal-secular and conservative-patriarchal-pious.

JUDITH DEHAIL (Paris) stated that emotions play a central role in producing secular, objective knowledge and truth in museums – institutions regularly defined as secular by professionals. The transformation of objects, entering this secular space, includes the loss of their original function, while they become a symbol, representing a culture. Dehail characterized the museum visit by receptivity, attention, keeping distance, concentrated gazes and the willingness to follow a script. Joy, awe, transcendental pleasure, boredom and frustration could be accompanying feelings of this ritual. The presentation showed the limits of a clear distinction between sacred and secular spaces, while the disembodiment in museums was questioned with regard to multi-sensory and interactive exhibition concepts.

LIONEL OBADIA (Lyon) reopened the de-

¹ This statement in the public opening lecture by Charles Hirschkind was based on his article, „Is there a secular body?“ In: *Current Anthropology* 26/4 (2011), pp. 633-47, here 634.

² In order to live up to the substantial density of the many contributions, I will leave out a few presentations for this report, which is meant in no way as a judgement about the quality of those I left aside. There will be an edited volume with the articles, because the symposium was conceived as author's workshop.

bate of soccer as religion by discussing the problem of metaphor and the construction of reality. Sports as modern, secularized phenomenon can epitomize expressions of a diffuse, implicit or metaphorical sacredness. Obadia asked for continuities and differences between antique heroes, gods of polytheistic traditions and sportsmen as modern metaphorical holy figures. Popular culture designs professional footballers as gods or sacred idols and even misbehavior doesn't stop the veneration of the persons and their bodies by fans. On the empirical level the reality is, according to Obadia, more ambiguous and results in a compound of different forms of the sacred and the secular. The bodies of footballers are torn between secular sports, religious traditions and superstitious tendencies.

KATIE ASTON (London) opened the section on „Bodily Practices of Secularist Rituals“ by identifying personal choice and sincerity as main issues for designing and performing a humanist wedding. She reads the joint creation of the script by couple and celebrant as a practice in which secular and unique personhood is constructed. Aston pointed out ways in which secular assumptions become embodied in the ritual. She described the presence of the body as a gendered, loving, responsible one and as relational to kin. It became apparent that there is room for compromises in negotiating religion. The rejection of institutional religion doesn't exclude the accepting of religion as part of personal identity and cultural phenomenon. The discussion included hints to creative space within liberal Christian ceremonies as well as restrictive and traditional dimensions of humanist ones.

CARSTEN LICHAU (Berlin) investigated the Minute's Silence as collective commemoration of catastrophic events, which are decisive for national and transnational identities. While also referring to recent events, he concentrated on the decade following World War I and presented campaigns for establishing this ritual as well as descriptions from British and German commentators. The latter expressed feelings of unease, devotion, shame and mourning while adapting and sharing bodily and emotional gestures in public. The synchronization, immobilization and falling silent of bodies as well as the presence of

church and state lead to an ambiguous character with rational and irrational, disenchanting and enchanting dimensions. A new perspective was brought in by reflecting on the relevance of sacrifice.

CAROLIN KOSUCH's (Rome) comparison of cremation practices in 19th-century Italy and Germany was embedded in discourses about industrialization, hygiene and nation-building and asked for the impact of those developments on the spectrum of emotions connected to death. Clean, aesthetical ashes, produced by purifying fire, were idealized as honorable „modern“ corpses. Cremation was advertised by emphasizing manageable „civilized“ feelings of pure love, noble commemoration, deference and poetic devotion. In contrast, the laid out or buried body could produce disgust, fear and discomfort. While the Italian case was influenced mainly by the romantic setting of the Risorgimento, in the German context aspects of respectful treatment, distance and utilization had higher priority.

In his keynote lecture MATTHEW ENGELKE (London) gave vivid impressions of trainings for celebrants, provided by the British Humanist Association. Though members of the association rejected the idea of specialized knowledge, he asked how somebody can become a professional secularist in order to provide nonreligious funerals. Essential was the intellectualized approach in the tradition of enlightenment and the neutrality of the celebrants in their speeches as well as their bodily appearance, right down to the socks they wear. Being professionally secular was defined as simplicity and invisibility.

As part of the section „Rituals for the Nation“, GÉRALDINE MOSSIÈRE (Montréal) determined gender equity as the emotionally charged core of collective identity in the province of Quebec after the „Quiet Revolution“. For respondents who identified themselves as atheists, the status religions (allegedly) attribute to women served as a lens through which religions are evaluated. The experience of oppression during the „Grande Noirceur“ led to an extension of criticism towards religion in general. This didn't block, however, the appreciation of Catholicism as part of their cultural heritage with aesthetic and social values. Mossière depicts the rela-

tionship between Catholicism and her informants as an affective, paradoxical one, which contributes to a common secular identity.

REBEKKA HABERMAS (Göttingen) noted that she didn't find any use of the concept of „the secular“ in sources of 19th century Germany. Therefore, she took the back door to take a closer look at a hidden, but highly emotional debate about the secular, dealing with non-European religions, superstition, exorcism, witchcraft and spiritual practices. She identified secular people as male members of the middle class and of Caucasian race, who rarely articulated themselves as secular. Their secularity was closely linked to the modern and enlightened. It stood in opposition to religion, which was depicted as oppressive, dishonest, emotional, dangerous and violent. But in confrontations with religious and spiritual practices, the neutral secular man lost all his soberness and reacted with disgust, fear, aggression and cutting irony.

PAMELA KLASSEN (Toronto) spoke in the final keynote presentation about the psychological body in early experiments with telepathy, the contraceptive body as an issue of religious freedom and the not personalized dead body in the museum as three kinds of secular bodies, which are all transformed by science and technologies. She connected those with the sublime as an analytical category, referring to Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Edward Said and Charles Taylor. As a kind of negative pleasure and mental mastery, the sublime was presented as a self-reflective concept which implies a distance to suffering and therefore was a kind of a privilege.

In the final section, „Body Politic – Citizenship, State Power and the Body“, JENNIFER SELBY (St. John's) explored the effects of increasingly restrictive laws on marriage and migration in France that aimed to prevent forced and fake marriages. Muslims of Algerian origin striving for a transnational union saw and see themselves confronted with suspicion and expectations of performing visibly romantic love at the civil marriage ceremony. Selby's fieldwork revealed how governmental interventions change experiences of love and regulate sexual relations. Governmentality can shape sentiments of affinity and influence partner preferences, which mirror the ne-

gotiation of one's own, the families' and the state's interests (ethnic and religious affiliation, citizenship status).

SCHIRIN AMIR-MOAZAMI (Berlin) investigated German citizenship tests in order to identify techniques of power in these contact zones, which embody principles of the liberal nation-state. By quoting some questions in the tests, she gave the audience an idea of their suggestive, prejudiced and importunate character. They reflected an interpretation of constitutional principles which includes „appropriate“ understandings of sexuality, body practices, affects and sensibilities and the stylization of a secular lifestyle as the acceptable norm in contrast to allegedly typical Muslim forms of social life. The chosen tests present a practice which marks people as (not) ready for liberalism (i.e. secularism).

RUTH STREICHER (Berlin) gave insights into contemporary counterinsurgency campaigns of the Thai nation-state, which work with affective language for the purpose of creating a proper atmosphere and avoiding factors, which could be obstructive to national unity. Disciplinary practices of body and affect at a re-education camp for Malay-Muslim men include Muslim religion in order to bridge national divides as well as monastic Buddhist traditions and secure inner loyalty to the secular nation. Streicher expounded upon the racial and religious character of a poster used at the camp, showing the „new path“ for young, instable Muslim men as potentially endangered by indoctrination. In this context, Islam is marked as religious error and Buddhism as secular reason.

The workshop proved once more that there is a need for analyses of the secular which don't refer mainly to the division of church and state. It became obvious how important the particular national context is for constructing forms and practices of secularity but also for the perspectives of the scholars. In the course of the discussions, 'the secular' was negotiated at the very least as being a problematic category as 'the religious'. The distinction between both and the characterization of this relation as an ongoing process in the tradition of Hirschkind's article seem to be constitutive for the emerging field of secular studies. The symposium showed impressively how emo-

tionally charged discourses about the secular are, and the audience could get a better grasp of what the secular can be in its material and emotional dimensions. However, it can be assumed that there are no generally valid secular feelings or habits, even if there are specific rules for cultivating such. The religious can be as rational and sober as the secular can be irrational and emotional.

Conference overview:

Section I: Feelings in Urban Spaces

Marian Burchardt / Mar Griera: Seeing and Being Seen. Public Space and the Burka Debates in Spain

Claudia Liebelt: Secular Self-Fashioning Against „Islamization“. Aesthetic Body Modification and Beauty Work Among Secular Middle Class Women in Post-Gezi Istanbul

Judith Dehail: (E)Motionless Museum? The Institution Under the Scrutiny of Affects – The Case of the Musical Instrument Museum

Lionel Obadia: The „Body of Evidence“ and the Evidence of the Body. Interplay Between Secular and Sacred

Evening Lecture: Charles Hirschkind: Is There a Secular Body?

Section II: Bodily Practices of Secularist Rituals

Katie Aston: Formations of the Secular Wedding. Love and Romance in a Secular Age

Lois Lee: „Her Spark, and Not Her Body“. Nonreligious Experiences of Transcending the Secular Body

Karsten Lichau: Uneasy Bodies. Tracing Secular Emotional Practices in the Minute’s Silence

Carolin Kosuch: Secular Feelings About the Corpse? Examining Cremation in 19th Century Italy and Germany

Midday Lecture: Matthew Engelke: Expertly Secular. Humanist Ritual Training in England

Section III: Rituals for the Nation

Ami Kobayashi: (E)Motion for Nation-Building in Gymnasium in Berlin (1870-1915)

Gertrud Hüwelmeier: Venerating Ho Chi

Minh. Religious Practices in Socialist Vietnam and its Postsocialist Diasporas

Géraldine Mossière: Sacred in Secular Bodies. The Affective Construction of Collective Memory in Quebec

Evening lecture: Rebekka Habermas: Secularism in the Long 19th Century. Between the Global and the Local

Morning Lecture: Pamela Klassen: Secular Sublime. Thinking with Bodies

Section IV: Body Politic – Citizenship, State Power, and the Body

Jennifer A. Selby: „Love“ in a Time of Post-Coloniality. Secularizing Muslim French Bodies Through Marriage Legislation

Stacey Gutkowski: Cultivating the Reasonable hiloni Self. A Case of Secular Self-Fashioning?

Schirin Amir-Moazami: Producing Loyal Citizens. Citizenship and the Regulation of the ‘Muslim Question’ in Germany

Ruth Streicher: Unpacking ‘Religion’ in the Southern Thai Conflict: Practices of Body and Affect in Military Counterinsurgency

Final discussion

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