PoLAR|online

Volume 37, Issue 2: November 2014

ONLINE BOOK REVIEW

Samuli Schielke
Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt
Hussein Ali Agrama (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012)

One of the paradoxes of the currently flourishing anthropology of secularism in Middle Eastern and Muslim contexts is that it is mostly concerned with issues like Sharia based civil law or Muslim piety activists – and not, say, nightclubs or communists. The presence of religion, rather than its absence, in the nation-state is the issue at stake. Agrama embraces this paradox and dwells on the indeterminacies, antinomies, and twists of the unanswerable, self-reinforcing question about whether Egypt is a religious or a secular state. The nature of this question is well caught by the drawing by M.C. Escher displayed on the cover: a play with perception and perspective, creating an impossible whole from individually sound parts.

The outcome is a virtuous exercise of theoretical analysis that stands in an interesting, and, at times, tense relationship with a highly sensible ethnography. Agrama writes about the everyday work of civil courts, the *hisba* lawsuit raised against Abu Zayd in the 1990's, the state Fatwa Council where people can ask Muslim scholars for an answer to a problem, and the work of Islamist lawyers supporting detainees under the state of emergency of the late Mubarak era. These ethnographic case studies are the starting point for a much wider theoretical engagement with sovereignty, the state, and the secular.

In a time when much of the anthropological work on statehood is focused on neo-liberal entanglements of politics and business, Agrama offers a refreshingly different take. He shows that state sovereignty is not only alive and kicking, but also on the increase. Demands on the state always evoke the state as the responsible sovereign actor, giving it more and deeper power over its subjects.

Agrama emphatically places his work within a distinct tradition of scholarship on secularism inspired by the work of Talal Asad, and subscribes to an understanding of secularism as a form of state power that works to regulate religion and to produce specific attitudes, behaviours and sensibilities. Rather than a way to separate the political and the religious, secularism in this

understanding is a way of disciplining religion that extends to the intimate lives of the state's subjects. Agrama adds an important perspective by arguing that secularism is not so much a norm as it is a question, a "problem-space" (pp. 27-33) that compels those engaging with law, politics and the state to repeatedly ask questions about the relationship of religion and state. As a problem-space, secularism is inherently indeterminate and ambiguous, raising paradoxical, irresolvable questions that reproduce and magnify the anxieties and antinomies of secularism.

Agrama questions a number of common-sense assumptions about power, law, state, politics and religion. And yet the substantial reality of the secular as an identifiable form of power is itself not drawn into question, and neither is the assertion that the secular is inherently and fundamentally bound with the liberal (nor does he fully explain what the liberal is). On the contrary, secularism and state power appear as the prime mover of events. At best, secular power creates conditions and contradictions that allow Islamist lawyers to exert a degree of resistance and critique, but by doing so they also become intertwined in secular paradoxes (chapter 6). One wonders whether this is not a rather one-sided history. Why not think of secularism also as the consequence of societal conflicts? In Egypt at least, the concrete shape of questions about and by secularism is inseparable from the rise of Islamist movements as the main and strongest force of opposition that makes contested claims in the name of the religious tradition shared by the vast majority of the country's inhabitants. Which is cause, which is consequence?

The privileging of the secularism-sovereignty complex as the prime mover at times narrows down the scope of Agrama's argumentation where the ethnography might have allowed for more. The chapters on law's suspicion, for example, begins with a fascinating observation about the prevalence of suspicion at courts – in contrast to the fundamental assumption of good faith in the Fatwa Council. Arguing at length to rule out possible other explanations, Agrama attributes this suspicion (and its absence in the Fatwa Council) to a liberal-secular loop of vigilance against abuses of power that generates the need for increasing control and suspicion. It is a valid point, but one wonders why it is necessary to pinpoint a single explanation and thus to marginalise other questions such as why and with what kind of problems motivate somebody to go to a court or to a mufti in the first place.

Whatever my reservations may be about secularism as a substantial reality and as a master key of explanation, Agrama does hit the mark in his final chapter about Islamist lawyers in the Egyptian emergency state. Here he shows with great ethnographic sensibility how it is to live and struggle under the condition of a state of exception, and how exceptional powers have since long become an inseparable part of what liberal political discourse calls the rule of law. In a time of a seemingly never-ending war on terror worldwide, and after the increasingly catastrophic failure of the January 25 Revolution in Egypt,

Agrama's suggestion that the state of exception is one possible secular future is becoming more true than he may have hoped it to be.

Agrama's book belongs to some of the best of what has been written on the topic of law and secularism, a book that inspires the reader to rethink many taken-for granted assumptions about law, courts, fatwas, and the state. To fully understand the critical thrust of this book, it is important, however, to read it not only as an intellectual exercise but also as a political, even utopian, work.

This is especially visible in the notion of *asecularity* which Agrama introduces in his analysis of the Fatwa Council's work in order to describe indifference about the religious-secular division. In the epilogue, Agrama returns to the theme of asecularity by drawing attention to the first days of Tahrir in 2011. For Agrama, this moment of "bare sovereignty" (p. 231) of a shared protest and democratic ethos was a more far-reaching case of asecularity: "utterly *indifferent* to the question of where to draw the line between" the religious and the secular (p. 231, emphasis is in original). What Agrama describes may be the myth of Tahrir more than the reality of Tahrir where, in my experience, the religious-secular conflict was suspended rather than overcome, and the fantastic unity of bare sovereignty took place in the middle of a lot of anxiety, quarreling, and ideological projections. In any case, the asecular moment – if there was one – came to an end briefly afterward, and Agrama (again perhaps more rightly than he may have hoped) soberly predicts a reinforcement of the paradigms of state sovereignty and national security.

As a description of political and legal reality, Agrama's vision of asecularity is very unlikely to be realized except in exceptional moments. As an analytical term, asecularity only makes sense within a very specific academic debate that restricts the secular to state power, while at the same time totalizing it into a key to understanding the contemporary world. However, my hunch is that it should be better read as a utopian concept. In variance from secularist political visions and the Islamist politicization of religion alike, Agrama shows the secular-religious divide as a problem to be addressed or even overcome, not as a solution to be proposed in favor of either direction. There is also a more simple concern involved, a hope – even if very faint at the moment – that there may be a day when people will not be imprisoned, tortured, or murdered for being on the wrong side of the religious-secular divide (whichever that side may be).